

Challenging The Gender Stereotypes Through Disney Animated Movies: A Multimodal Analysis-Based Study

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ABSTRACT

Popular culture is one of the important sites to invest ideology and to gain vested interests. Through this platform desired version of ideology about gender de/construction is propagated to target audience. Disney animated movies have two-fold appeal in this regard. They provide fun and perform ideological function as well. This research is a critical analysis of the posters of animated films that comprise Mulan (1998), Brave (2012) and Moana (2016). In the present study multimodal analysis approach is used to analyze linguistic and visual moves used in the posters of selected films. It has formulated its research model based on (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). There are the visual and verbal levels of analysis. Through the analysis of linguistic and visual moves the concept of gender de/construction has observed. The paper concludes that the cinematic portrayal of males/females is never neutral. It asserts that a noticeable trend has been witnessed in the de/construction of gender stereotypes. The concept of women empowerment has been highlighted through the subtle use language and visuals. In addition to this, the concept of white is right has been challenged to some extent. The study finds that Disney animated movies are among the important means to propagate gendered ideology.

Keywords: Feminist Ideologies, Multimodal Analysis, Gender Representation, Female Empowerment, popular culture, Semiotics

Introduction

The film industry through Disney animation highlights important cultural descriptions that usually pertain to gender and identity. The animated films of big organizations like Disney have universal attraction that cuts across the age and language barrier and conveys meaningful message through the use of engaging images and realistic narration. These films are not just entertaining the viewers

rather mirror changing taking place in socio-political contexts around the globe. The portrayal of femininity and active female makes it one of the most significant domains in academia to conduct research on this significant domain such as movie posters. The movie posters should be the starting point in the analysis of popular media academic studies since such advertisements embody important ideological meanings. To examine how feminist ideologies are portrayed through the three Disney movie posters, the paper critically analyses the posters of the Mulan (1998), Brave (2012), and Moana (2016) movies.

Watching products of the media, as (Bignell, 2013) suggests, has a tendency to commercialize feminism, making complex ideologies into images that are easy to follow and keep the audience interested. Commercialization of empowerment proves to be especially important in children media since it tends to make female representations of power. The poster is a brief overview of the ideological stance of the movies that demonstrates the way in which its protagonist is connected to the authority as well as to emotional states and norms in the society.

As a core tool of spreading feminist ideas, (Ross, 2014; Lloyd, 2015) visual discourse acts as a communication method. Disney animated movies' posters of female characters in active and independent poses imply empowerment, however, sometimes gender stereotypes are also observed in these movies. Liberal feminism practice is an individualistic form of gender empowerment that backs the principles of neoliberalism but does not tackle the issue of institutionalized inequality (Van der Laan, 2018). The agency in this model of representation is manifested as personal triumph rather than collective feminist resistance thereby limiting the revolutionary power of feminist representation.

In their study on the media influence in South Asia, (Sajid and Buzdar, 2021) demonstrate that Western animation influences the mindset of youth on the basis of gender and identity in a manner that is a mixture of various cultural customs. The dissemination of Disney films internationally makes their gender discourses influence viewers in a variety of social and cultural settings despite their Western nature. They argue that any form of communication has an implicit cultural and ideological meaning.

As reported by the UNICEF UK (2020) media has a role to play in ensuring children grow in a positive way by offering a wide range of role models who are empowering and diverse. The fact that the approach toward femininity construction in popular culture should be approached with critical evaluation is a central focus in the study. In case animated movie posters have some role in early teachings on gender, we should examine the ideologies that they put forward on what they confirm and what they exclude. The significance of these posters either supporting the traditional gender stereotypes or providing alternative perceptions of womanhood have long term effects on the viewers.

Multimodality and Popular Culture

Multimodality plays a significant part in the study of media particularly in how the meaning of visuals and other elements are created using images and visuals. The animated movies of Disney do not merely utilize visual texts in selling the movies; they assist in supporting social messages and assigning gendered identities. The

visual semiotics offer a practical concept of looking at how Disney posters do not simply advertise but also support cultural ideologies.

Similarly, the semiotic theory by Ferdinand de Saussure (1983) defines the signifier as the physical image or symbol and the signified as the concept or idea which the signifier signifies. According to Saussure, it is not signs which have a natural meaning, as meanings are constructed through collective social knowledge as well as historical and cultural backgrounds. The interpretation of Disney images needs to be explored due to the fact that their meanings of gender roles emerge based on the social norms and expectations. Julia Kristeva (1981) states that all texts including visual ones are in intertextual relationships and cannot be understood in isolation. The theory of Kristeva posits that such images have an enduring meaning even when they are removed out of context since they are based on universal cultural narratives regarding gender and power relations.

