
WINDS OF CHANGE: ANALYZING THE CHANGING TRENDS IN DISNEY MOVIES THROUGH MOANA

Rachel Lewis

MA in English

Abstract: Disney fairytales have long been the standard of perfection every little girl has inspired to reach. Disney is famous for portraying a stereotypical depiction of a fragile looking girl, only to be admired for her appearances. However, this has gradually been changing over the past few years. While films like *Mulan*, *Brave* and *Frozen* depicted a gradual shift from the 'idealistic' to the 'realistic', *Moana* broke all the existing stereotypes to showcase the strength of a female in a society that was not gender biased in its functioning. This paper analyses how Disney has broken free from its previous depictions of female protagonists, and how it uses this change to influence the society's ideologies of gender. This paper also looks at how the ethnic culture, myths and traditions of a particular region have played an important role in the narration of the film.

Keywords: Gender, Animation, Stereotypes, Realistic, Changing Depictions.

Introduction: Animated films are unique in the sense that they convey important social messages to their audience while suitably entertaining them as well. Disney in particular is one of the most famous animation film companies. Since its inception, Disney has depicted tales that are filled with gender stereotypical roles and class distinctions. The stereotypical way in which the feminine gender has been portrayed is far from reality or the ideal that any little girl should aspire to be.

Though the feminine gender has always been shown as someone who needs to be saved, Disney has attempted time and again to break away from the stereotypical depiction of a fragile looking princess, dressed in gowns and singing their problems away. Along the years, there has been a slow but steady change in the way women were being portrayed through films like *Mulan*, *Brave* and *Brave*. But *Moana* broke all the previous stereotypes to bring about a prominent change in the depiction of their female protagonists.

The change in terms of the portrayal of the heroine has been real and not superficial. While animation films have certainly come a long way in changing the way a woman must be seen, the elements of 'magic' and 'happily ever after' are still retained. Magic in *Moana* is more in terms of an element of culture rather than a means of escape from the reality around. This film is a definitive break from the previous stereotypical and pre-defined formulas of the damsel-in-distress, and this will be analyzed in the paper to enable one to understand why such a change was necessary in the light of the changes that the society around us is undergoing.

Films have the power to influence and mold young minds, and change their perceptions and their thought processes. According to the Constructivist and Cultivation theory by John Dewey and G. Gerbner respectively, one internalizes what one views and makes the reality on screen as a model for appropriating behaviour in the real world. In a study conducted by Towbin et al, it was found that three themes that are common in all animated films with female protagonists is that a woman's appearance is more valuable than her intellect, women are helpless and in need of protection and that women are likely to marry. *Moana*, however, has broken free from all these set notions.

Animated films are a medium through which particular messages can be effectively transmitted. They also act as a medium of change and mass propaganda. In her article Deborah Ross focuses on the various subtexts that exist in Disney movies. Even though the females are portrayed as heroines, they are attributed masculine characteristics like in *Mulan*. The women represented are not always weak and resigned to their fate. Since Disney cannot portray characters involved in a lot of violence and bloodshed it tends to depict a happier version of the situation. Though not in its original form, Disney does portray the female protagonist as having some amount of choice yet a lot of determination and grit to get what they want. This is important as this teaches women that they can conquer the world if that is really what they wanted to do. Judith Halberstam in her essay focuses on the uniqueness of the animated films that deliver social and political messages through a variety of mediums. Tales with gender-normative roles and class distinctions are part of the blueprint of a

Disney movie. A closer look at the elements that inter-play with each other will give us a better understanding in reading and analysing the subtexts that exist.

In an earlier paper titled, 'Changing Trends: A Change in the Depiction of Women from Idealistic to the Realistic', the researcher analysed how the portrayal of women has changed over time. This change in the depiction of female protagonists is significant because they lead to a change in the perceptions of the audience, not only in the way they perceive a woman but in their interactions with them too. The paper concluded with the idea that more animated films are being released that depict women as more independent and realistic, and that a definitive shift is seen in the portrayal of female heroines. This is a move in the breaking of stereotypes and gender specific norms as stated by society.

This paper focuses on *Moana* and how the film has attempted to break free from the existing stereotypes. It will also focus on the role of myths, cultures and traditions in the course of the narration of the film.

Set in the Polynesian Islands, *Moana* revolves around the journey of a young, independent and strong girl who rebels against her father, and sets on a voyage across the oceans to release her tribe from a curse that has been plaguing them since the time of their ancestors. According to their traditions, a demi-god named Maui stole the heart of the Mother Island goddess Te-Feti and started a chain of events that caused the havoc in nature all around the world. Moana is a young girl who is irresistibly drawn to the ocean. The tribe have a long history of being voyagers, but after the curse they have stopped sailing the seas in search of new lands. This is the first movie made by Disney, where the female character is the sole protagonist and knight in shining armor that is instrumental in saving the Mother Island goddess, her tribe and Maui. While this may seem as a typical Disney film, there are quite a few progressive elements within the film.

