

# Gender Representation in Disney Film in the light of Feminism

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**Abstract:** This article offers a nuanced critique of how Disney films, especially Cinderella adaptations from 2015 and 2021, portray women and address feminist concerns. It contrasts traditional depictions of passive, beauty-focused female characters with more recent efforts to present empowered, diverse, and self-driven heroines. The analysis highlights both the progress in gender representation and the ongoing challenges within fairy tale narratives. By reflecting on these changes, the article underscores the need for continued critical evaluation of children's media to foster genuine empowerment and inclusivity.

**Keywords:** Fairytales and women, Gender representation in folktales, Disney Princess, Feminist film theory

## Introduction

'Fairytales' are the escape routes to the magical world of fantasy. However, many of these carved us into believing in some 'not so good' beliefs; a negative image, and dwindling of the self-identity of a woman. Fairy-tale is recorded since the year 1750, and its leading sense is said to be (a) a tale about fairies, or generally a fairy legend; with developed senses, (b) an unreal or incredible story, and (c) a falsehood. Disney rose to popularity in the middle of the first wave and second wave of feminism. Disney socializes gender identity as a motivated invention to represent current ideals during that period pointing to the fact that Disney makes sure to move according to the situation.

The intertwined bond between fairytales and Disney films is indisputable. With the evolving concept of feminism, Disney has transformed the film text, the narratives, and the characters with new perspectives on feminism. Disney has evolved from presenting docile, graceful princesses to female leads who are unsophisticated, carefree,

independent, and adventurous. Nonwhite princesses have also made an entry through Jasmine in 'Aladdin', Tiara in 'Princess and the Frog' and Pocahontas who chooses to stay with her tribe. The trajectory of feminine characters has diversified in due course of time. The progression in protagonists like queen, princess, maid, stepmother, and witches not only showcases their powerful voices and presence but also alters their status and identity as an opposition to the majority. These narratives, according to feminism, directly relate to the foremost images of women that appear to emphasize their significant position in society. Furthermore, the feminist movement addresses the changing appeal of the female voice in Disney Films. Feminist revision of Disney films chastised men's indifference and challenged societal norms that treat women as second-class citizens, compelling patriarchal authority to rethink women's roles.

Stephanie X. Hu made a distinct division of the Disney Princesses according to various eras. She mentions "Representations of women in Disney princess animations not only reveal norms of romanticized passivity and subservience, but strengthen them within contemporary society alongside superficial standards for women's beauty." Joyce Olewski Inman and Kelli M. Sellers (2016) deliberate on classifying the narratives of Disney Princess into 1) the youthful impertinence, i.e., the characterization of the princess as a rebellious teenager, 2) the significance of physical beauty as Disney princesses are shown to be exceptionally gorgeous with perfect features from head to toe, 3) heteronormative domesticity which is the concept of marriage and happily ever after love. Cole Reilly divides the Disney Princesses into four generations according to their characters and traits namely "Prettiess Punished", "Sacrificial Lambs", "Exoticized Ethnic" and "Mighty Maidens breaking free". This classification becomes crucial in understanding the gradual change in the portrayal of the Princesses.

Alison Lurie (1970) stated the role of fairy tales has reinforced the woman's question by not only depicting meek women but also representing strong and empowered women which contribute to the advancement of the cause of women's liberation. In 'Fairy Tale Liberation', she articulated how fairytales record women liberation by representing them as powerful and influential subjects that can support the salvation of other characters. They seem to hold the actions of the stories and govern the text of the tale with their decent or wicked spell.

## Objective

The basic objective is to examine the feminist revision of fairy tales and their portrayal in Disney films with special reference to Cinderella. It attempts to delineate the gender representation, stereotypes, and myths embedded in the Disney fairy tales.

**Methods used** in the study are content analysis to find out about the messages, and effects of film text. A focus group discussion (FGD) is carried out with 10 children from

the age group 6 to 14 years who have watched the select Disney films to understand the influence of the fairytales in the formation of agency of children.

