

# DISNEY PRINCESSES' JOURNEY FROM HEROINES TO HERO: MOANA, FROZEN AND BRAVE

Ms. Tanvi Patel

Research Candidate, Ph.D. English  
Mumbai University  
Mumbai, Maharashtra  
Email id: tanvi25.tp@gmail.com  
Contact number: 9152047366

## Abstract

*Abandoning the long-held tradition of placing princesses under the stereotypical lens, Disney's recent works seem to have taken a turn for the better. The present research aims to do a critical examination of films like Moana, Frozen and Brave in order to establish the idea that Disney's representation of women has radically changed over the years by recognizing their potential and making them the hero of their own story.*

*Disney's journey from characterization of its princess as a damsel in distress to giving them enough space to explore their abilities on their own by taking charge of their lives is noteworthy and will probably serve as an educational guide for younger generations.*

*Apart from this, Disney's attempt to make its stories more diverse by parting from its common phenomenon of having its main characters as white, blonde and with blue eyes, is worth analyzing as well.*

**Keywords:** *Feminism, Gender roles and Gender identity, stereotypes, unconscious biases, diversity.*

## INTRODUCTION

The reach and popularity of the Fairy tales created by Disney is probably unmatched by any franchise. It is also why its influence in our lives has been established since our early years. Ideas of an ideal relationship or an ideal characteristic of men and women and their roles in life is to some extent taught to us by these productions. The present paper is going to analyze some of the controversial elements of these fairy tales and how Frozen, Moana and Brave stand completely opposite to the portrayal of these said elements.

Background: criticism against the Disney production of fairy tales started roughly around the 1960s, the peak era in the Feminism movement. The feminists were not happy with the representation of women in its works. The idea of women being the helpless and pitiful creature who is waiting for an unknown knight in shining armor to rescue her and give her a happy life seemed outrageous then and it seems outrageous now. Disney tried to mend its ways but the outcome was not satisfactory. For instance, productions like Snow White, The Beauty and the Beast, Little Mermaid and the wildly popular, Cinderella, have some of the most questionable plot structures and themes.

Snow White is one of the first productions which introduced Disney to the world. In terms of technology, the movie transcends its time but in terms of storyline and representation of characters, it has various drawbacks. Firstly the name Snow White is clearly influenced by the notion of White supremacy. Whenever asked about the prettiest woman, Snow White who has pale skin would appear. This is also when the 'evil stepmother' phenomenon began along with the idea of pitting women against each other in the name of jealousy and petty behavior. Besides having 'jealousy-inducing beauty' the only characteristic of Snow White which is shown is her maternal side. When she starts to live with the dwarfs she cleans after them, cooks for them and cares for them, clearly suggesting the 'ideal' role of a woman.

This exact element is evident in Cinderella as well. All she is made to do is clean and cook by her evil stepmother who is again jealous of her beauty. Her talent for dress making is completely cast aside as the

readers or the audience is more interested in the actions of the prince who is trying to find the poor girl with a glass slipper in hand. Cinderella does not have any will of her own or her own opinion. She simply accepts her fate and waits by the window for her prince.

The Beauty and the Beast starts off quite fresh with Belle showcasing her strength to protect her father and bravely facing the Beast. However, this is again overshadowed as the narrative shifts towards Beast's apparent lovely gestures to impress Belle. This facade makes us forget that Belle is actually held captive and the one making the gestures is her captive and we are unknowingly hoping for the most psychologically disturbing love story to come to life.

Little Mermaid has a similar start. The princess has an adventurous soul who wishes to explore the world but as the story goes ahead she is willing to exchange her voice in return for legs so that she can be with the man of her dreams. Symbolically speaking, she gave up her voice, her mind, her opinion, her personality in order to be with a man. A man who is unaware of these sacrifices and the kind of love she harbours for him. The message that comes across from this story arc is utterly absurd.

Main body

Even though Disney has a long history of misrepresented of Gender roles and stereotypes its recent contribution in the name of Frozen, Moana and Brave should be considered while discussing these exact points since these productions have broken the so-called notions of what being a Disney Princess meant and built its own definition. This is not to say that Disney will not go back to its ways or that its previous works should be pardoned but it most definitely should also not mean that these three said productions should not be appreciated since it rightfully earned its place on the table.