Firstly, unlike all the previous Disney Princess films, the question of a love interest does not arise at all. Even in films like *Brave* and *Frozen*, there were allusions to true love, and marriage and the likes. However, Moana has nothing to do with love, romantic or otherwise. Unlike the previous films that refute the importance of love, romance as a topic does not even arise in *Moana*. There is no scene where she is told to get married or when she renounces the value of a significant other. While there is nothing wrong with having a romantic interest, the fact that this theme is absent in the movie is proof to the fact that Disney has come a long way in changing its stereotypical depictions of the culture around us. Instead, Moana shares a perfectly healthy platonic relationship with Maui. In all previous films, Disney has managed to create sparks between characters of the opposite sexes, but with *Moana* it has once again gone against the norm, thus proving that it has broken free from stereotypes in an effort to move away from the predictable.

With the character of Moana, Disney has brought about inclusion of non-white females into their princess franchise. Moana is the first Polynesian princess (daughter of the Chief), and this adds a lot of diversity to the Princess range after Pocahontas, Tiana, Mulan and Merida. In keeping with the inclusion of diversity, the makers of the movie also kept the traditions and folk narratives of the Polynesian islands alive in the film. The Polynesians have a deep connect with the Ocean, and so the movie portrays the Ocean as having an individual and independent identity. The connection between the Ocean and Moana is established right at the beginning of the film to illustrate the bond between them, and the fact that Moana is the one the Ocean chose to save the people from the consequences of stealing the heart of Te-Feti.

Considering that the people of the islands depend on the Ocean for their livelihood, it is no surprise that the Ocean has played an important part in the film. Disney has given life to the Ocean, with her own unique identity. The Ocean is instrumental in getting Moana to Maui and then Te-Ka, but she is not one to spoon feed Moana. Moana had to learn like everyone else how to sail the seas. Also an important thing to be noticed is that the Ocean does not necessarily just help Moana whenever she asks for help. She only helps Moana once Moana herself starts taking responsibility for the journey she has undertaken. This is an important feature of the narrative. Unlike the previous films where magic is used to help the heroine solve her problems in a jiffy, here, the Ocean as a magical element is only available to 'help' Moana, and not make all her problems disappear. As far as the role of the Ocean is concerned, she is there to help the Chosen-one restore the heart to Te-Feti. Her job ends with the restoration of the heart, and then she has no individual role to play. Once the job has been done, her magical entity fades into the background of the narrative.

The idea of the 'Chosen One' has been a recurring trope in literature and across movies; the 'Chosen One' who will save his fellow people from their distress and sufferings. Interestingly, the person saving the tribe from the curse is a *she* and not a *he*. Breaking away from the predictable and stereotypical depictions of the 'Chosen One', the savior in this film is a headstrong and independent female character, Moana. But though being the 'Chosen One' is special and meaningful, and a lot of focus is put on fulfilling the mission and accepting one's destiny, the character also has free will. At every point in the journey, Moana has a choice to quit her quest, and even at a point when she does, the Ocean accepts it. Here the characters are not just bound by destiny, they have the agency to carve their own path as well. This is extremely important in the context that freedom of choice is essential to everyone, and that one is not bound by their circumstances to do anything that they do not want to do.

The demi-god Maui is portrayed as a character who has his own flaws and individual characteristics that make him far from the ideal. Unlike Disney's portrayal of perfection, Maui is not a perfect or even benevolent demi-god. While he may consider himself to be altruistic, he is quite selfish in his wants and deeds. He loves to be praised, which is quite evident from the way he would like people to address him. His goal is to be loved and appreciated beyond the constricting status of a demi-god. Charismatic, narcissistic and heroic, this snarky character is the most relatable of all, because though he has magical powers, his flaws make him more human, just like any other human character. The mini-Maui tattoo on his body is significant because he is the depiction of the actual Maui and acts as the latter's conscience.

Moana, as a human girl with human capacities, shows her leadership skills and responsible attitude when she decides to do something substantial to save her island instead of passively succumbing to the curse. Though there are times of self-doubt, or times when she wants to quit, Moana knows that she must save her tribe, irrespective of the fact that she is the 'Chosen One' or not. Like Maui, Moana is also stubborn and headstrong, with a heart of gold. There are more similarities between them than they choose to acknowledge, which makes the narrative even more interesting. Difference in leadership styles leads to different outcomes, different motivations lead to different consequences.