Fairy tales are an integral part of anyone's childhood. An assessment of the portrayal in the fairy tales as a site for the construction of gender-appropriate behavior of children is carried out. It is imperative to know how fairy tales could contribute to the formation of agency of children and how the evolving feminism impacts the narration of films.

Two Disney films based on the concept of the popular fairy tale Cinderella are chosen purposively for the study. *Cinderella* (2015) and *Cinderella* (2021) are both productions of Disney, and Hollywood, which portray culture and lifestyle that is prevalent in the West, and the values imbibed in them for the children bind these films together.

### **Feminist Revision of Disney Films**

Feminist film theory came into existence in the early 1970s to understand cinema as a cultural practice that represents and reproduces myths about women and femininity. Feminist film theory critically discusses the sign and image of women in film as well as opens up issues of female spectatorship, criticizes classical cinema for its stereotyped representation of women, and aims for adequate representation of female subjectivity and female desire on the silver screen. Informed by a (post)structuralist perspective, feminist film theory moved beyond reading the meaning of a film to analyzing the deep structures of how meaning is constructed. Using insights from a Marxist critique of ideology, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction, feminist film theory claims that cinema is more than just a reflection of social relations. The film actively constructs meanings of sexual divergence and sexuality (Smelik, 2016). During the second wave of feminism, several feminists used films as part of their liberation activities. Women's use of film has been crucial in creating feminist political expression (Tomsic, 2007). Activists involved in the movement made films to self-represent female experience and feminist demands and to address what they saw was missing from films already in circulation. Feminist movements continually attempt to create public space for debate on the issues they consider important, and films can become a crucial segment of that struggle as they create a forum in which the public can encounter issues.

Kaitlin Ebersol (2014) looks at the changes brought in Disney movies following the three waves of feminism. The first wave of feminism in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century aimed at the voting rights of women and the abolition of slavery, yet did not embrace women's social equality and sexual autonomy which were still denied. Female lead characters in early Disney films such as *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* lacked independence. The 1960's 1990s was marked by second-wave feminism with radical demand on sexuality and reproductive

rights. Feminist claim during this era was not to look at women as biologically inferior. Similarly, the Disney films, *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Little Mermaid* (1989), *Mulan* (1998), and *Pocahontas* (1995) slightly resisted the misogyny.

Fairy tales are objects of actual anguish for the generation of second-wave feminists, as women during this period have continued to be victims of silence, submissiveness, patriarchal power, and physical- psychological assault. In *Cinderella*, the leading female character is compelled to suppress her emotions and perform all household chores. In *Beauty and the Beast*, Beauty makes a sacrifice by traveling to the Beast's castle and striking a marriage bargain. Thus, the author of this story, Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, contends that the beauty of a girl lies in her submission, obedience, humility, and patience reveal her true character. "Young women should," according to Beaumont, be educated and encouraged to be intellectual rather than treated as "marriage fodder". In the story *Cinderella*, despite *Cinderella's* status as a servant and victim, goodness nonetheless prevails in the story. She stands for the real and symbolic persecution of a girl who has lost her mother and is subjected to her stepmother's injustices.

The third wave of feminism began in the mid-1990s, upheld the modern, and deconstructed the concept of mother, body, gender, and women as a whole. The same has been reflected in the Disney movies like *Brave* and *Frozen*. Several feminist scholars examined old folktale anthologies to see if any stories featured strong, resourceful, independent, and active females, females whose physical appearance is unimportant, and females who are capable of solving their own (and others) problems in the world. Such stories, which had been lost or forgotten in a patriarchal culture, were discovered and retrieved. Several collections of these "feminist" stories have been released in the hopes that children may discover female role models in them with whom they can identify in a healthier and more freeway (Barchers, 1990; Lurie, 1970; Minard, 1975; Phelps, 1978). Some of the existing literature asserts in their search for an important role of women in fairytales the shifting emphasis of women's passivity to positivity. These shifting dynamics of women's role are found expression in the folk stories of many well-known female writers such as Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960), who documented African American folklore and traditional tales of the Blacks in her novel *Mules and Men* (1930) as a treasury of black American's folklore or Negro folklore. Margaret Mills deliberated on the correlation between gender and storytelling and asserted a significant finding that "men tend to tell stories about men while women tell stories about women and men" (Mills, 2001).