In this paper the representation of women would be analyzed against the backdrop of four main elements; an act of true love phenomenon, the concept of damsel in distress, women relationships and cultural diversity. An act of true love is a phenomenon which Disney gave birth to. A sudden kiss from the prince would magically make everything good and every problem or obstacles would disappear.

In Brave however, an act of true love is performed between a mother and her daughter in terms of mending their relationship which has suffered due to misunderstandings in the past. By the end both mother and daughter are willing to look at things from each other's point of view and give one another enough space to grow.

Similarly in Frozen, an act of true love is performed between sisters. Elsa hugs Anna by the end and that hug which was filled with love and care for her dear sister ultimately saves Anna. Interestingly, both the sisters were fighting to protect the other from disasters and it is the boundless love for one another that saved them both.

The concept of damsel in distress has been continuously ruling the narrative of almost all of the Disney productions. Even outside of Disney, this particular notion of woman being in the state of demise and seeking help from a capable and charming knight which ultimately leads to them falling in love, is being used in almost every love story one can remember from any era whatsoever.

For Moana, however, this is not the case. She decides to go on a dangerous journey to save her family, her island, her legacy and manages to tame evil forces all by herself. She makes a male friend on the way, Maui, and he does help her in her tasks but the storyline never shifts its focus from Moana as the main character and her contribution to the plot. This surely is a big turn over compared to how Disney has treated female characters before. The message was clear, this is the story of Moana and her journey to self discovery and even if there is a half God -half human beside her, it is her who has the power to change the course of everyone's lives, a woman, an ordinary woman and a rightful princess.

Similarly, in Frozen, when Anna decides to follow her sister, Elsa, she is accompanied by no one. She is confident and strong as she embarks on the road unknown to many. She has no superpower or magic to guide

her except her deepest love and determination to protect her sister. Anna, too, meets Kristoff on her way but he represents what Anna needs, a warm friendship. Kristoff does not take over Anna's tasks nor does his character is the typical know-it-all male with Disney is used to creating. He is rather transparent about his flaws and fears and most importantly he falls in love with Anna for her immensely big heart that loves everything and anything and her limitless bravery to protect the ones she cares about. This is something very rare in not just Disney fairytale but any romantic story. A story where the male character is not threatened because of his female counterpart taking charge and moreover he loves her more for doing that.

Brave is a combination of all of these and some other elements. Merida is a born princess with all the world privileges one can think of. The problem arises when she wants nothing to do with those privileges. She has the soul of a warrior, an explorer, someone who would rather go to war than learn embroidery. This characterization itself is groundbreaking in terms of creating a Disney Princess. Merida's journey in order to save her mother from the mishap she caused is also something she embarks on her own. There is no prince or any male counterpart mentioned here. She has a father, the King, but he is nowhere involved in the actual plot. The reins of the story is in the hand of Merida alone. How she decides to right the wrong, to solve the magical mystery, is solely up to her. Her bravery, her intelligence, her intentions and her priorities are tested on every step and she courageously faces them and marches ahead.

It is true that Moana, Elsa, Anna and Merida are in trouble but the point to focus here is that they are anything but a damsel in distress. They are not waiting for any prince or knight to solve their problems for them. They are their own knight in shining armor.

The next element to discuss here is the element of woman relationships. Earlier if there were any other female characters besides the princess she was created as a potential enemy of the princess. Someone who is jealous of the princess and simply would do anything than to let her be happy. Evil stepsisters, evil mothers, or evil witches, they all apparently have only one goal; to destroy the princess' happiness. The absurdity behind the idea that women don't get along or that they can never be companions is dangerously promoted in every time and era.

Looking closely at these three movies, the female relationships are like a breath of fresh air. The equation between Moana and her grandmother is nothing but precious. Her grandmother who is known as the mad woman by the villagers is the only know who understands Moana's need and desire to see the world to the extent that she encourages her to step out into the sea and go as far as freedom allows her. A bound which is motivational, inspirational and loving contributes greatly to not only the plot but also to the character developments.

Merida and Elinor's relationship on the surface are like any other mother and daughter relationship. A strict mother who wants the best for her daughter and a daughter who simply wants to live her life on her own. The difference is that Elinor's strictness and her firm belief in the principles cannot be compared to that of an evil stepmother whose actions are merely spiteful. Elinor genuinely cares and loves her daughter and her fear that Merida wouldn't get the life that she deserves runs deeper in her heart than she lets on. They both are poles apart but as the story goes ahead they learn to be more understanding of each other's perspective and have faith in each other's hearts.