The comparative relationship between women and men has historically made women in *The Second Sex* (Simone de Beauvoir, 1949) as the Other. The recent animated films *Brave* and *Moana* feature female protagonists who do not follow the typical traditional images. The women characters now become the driving force of the story rather than waiting to be determined their direction by others as they have their own free will destinies. The evolving Disney approach to female characters goes against the idea of defining women as the Other by Disney that requires them to play a crucial role in their own tales.

Research Question

How is gendered ideology about fe/male is propagated through visual and verbal practices used in Disney animated movie posters?

Theoretical Framework

The research in hand uses Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) social semiotics and multimodality theory as its analytical frame work. The framework demonstrates how different communicative modes including image, text, color, layout and gesture create meaning while working together to transmit social values and ideologies. The framework includes three meta functions first is Representational, concerning what is being depicted, second is Interactive meta function involving how viewers are positioned and third is Compositional meta function focusing on how visual and verbal are used to make meanings. The following table illustrates the model used.

Multimodal Framework Table (Adapted from Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006)

Semiotic Function	Main Features	Use in Poster Analysis
Representational Meaning	The graphical representation of the actions and roles of characters.	Addresses the fact that heroines such as Mulan or Moana are depicted to take significant actions or represent the power deconstruction.
Interpersonal Meaning	Symbolic elements and the use of cues.	Deciphers the power relationship that has been constructed between the

Semiotic Function	Main Features	Use in Poster Analysis
		viewer and the character by gazing and framing.
Textual Meaning	Face movement, eye contact.	Discusses the way design structures (e.g. center framing, contrast) determine the point of attention to transmit the message in a clear way to the viewer.
Visual Realism and Texture	Camera view and physical distance.	Explores the influence of the realism or stylization of character images in creating perceptions of empowerment, fantasy or cultural background.
Typography and Verbal Text	Layout and composition	Consideration of the verbal content augmentation of the visual message e.g. empowering taglines and female character images.
Cultural and Symbolic Codes	Visual accentuation and beauty.	Explores the cultural elements of the symbols (armor, traditional, heritage related) as the means of feminist identity construction.
Framing and Connection	the use of colors, shading, effect of light.	Process of depicting individualism or cohesiveness.

Mulan (1998)



The Mulan (1998) poster presents the re-branding of the conventional stereotype of gender roles and female empowerment within Disney animated films through the integration of the visual and textual message. Incorporating the social semiotics

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proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and applying the concepts of feminism introduced by Kristeva and de Beauvoir, this analysis will help to show that the Mulan poster successfully alters the traditional gender roles by portraying Mulan as a self-sufficient ruler challenging gender stereotypes. The central character in the poster is Mulan who has a strong body language and facial expression which implies determination and confidence and high will. Contrary to other female figures in the classical animations that tend to be passive or subsidiary to the storyline Mulan proves to be active as she shows her willingness to fight and take command. The feminist theories of Julia Kristeva demonstrate the correspondence to this way since the concept of semiotic focuses on the idea of self-determination of women as the basis of their personal power and identity (Kristeva, 1986). The portrayal of Mulan has her doing male combat tasks in the war and breaking the ground on the traditional gender roles in the mainstream culture.

The color scheme of the poster connotes the strong independent nature of Mulan. The prevailing red color in the poster symbolizes passion, vitality and courage. Mulan is the main protagonist since the red color prevails in the background whereas this color shade is a contrast to the dullness of the rest of the space in the poster. The vivid red color is used to make her mission seem very serious and urgent to emphasize how she puts her own life at risk. The poster is designed with intense dramatic effect through the use of the colors of gold and black color that heightens the significance of the story and character development of Mulan. The Mulan poster shows the use of a sword as an object of power that is traditionally associated with a strong male presence. The sword Mulan is used to show how powerful and a leader she becomes to lead the people as a character. The fact that this weapon is held by Mulan breaks the conventional gendered conventions as it shows a woman holding an object that has been identified with men. This representation is similar to what Simone de Beauvoir believes women have equal ability to lead and act as men (de Beauvoir, 1949).

The tagline of the poster connotes that fate of the nation lies in her hands. It illustrates that the main character of the story is Mulan since all decisions are made by her. The language helps to elaborate the status of Mulan as the leader and as a symbol of power challenging old gender stereotypes. The feminist ideology embedded in the of the poster is evident in the social semiotics analysis and includes visual and verbal components. In the multimodal framework by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) the various modes of representation like color, posture and symbols work in conjunction to make meanings. It integrates the conventional Eastern and Western feminine images to form a universal narrative of empowerment of women in terms of cultural fusion. Mulan metaphorically stands for all the women attempting to empower themselves across the globe.