### **Female Protagonist with the Lens of Feminism**

In *Cinderella* (2015), the female protagonist 'Ella,' as named by Disney is shown as a beautiful, jolly young girl, who earnestly believes in magic. It very subtly expressed the

idea of gender roles with the lullaby sung to Ella, “When I shall be king, dilly dilly; You shall be queen”. With such lyrics, the very idea of how the identity of women is attached to the man’s identity is portrayed. The significance of marriage was imbibed into the minds of the girls from a very young age. The song emphasizes the equal partnership of a relationship as the lyrics go as, “You must love me, for I love you.” The last words of the protagonist’s mother were, “Have courage and be kind.” She grew up keeping her mother’s last words in her mind.

As time unfolded, Cinderella’s stepmother manipulated her for her kind and courteous nature. Her father’s demise added to her grief and troubles. Irrespective of the misbehavior and torture of her stepmother and stepsisters, she always found a ray of sunshine and lived to her fullest. She mastered the art of household work. She is also portrayed as a person with a voice with dialogues like, “Just because it is what’s done, doesn’t mean that it should be done.” On the contrary, when it comes to voicing out her needs and requirements at home, she is weighed by the burden of the relations and the dos and don’ts of it. Then the invitation for the ball arrives and her motive for going to the ball wasn’t to go and meet the prince but to go as all the maidens of the town were going by the order of the king.

But as Cinderella is denied to go by her stepmother, she breaks down and apologizes to her mother, “Sorry, I don’t have the courage anymore.” When the fairy godmother offered to give her a new dress, she denied it, as the dress she wore was her mother’s. She would love to go in it with just a few mends. This depicts the emotional nature of her. When threatened by her stepmother, she chose her family over the prince. As the end approaches, she boldly states, “You have never been and will never be my mother”. Her character is shown as a courteous, bold, and independent lady. To be seen as we are, have courage, and be kind, is what she abides by.

In **Cinderella (2021)**, the protagonist ‘Ella’, is named ‘Cinderella’ by her stepsisters. She is portrayed as a dreamer who believes in herself. An independent minded girl who wants to run her own business. Lyrics like “You’re gonna know my name” depict her belief in herself as well as her dreams. But societal norms are imposed on her too with dialogues like “Well, you must make yourself a match for someone.” She is depicted as a very brave girl, who is witty as well. She believes in living her life on her terms. As she tries to sell her designed dress in the market, she is mocked by the people. But this doesn’t make her lose hope. She was least interested in going to the ball until the Prince made her view the ball as an opportunity to expand her business. The scenes that followed depicted her hardworking nature and her conviction in her dreams. So, when she was revealed about the Prince’s identity as he proposed to her, she said “If it’s a choice, I choose me.” Further, dialogues like “He likes me for me, but, saying yes to him means saying no to this, I can’t do it.” elucidated her desire to have her own identity.

Even when her stepmother asked her to say a 'yes' to the Prince, she denied it. At last, her hard work and talent helped her achieve what she wanted to.