Elsa and Anna also start off as sisters with different personalities who have a lot to learn about each other. As children they both used to be close but as Elsa's powers grew stronger she and her family it would be best to keep her isolated from everyone in order to prevent any harm. As teenagers Elsa and Anna meet again and Anna, rather than getting jealous or angry by Elsa's powers or abilities she focuses her energy into helping her come out of the shadow and live her life to the fullest unapologetically. Anna helps Elsa see the bright side of her powers and makes her believe in herself by teaching her that she can do no harm to others if she doesn't want to. Two sisters trying their best to encourage each other and putting efforts to bring their family together is probably the warmest female relationship Disney has ever created.

There is one important element in these three productions that should not be neglected. The element of diversity. For as long as one can remember, Disney's idea of beauty has been quite standard. A Caucasian man with flowy blond hair and blue eyes falling in love with an even more pale skinned woman with an unrealistically perfect body figure who sings and dances in the forest.

However, Brave and Moana goes beyond these standard criteria which is or was apparently required to be a Disney Princess.

Brave covers a culture which has never been tapped on before by many filmmakers or writers; the Scottish Highlands. The production is authentic in terms of their costume, language, beliefs, way of living and even the castle. This might be the first time where a Disney Princess doesn't have the usual later than life castle. The construction of the castle in Brave is rooted in Scottish heritage. This is also one of the rarest times when the princess is not blonde, pale skinned or has any kind of idealistic and unrealistic beauty. Merida is a red haired beauty with a knack for archery and horse riding. She is polished when she needs to be and a fighter on-call. Another interesting angle here is that towards the end her parents decide that she doesn't need to be married in order to rule the land. She is capable of doing that even without a husband. This is something which isn't normally portrayed in many Disney productions.

The marriage angle runs along the same line in Frozen. Elsa is a born princess and after the parent's death she is crowned as Queen and surprisingly no one mentions marriage at that point of the story. She is a naturally loved female ruler from the beginning of the story. Even for Anna, marriage is not mentioned. She does fall in love but there is no grand Disney style proposal by the end which makes it more realistic. Infact by the end Anna gives Kristoff a new sledge for his business as a way of supporting him and his work portraying a more stable and mature relationship.

Moana broke probably every ceiling when it comes to diversity. Rooted deep within the Polynesian culture and heritage, Moana is beautifully authentic and creative at the same time. The costume, music, language, lifestyle has been paid immense attention to. Moreover, Moana's physical appearance of being a black curly haired young girl with brown skin shows how welcoming of different races Disney has tried to become. Like Brave, Moana's castle and lifestyle is also rooted in the culture. Moana doesn't have a castle with great grandeur. She has a clan of loyal followers who trusts her as a leader because she has proved herself to be a worthy leader by doing the work herself.

Moana, Merida and Elsa are leaders because they truly care for their people and being a queen isn't a fantasy for them, it's a responsibility which they take very seriously.

## CONCLUSION

Disney has come far from where it started. Its reach and popularity is still unmatched. What's changed is its approach in making stories which are the basic yet strong influences on children who grow up to be the future of our society. Teaching our children such diverse stories in terms of culture, race and Gender is of utmost importance today. This makes them more open minded and teaches them to be more patient and tolerant towards others.

From creating such princesses who don't need a prince to save them or aid them, Disney has turned the definition of hero around. The term hero is no longer Gender based. Anyone can be a hero of their life with a little encouragement and support. Looking back at Snow White and Cinderella, it makes us wonder what would have happened if they had decided to stand up for themselves, to speak up, to take charge of their lives. If only someone had taught them how!

Nevertheless, our minds can be a little at ease that future generations have Moana, Merida, Elsa and Anna to look up to. They can set up the right examples for our children by teaching them that even if you're a heroine you can still be your own hero.

## REFERENCES

- [1] *Frozen*. Directed by Buck. Chris, Jennifer Lee, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2013.
- [2] *Moana*. Directed by Clements. Ron, John Musker, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2016.
- [3] *Brave*. Directed by Andrews. Mark, Brenda Chapman, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2012.
- [4] *Cinderella*. Directed by Kenneth Branagh, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2015.
- [5] *Beauty and the Beast*. Directed by Bill Condon, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2017.
- [6] *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Directed by David Hand, Walt Disney Animation Studios, 1937.