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Brave (2012)



The poster *The Brave* (2012) presents the character of Merida as a defiant mighty heroine, who breaks the Disney movie traditions on female characters. The research uses the theory of feminism using Julia Kristeva and Simone de Beauvoir and Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) multimodal framework to understand how visual and textual elements come up to form the image of Merida. The *Brave* poster provides gender resistance with Merida, who cannot agree with the traditional gender roles and wants to make her choice herself. On *Brave* poster, Merida is the center of focus and is shown in a confident body language holding a bow and arrow. The bow and arrow are male features, which denote dominance and self-reliance as well as power but which are typically limited to male heroes. The show of Merida with her weapons is exhibiting a radical step against the traditional female character roles which depict women as victims or reliant on the rest. The poster plays tricks with traditional femininity because Merida is depicted in an active pose that is not associated with female stereotypes.

The wild red hair of Merida is an obvious means of evidence of her independent personality and the unwillingness to follow or challenge gender stereotypes. The wild red hair of Merida is in contrast with the traditional hairstyles of Disney princesses since it demonstrates her unwillingness to abide by the standard of beauty. The visual aspect is equal to the semiotic theory of Julia Kristeva that illustrates the unstructured disruptive force that violates the rules of linguistic and cultural order. The disheveled hair shown in the picture connote her resistance to gender rules in the society. The green and brown coloration of the earth used in the *Brave* poster signify the deep connection of Merida with the nature. The color scheme reminds of the natural growth and the freedom. The merger of the natural background of the poster to self-discovery process of Merida helps to relate her personal progression to the cruel nature. The poster is green and this is a symbol of new lives as well as a symbol of vibrant life that Merida expresses in challenging the constructed norms.

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The naturalistic pictures reinforce the concept that Merida lives outside of the traditions of the royalty since she retains her attachment to the picture as she lives in relationship with her surrounding following her own ideology. The natural world introduces us to Merida as a person who actively constructs her own identity rather than passively watching the situation which happens in her life. The feminist ideology voiced by Simone de Beauvoir is obvious in the semiotic under analysis. The feminist message of the film is delivered with the help of the tagline of the Brave poster Change your fate. This pronouncement challenges the notion that fate is fixed so individuals especially the women of an age bracket to be in charge of their destinies. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) opine that the use of multimodality makes the process of meaning making more comprehensible. Based on this framework, the semiotic of Merida, contributes in challenging the centuries old concept of patriarchy. Merida looks directly to the viewers. The very posture of Merida implies her empowerment. With the help of the strategic positioning Merida turns out to be the central point of the poster that creates a central visual image. The bow and arrow used here are not simply props, but very strong agents of agency. These weapons have always been linked to physical power, self-sufficiency, and security. These symbols make her a character who is self-directed in her life and who desires to have her own way, which the poster achieves by associating her with the symbols used in the poster. This is supplemented by the tagline, Change your fate and shows that Merida is capable of altering herself, which is a significant feminist concept that focuses on the potential of women to make their own decisions.

The Brave poster can be considered an ideal instance of how visual and verbal resources can be applied to deliver a powerful feministic message. The poster challenges the feminine stereotypes by expressing that Merida is an independent, strong, and self-determined individual. By applying the feminist theory and multimodal semiotics, it is clear that Disney animated movies are meant to disseminate feminist ideology and women empowerment.

Moana (2016)



The Moana (2016) poster is an interesting example of representing the concept of women empowerment employing multimodal style of communication. The movie poster of Moana can be interpreted in various forms of feminism as a character who breaks the gender stereotypes. It is possible to use the concepts of renowned theorists like Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Kress and van Leeuwen, etc., to see how the poster of the movie represents the journey of self-discovery and empowerment of Moana and makes her the primary and autonomous character of the story. In Moana poster, the protagonist, Moana, occupies the central position in the poster and this renders her salient and also self-sufficient position. As opposed to most scenarios where women characters are kept in the background or where they have been depicted in passive role. Moana is not afraid and ready to confront hardships. Her stance and expression reveal determination and willingness to do something, meaning that she is an active actor and a protagonist in her life. This is the complete reverse of the traditional animated cliches where the female characters are treated as either peripheral or beauty objects