**In the film Snow White** was bullied by her stepmother yet she never dared to stand up for herself. Snow White was compliant and respectful and never brawled with the Evil Queen. She would clean the floors, cook happily, and sing songs about true love. She was presented as a docile and dependent woman. She always had to rely either on the prince, the animals, or the dwarfs to take care of her. She kept only one wish, i.e., to marry her prince whom she never met, never talked to, and never knew. Compared to Snow White, Belle presents a slightly different narrative. **The film, Belle and the Beast** presents Belle as a woman, fond of books and often visits the library. Belle is characterized as the one who got the backing from her father who encouraged her to crave adventure and enjoy life on her terms. As the film portrays mid-1700s France, the society was against women's education and hence perceives Belle as crazy. Gaston, the favorite guy of their provincial town, wanted to marry Belle. But Belle rejects Gaston for his selfishness and ego. Even upon being taken hostage by the beast, Belle does not submit to him. Eventually, she stepped forward to the institution of marriage and lived happily ever after with the man who kidnapped her in the first place and stripped her of her freedom.

**Tiana is a strong woman** working two jobs just to carry forward her father's dream of owning a restaurant. She did all in her capacity to make the down payment for the place. Later it is revealed that the place was bought by someone else who paid the full amount in cash. Tiana finds an alternative solution for her restaurant which is to help Prince Naveen and turn him back from frog to human. Tiana turns into a frog too, but that does not discourage her from not keeping her promise to Naveen. She not only saves him from the crocodiles but builds a raft to travel and also cooks food with whatever is available in the forest. She can resist the temptations of the shadow man, who tells her that he will make her dream come true. She stays true to her words and defeats him. She confesses her feelings to the prince. When she realizes that they might remain frogs forever she does not lose her calm instead she accepts her fate and marries Naveen. In the end, she fulfilled her dream and lived happily ever after.

**Merida is the first princess** to be obsessed with bow and arrow. She loves archery and defeats all of her suitors in the archery contest. Merida does not want to marry and hence makes a rule that she being the firstborn from their clan can participate in the contest for her hand. She was confident in knowing what she wanted. Angry with her mother for forcing the marriage upon her, she finds herself in a witch's cottage who gives her a piece of cake. On eating the cake, the mother turns into a bear. Merida tries with all her might to undo the spell. To save her, she even decides to select a suitor to marry. But the mother indicates to her that the firstborn should be able to marry in their own time whoever they want. On searching for a solution Merida reaches out to the witch who left one message "mend the bond torn by pride". Merida deciphers this

message as repairing the tapestry consisting of her and her mother's images. She fixes it and ultimately realizes her mistake. The mother turns back into a human and accepts Merida as she is. As the first Disney princess to not marry, Merida lives happily ever after with her family. Her choices are celebrated and not frowned upon.

### Male Protagonists with the Lens of Feminism

In *Cinderella* (2015), the prince named Kit is depicted as an absolute gentleman, abiding by all the rules and regulations of society. He wants to explore life as Kit, rather than the Prince. When he meets Ella, he introduces himself as an apprentice. He is not arrogant about his royalty. "A prince may take whichever bride he wishes." And "It's a princess or nothing" are the different notions attached by society to a male. But he defies or rather challenges these societal norms and tries to break through the conventional. When his identity is revealed to the protagonist at the ball, he defines himself as "not the prince. There are a bunch of princes, I am only one of them, a prince." In the end, the prince came in disguise to check on the conspiracies that were happening. The film also portrayed him as a compassionate lover, who believed in equal status in a relationship and valued the consent of his partner. This was evident with dialogues like, "Will you take me as I am? An apprentice to learning his trade."

In *Cinderella* (2021), the male protagonist, or the Prince is shown as a spoiled child who drinks and hunts fox for three long days. He was portrayed as a rebel, always restless. His expressions were very boldly depicting his frustration with the system. He is considered as the 'idiot son', 'Mama's boy', etc. When he finally falls in love, he goes out of his way for the beautiful, witty, and fearless girl that he just saw. As the story unfolds, he, conditioned by the norms of society, expects only a 'yes' from a maiden. All the other Princesses were just all over him because he was 'The Prince' and because of the person that he was. But he handled his rejection with absolute grace. This depicted his well-cultured and understanding nature. How he perceived relationships, his understanding of consent in a relationship, and the right of any girl to reject a man irrespective of his social position and power were some of the values imbibed in him. After he was rejected, he introspected and was inspired by Ella's independent nature and her belief in her dreams. He realized it was traditions and customs that burdened him. And the fact that people didn't care how he felt, or what he wanted, made him the irritated and frustrated rebel that he was.