Moana is an overt satire on the previous Disney princess films that have been released over the years. The puns, allusions, and snide remarks in relation to the previous films are hilarious and witty. Anybody who has watched the previous Disney princess films would identify that Moana is not the typical Disney princess. This can be seen in the film right from the beginning. Firstly, the usual sidekick or a pet, which is generally a cute animal is switched to a not-so-cute chicken, who seems to have a death wish. Moana's constant companion on the journey is the capacity of a comic-relief in the otherwise somber narrative. She marks herself apart from the other princesses as she refuses to accept destiny as her destiny, and does take action to change it. She does follow her calling. An important scene in the film is when Maui keeps calling her a princess, with Moana refusing it by stating that she is the daughter of a chieftain, and not a king. Maui distinctly and overtly makes fun of all the previous Disney heroines, in the sense that they all have animal sidekicks and sing their problems away. As Maui says:

'If you wear a dress and have an animal sidekick, you're a princess... If you start singing, I'm going to throw up...' (Moana, 2016).

There is a lot of importance given to the portrayal of the culture in the film. Right from the story of the origins of life, to the proclamation of the curse of 'inescapable death', to the foretelling of the 'Chosen One', to the final realization that the tribe were originally sea-farers and voyagers, Disney has managed to intricately weave culture into the fabric of the plot without over or understating its importance. Polynesian myths play a huge role in the understanding of the plot as well as giving the viewer an insight into the rich and vibrant culture of the Polynesian islands. As a whole, *Moana* is a socially and culturally aware film that consistently embraces strength in diversity. In traditional Disney princess fashion, it features an inspirational female character and catchy tunes about hardship and courage. In addition to her admirable and complex personality, the accurate depiction of Moana's vibrant Polynesian culture contributes a distinct richness to the film. With its definitive themes of female empowerment and cultural appreciation, *Moana* inspires and enlightens audiences. With its deliberate break from its previous blueprint of previous movies, Disney has taken a step in the direction of inclusiveness.

Through *Moana*, Disney has managed to break away from the traditional script that makes its ideas very predictable. The influence of Disney cannot be ignored either. A conscious effort has been made to break free of the stereotypes that exist in the way cultures and genders are portrayed in their films. Like the previous paper, this paper also uses the Constructivist and Cultivation Theory to portray the change that can be influenced or brought about in the way one perceives the society around them and engage in behaviour that brings about a change in the way women are portrayed since art influences life as much as life influences art. Gender and cultural boundaries are broken to be more inclusive, in the process influencing young minds to more progressive ways of thinking. As more animated films are being released that depict women as more independent and realistic, a definite shift is therefore seen in the portrayal of the female lead from the 'idealistic' to the 'realistic'. And this in turn slowly shapes and changes the society's ideology.

References:

1. Baker, Kelly J. "The Gospel according to Disney: Faith, Trust, and Pixie Dust". *J Popular Culture* 38.4 (2005): 763-764. Web.
2. Best, Joel and Kathleen S. Lowney. "The Disadvantage of a Good Reputation: Disney as a Target for Social Problems Claims". *Sociological Quarterly* 50.3 (2009): 431-449. Web.
3. Deszcz, Justyna. "Beyond the Disney Spell, or Escape into Pantoland." *Folklore* 113.1 (2002): 83-91. Web.
4. England, Dawn Elizabeth, Lara Descartes, and Melissa A. Collier-Meek. "Gender Role Portrayal and The Disney Princesses". *Sex Roles* 64.7-8 (2011): 555-567. Web.
5. Giles, David. *Media Psychology*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2003. 73-87. Print.
6. Halberstam, Judith. "Animation". *Profession* 2009.1 (2009): 44-49. Web.
7. Hurley, Dorothy L. "Seeing White: Children of Colour and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess." *The Journal of Negro Education* 74.3 (2005): 221-32. Web.
8. "Maui." *Disney Wiki*, 2017, <http://disney.wikia.com/wiki/Maui>.
9. *Moana*. Dirs. Ron Clements and John Musker. Walt Disney Animation Studios and Walt Disney Pictures. *Film*. 2016.
10. "Moana / Funny - TV Tropes." *TV Tropes*, 2017, tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Funny/Moana.
11. "Moana Review: Even The Chosen One Has A Choice." Simcha Fisher, 2017, www.simchafisher.com/2017/06/07/moana-review-even-the-chosen-one-has-a-choice/.
12. Redden, Crystal Virtanen Née. "The Media's Influence on Female Relational Aggression and Its Implications for Schools." *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue Canadienne De L'éducation* 36.4 (2013): 380-85. Web.
13. Ross, Deborah. "Escape from Wonderland: Disney and the Female Imagination." *Marvels & Tales* 18.1 (2004): 53-66. Web.
14. Sara K. Chasse, "The Magic in the Music of Disney" (April 1, 2015). The Research and Scholarship Symposium. Paper 3. Web.
15. Sawyer, Nicole. "Feminist outlooks at Disney Princess's". James Madison University. SCOM 432. Web.
16. Storey, John. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2009. Print.
17. Storey, John. "Psychoanalysis." *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. University of Sunderland, 2005. 102-105. Print.
18. Zevallos, Z. 'Sociology of Gender,' *The Other Sociologist*. n.p., 2014. Web.