Moreover, the ocean which is depicted in the background of the poster of Moana itself is a symbol of endless possibilities which are behind. The ocean can be understood not only as the actual location she is forced to navigate but as the symbol of the challenges that she must overcome and the experience of self-discovery that she must undergo. The poster makes her seem to be a character who is not victimized by her surroundings, but she is in control of her destiny. In addition, the character of Moana featured in the poster is also counterproductive to what women should look like in animated films. Her hair is portrayed in more natural and wild style which contrasts with normally smooth and beautiful hair that the female characters possess. This is a more realistic and natural solution as it portrays femininity and focuses on the personality and power of a woman rather than on her beauty. The main focus of the picture is not on the physical appearance of Moana, though it is beautiful. Rather, her body language, her eyes, and the rest of the features shown portray her as dynamic and active, unlike how women are traditionally represented in animated movies.

The feminist nature of the movie is also supported by the costume Moana is wearing. Rather than being dressed up in a gown or a delicate dress, she is equipped with what she can wear on a journey which demonstrates that her value is not in the way she looks but in what she can accomplish. This dress makes Moana look strong and resourceful, a heroine who is not that much about the expectation of the society but it is more about her inner strength. The poster has a tagline, The ocean is calling, which attracts the audience into the central concept of the story of Moana. It implies that she is being invited to some bigger task, one that transcends the conventional notions. This is as it was explained by the feminist theory of Simone de Beauvoir who opined that women ought to be able to make their own choices in regards to their future.

This is also reflected in the fact that Moana is portrayed as a person who is in control of her life. Moana is not satisfied with the status quo, she is also depicted as a person who makes a way out to establish her own destiny and challenge the odds and risk. This coincides with the thoughts of both Kristeva and de Beauvoir that women ought to have a chance to make their own decisions and not be bound down by the community. In terms of multimodal communication, the model that Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) suggest that describes visual communication offers a useful platform

on how the Moana poster works as a persuasive text. The main character in the story is indicated by placing Moana in the middle of the poster and by depicting her in the ocean and the dynamic composition as the main character. The whole content of the poster is employed to ensure that the message about her being independent and not a spectator but a doer in the story. The various hues of blue and green utilized in the poster can be related to the ocean and nature and they communicate the concepts of the expedition, self-reliance, and potentials. These colors as well are identified with the location of Moana in the natural world and her cultural origin and signify her ability to change as well. Her clothes are also cozy and this makes her associate with her culture and the fact that she is part of it and at the same time she is free to experience the rest of the world. Moreover, the direct eye contact of Moana to the observer makes her look familiar. This eye contact enables the viewers to get into her world and demonstrates that she is not only a piece of admiration, but a person, interacting with other people. Such interaction makes Moana a self-assured heroine. Moana poster is an extremely powerful image and textual depiction of female characters in animated films. The poster positions Moana in a strong and independent position and demonstrates that she is in charge, which is opposite to the conventional gender roles and makes her a powerful female character. The poster succeeds in summarizing the journey of Moana towards self-realization and empowerment, and she is an example to everyone. With the use of the feminist theories and the multimodal analysis, one can observe that the Moana poster is not merely an advertisement, but also a gender, identity and agency statement. This invites the audience to perceive Moana as a subject matter, rather than an object.

Focus Group Findings

The researchers have validated their finding semiotic analysis by conducting focus group discussion among linguist and non-linguist participants. In this regard some of the remarks have been reproduced as under:

“These movie posters carry implied message; on one hand they provide entertainment and on the other they disseminate the concept of challenging gender stereotypes. They have two-fold appeal.”

“I think that Merida’s wild hair and fighting posture connote that she has taken step to decide her fate herself instead of depending on others. This can be taken as an attempt to shape the minds of the young viewers. It is assumed that ideology learnt at early age lasts for long. This is what is being propagated through these movies and the posters under discussion.”

“What I am seeing is that Moana leads others by empathy and emotional connections rather than coercive leadership. This is an attempt to impart a clear message about feminist ideology. It also implies that gone are the days when women were exploited being weaker sex. It is an era of change.”

Conclusion

The analysis of the data selected for the study reveals that Disney animated movies like Mulan, Moana, Brave embody the clear message of women empowerment. These three female characters can be taken as a person as state metaphor. Traditional gender norms about patriarchy have been challenged through these movies. It is an

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attempt to shape the minds of young viewers in a particular style. It is also an attempt to make the young viewers gender sensitized. The findings of the study reveal that popular culture is one of the influential sites for the investment of gender ideology. The role of popular culture is dual in nature. Besides providing fun, it very tactfully shapes the ideological landscape of viewers as well.

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