### Gender Stereotypes and Changing Trends of Representation of Women in Disney Films

The film *Cinderella* (2015) depicted many instances of the prevailing gender stereotypes in societal norms. A girl is considered beautiful with a fair complexion and a slender

body. The entangled identity of a woman with a man through marriage is depicted in many instances. The work associated with Ella was household chores. But on the contrary, the Prince was given lessons on sword fighting, and hunting. This brings forth the difference in work division based on gender that prevails in society. In one of the scenes, the Prince was questioned on why he let the stag run free. According to the norms of the society, killing of animals is an act of heroism and a Prince is expected to be a hero. The film also portrays through the dialogues of the stepsisters, “He is rich beyond reason”, how the man is expected to be rich and the woman must possess beauty to get married to such a man. The King’s dialogue, “Make him look marriageable, must attract suitable brides.” portrays the importance of how one should look, to attract a partner, rather than how one needs to be from inside.

In **Cinderella (2021)**, many social norms regarding gender roles are addressed. Dialogues like “Fortune has smiled upon this house, my daughters have a suitor”; “If you serve such swill to your future husband how long will it take him to abandon you?” depicts how the identity of a woman is a second in command compared to a man’s identity. The Stepmother too in her time tried to fight against society to live her dream. But her dreams were shattered into pieces, which made her the materialistic and cruel lady that she was. So the stepmother uses dialogues like “You think that any girl, let alone you would have the audacity to engage in matters of business. It’s insane.” to discourage the protagonist from realizing her dreams. The autonomy of the King is also a burning example of gender stereotyping. The King uses dialogues like, “I am the King, I have every right. Kings marry for power, not love.” Which mirrors the prevailing notions of society regarding the gender who should be in power. The earnest concern of the stepmother regarding the marriage of her daughters depicts the ultimate goal of a girl is to marry but not to create an identity of her own or realize her dreams. “You must marry rich” is one such dialogue used to describe the need for marriage for a woman.

In the first era of Disney films, princesses like Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora were known for their physical beauty and youth. The Evil Queen in Snow White and Seven Dwarfs film is so jealous of Snow White being pretty and young that she wants to kill her so that she is the one and only “fairest of all”. Snow White has a beautiful voice that captures the heart of the prince who just passes the castle. He stops and looks over the wall to see who is behind that voice. Snow was forced to do tremendous domestic chores yet she happily waited for her prince to come and save her. The concept of love at first sight and marriage with Prince Charming was sewn into the narrative that gave unrealistic expectations about love. The second era of princesses including Ariel, Belle, and Jasmine portrayed women as a rebel. The princesses were known to do things society did not expect them to do. Belle loved to read and the society termed her



as mad or crazy. The princesses of this era were known for their desirability. Belle wore a yellow off-shoulder ball gown which was way ahead of her time.

Her hairdo, which showed hair instead of covering it with a hat or pouf, during that period suggested her being sexually available. Belle initially set very realistic goals as a woman of her age such as seeking adventure, and marrying who understands her but when the time comes she readily gives up her freedom and marries the man who captured her. The third era of Disney Princesses portrays inclusivity of various ethnic backgrounds. Pocahontas, Mulan, and Tiana all are from different backgrounds compared to their predecessors. Tiana is an independent woman who is working and saving money to open up her restaurant. She is so invested in her responsibilities that she denies her feelings towards Naveen. She tirelessly keeps thriving to achieve her dream despite all the hardships she has to go through. The princesses of this era are so focused on achieving their goals, saving their families, and doing something great for the societies, that their personalities seem to be lacking in terms of following what they want.

The fourth generation of princesses includes Rapunzel, Merida, Elsa, and Anna. One of their main characteristics is breaking the notions set by their predecessors. Rapunzel deliberately disobeys Gothel and goes to see the floating lanterns. Merida does not succumb to her mother's wishes for her to marry. These princesses break away from all the stereotypes related to love and marriage that are previously associated with Disney. Rapunzel and Merida each have their dreams and they do whatever they can to fulfill them. They do not fall prey to societal norms or parental pressure but break free of all barriers that are tying them down. They can be said to be understanding and independent in the decisions they make. Rapunzel combats Gothel while Merida patches her relationship with her mother who finally agrees with her decision on marriage. No space is provided for the character of the prince or a potential love partner in the films.

Recent Disney princess films like *Frozen* and *Moana* do not divert from Prince Charming and Marriage. *Raya*, the contemporary addition to the group of Disney princesses, provides a new narrative. She is a warrior who does not wear a ball gown. Her outfit consisting of pants is designed in such a way that they boost her fighting skills. She along with her friends carry on the journey of killing the Drunn. She does not need anyone else to save her or help her fulfill her dream. Compared to her predecessors, *Raya* has complete autonomy in her life and does not need any dictation.

### **Outfits in the Films**

In *Cinderella* (2015), the outfits were designed by Sandy Powell OBE. The colors of the outfits were chosen by the characters. Ella is shown wearing subtle pastel colors with floral prints as a kid. But as she grows solid pastel color gowns are used. With time,

she is shown wearing a sky-blue color dress constantly. The wear and tear of the dress is very prominent. The Prince always had at least one piece of clothing that was blue in color. It was intentionally done to bring in some connection with the protagonist who was seen mostly in blue. The colors for the stepsisters were yellow and pink. Their outfits had fun and loud patterns to bring in the ridicule in them. It was somehow gaudy to bring in the contrast with the protagonist who was seen in simple and subtle dresses. The stepmother is shown as an evil character. So, to bring the dark element she was shown dressed in black. Her dresses were layered to depict the pompous nature of her. The outfit of Cinderella at the ball was grand yet subtle. It was not overloaded with too many elements. The outfits were designed according to the characters and were in resemblance to 19<sup>th</sup>-century-period films.

In **Cinderella (2021)**, Ella was shown wearing comfortable yet stylish clothing. The film tried to break the stereotype of Cinderella meaning the blue dress, and bring a fresh and new look for Ella as she dolled up for the ball.

### **Disney Branded the Gender Roles**

The production of Disney movies can be said to be a male-dominated work industry. The female characters that are portrayed in Disney films are usually a creation of men and how they visualize women. Disney has a history where they adapt an original story and change it according to them. In the process of adaptation, Disney selects what and how to show, causing objectification of women. The panoramic view of the initial films picturing the Disney princesses always presented a story where a docile, helpless princess waits for years patiently for her prince to arrive and rescue her, only to discover her true and unwavering love. Instead of rude and uncouth men, Disney films presented the chivalric gentlemen who undertake the journey to save the princesses. In the early film *Cinderella* (1950), there are no villains. The evil stepmother and stepsisters represented the negativity. Thus men had been reflected in the good mirror who were never flawed. The initial forms of manhood conveyed through the Disney movies are the one who is rich, probably a Prince, courageous, adventurous and has enough leisure time wanting to save someone from a dilemma.

Reiley (2016) in her article brings forward how *Snow White* (1937) and *Cinderella* (1950) were released in times of the Great Depression. The situation made it very difficult to raise children and the movies *Snow White* and *Cinderella* are heavily stereotypical in the context of gender norms. The original story of *Cinderella* by Charles Perrault showed that *Cinderella* interacted with her step sisters and the family relations were good. The step-sisters later marry into good households and everyone lives happily ever after. But Disney adapted the movie and portrayed the stepmother and stepsisters in a bad light focusing on how women should always be kind and giving even if treated

badly. Disney for a long time only portrayed Princesses of European descent. That changed when *Aladdin* (1992) portrayed Jasmine, the first Disney Princess of color. Disney went on to explore other ethnic princesses like Pocahontas and Mulan. From damsel in distress to a fighter, Disney changed the portrayal of women for 70 years. The characters showed similarities in traits and yet the roles assigned to women have significantly changed. The Princess these films showed have tremendous differences in comparison. The roles assigned to women have significantly changed at different periods in Disney films. Snow White was solely seen cleaning, scrubbing, and cooking. She did not have any other job apart from domestic labor. The character of Snow White only focuses on being young and externally beautiful. She was so heavily invested in being kind to the animals and doing household chores that she couldn't even oppose her stepmother who was poorly treating her. The same pattern can be seen continuing with Cinderella.

Raya, just like Merida, alone completes the journey of defeating the Drunn. She does not take fancy in ball gowns or Prince Charming. Raya knows combat and is trained from an early age to be a protector of the dragon gem. In comparison with her predecessors, one thing that can be noted for sure is that along with ethnic inclusivity, Disney has finally accepted that princesses can survive alone. Raya, without her father, searches for Sisu, the last dragon for so many years. The newest Princess brings forth women's empowerment and the independent nature of women shifting the perspective of what can do.

*Brave* (2012), the first Disney Movie drifts away from the conventional portrayals of princess stories such as the narrative of marriage and a happy ending, and sets a new benchmark for an independent female without a partner. *Brave* (2016) marks the complete absence of the prince and goes on to tell a story about a female-centric story. Disney holds the power to influence how gender is perceived in society. Disney is one of the most popular entertainment industries and has a tremendous audience reach across the world. Disney has remarkably changed the way it represents the female gender. Disney films during the 2000s-2010s exhibited a similar amount of masculine and feminine behaviors among the male and female protagonists.

With the evolving waves of feminism, the narration of children's films has also evolved. The storyline has been designed by the present scenarios of society. *Cinderella* (2015) focused mainly on being brave and kind; and talked about the magic within. But with changing times, *Cinderella* (2021) has now brought in changes that talk about the dreams and desires of a female. It doesn't restrict the dreams of a female merely to fall for and marry a rich and powerful man, but to live an independent life of her own. It talks about the fact that women can also venture into business and make a living for themselves. The change is not just limited to the narration or the plot of the films but has

extended its roots to costume, treatment of the film, music, etc. For instance, *Cinderella* (2015) used one of the smoothest ballroom dance styles which is very classic and subtle in nature. But in *Cinderella* (2021), there is a touch of a modern, contemporary style of dance that is loud and fun. The audio-visual representations of the fairytales also represent the culture they originate from. Cinderella stories come from the West and hence influence the prevailing culture of the West. The 'ball' represented the culture of the West. Their costumes, bonds, and customs were representative of the society of the West. Disney inspires the idea of equality between gender and aids to build a universal acceptance of the equality between gender by defining oneself not by how one is born, but by his or her actions. contemporary audiences can relate to strong female leads. Children adore princesses with fancy dresses ball gowns and Cinderella-like shoes. However, children and parents at present equally care about the comfort of dressing. They prefer wearing pants instead of traditional dressing. That's how Disney attains accomplishment in influencing gender roles and its ability to sell products that coincide with its movies.

### **Disney Fairytales and Influence on Children**

Fairytales are filled with values that subtly define the conduct of the children, their choices, their habits, and their belief systems as they are influenced by what they see in the fairy tales. From the focus group discussion ( FGD) with children, it is found that fairytales form an integral part of children on a personal level and in forming social bonds. Fairytales become a topic of discussion or part of the games that they play. It also defines their dressing styles or the choices that they make. Women's identities were shifted from margin to center as a result of the connected association between narratives of the fairy tales and men. In fairy tales, women are usually split into two categories: good and bad, victimized and wicked women, assertive, and subservient ladies, whose destructive activities compete with those of godmother fairies. Fairy tales, in this way, function as a convincing didactic example for women, teaching patience and sacrifice. The term "self" refers to a person's experience of being a single, unitary, autonomous being who is distinct from others and who is experienced consistently across time and space. The conscious awareness of one's physical, as well as one's inner character and emotional life, are all part of the self-experience. The self is the totality of an individual, consisting of all conscious and unconscious characteristics. It is both mental and physical. Apart from its basic meaning of human identity, existence, and experience, the phrase has several other meanings. The concept of self plays a vital role in shaping the behavior of children.

According to the concept of Gender socialization, Anthony Giddens (2006) brings to light that, it is through socialization that the stranded child gradually becomes a

self-aware, experienced person, in the ways of the values in which he or she was born. Television, children's books, and Toys reinforce different attributes of male and female that contributes to shape child's perception and they reaction is based on their perceived gender based differentiation (Giddens, 2006). Children grow up watching fairytales and folktales. It wouldn't be inappropriate to say that the majority of the children have watched one or the other fairytales. Children at times heard the stories from their elders. Undoubtedly, they are fond of the audio-visual representation of these stories too. They have also to a great extent resonated with the characters and shown keen interest to be a part of their world. They have at some point or the other attached their self to the protagonist as an audience. Children are quite influenced by Merida's decision not to marry any of her suitors. They love her portrayal of being courageous and capable of making decisions. A change in perception is also noticed regarding independence, as children crave them. They no longer believe that princesses can't combat or are not supposed to combat. Children appreciate how Merida loves archery and she does not lose interest in archery only because princesses are not supposed to combat.

The children considered the male protagonist of *Beauty and the Beast* to be ill-tempered and selfish and held Belle captive without any reason. They no longer look for a prince charming to help them and save them. The gradual absence of male protagonists from the recent Disney Princess Films like *Brave* has sent the message that girls or women do not need a male companion to be saved. Children's notion of love is highly determined by their viewing choices. It becomes a determining factor in the formation of agency of children. It defines their belief in themselves and their conviction to work towards their goals. The children take up not only the positive but also the negative from these audio-visual representations of fairytales. One child respondent in FGD has revealed that the lesson that she learned from one of the fairy tales is 'tit for tat'. Although the majority of them took the positive out of it, the negative cannot also be denied. Hence, fairytales subtly contribute to the formation of the agency of children.

The role of parents in promoting the viewing of fairytales and processing and negotiating cultural scripts in their children is also exposed in FGD. They not only encourage them to watch commercially successful fairy tales but also encourage them to watch the folktales that give them a taste of the local culture and tradition of the region.

## Conclusion

The shift in the narration of the story keeping in pace with the evolving concept of feminism is observed not only in the plot, and narration but also in the treatment of the film, music, dance, costume, etc. Society at present demands proper representation of women that resonates with the concept of feminism as an important aspect. Parents

of today's generation would prefer their children, especially girl children, to take the world by their confidence and paint the sky with a rainbow. Fairy and folktales form an integral part of children's lives. They play an important role in shaping the idea of 'self' for a child. The fairy tales unconsciously determine some gender-appropriate behavior for them. Their dressing style, way of talking, whom to ask permission from, the right to make decisions, etc. are some aspects where the influence of these fairy tales and folktales are found.

"The greatest risk any of us will ever take, is to be seen as we are," is one such example that elucidates the inner messages in fairy tales and folktales. Fairytales talk about magic which has deeper connotations of positivity. It refers to the magic that lies within each one of us. Magic represents the belief and power that each one of us holds to overcome hurdles and realize our dreams. It also subtly promotes some beauty myths like being fair is beautiful. Other myths include 'marriage is the ultimate goal of life for a girl', a man with money is desired by everyone', 'power and money bring happiness', etc.

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