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## From Tradition to Transformation: Unveiling the Politics behind the Evolution of Disney Princess Narratives from *Snow White* to *Frozen*

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### Abstract

Fairy tales have long captivated human imagination with their timeless appeal and universal themes, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries. This paper explores the evolution of Disney princesses from \*Snow White\* to \*Frozen\*, applying Vladimir Propp's narrative framework from \*Morphology of the Folktale\* to analyze their storytelling structures. While Disney's princess films appear to embrace individuality and empowerment, they often conform to a formulaic structure that perpetuates traditional archetypes cloaked in modern narratives of liberation. The study categorizes Disney princesses into three groups based on their evolution: the passive, domesticated heroines of the classical era; the adventurous yet romantically bound princesses of the Renaissance; and the more independent but strategically restrained characters of the 21st century. Through detailed analyses, the paper critiques the representation of race, gender, and independence within these films, exposing how the franchise's diversification and modernity often serve as calculated marketing strategies. Despite the incorporation of multicultural contexts, bold character traits, and ostensibly progressive ideals, the Disney princess formula ultimately reinforces conventional notions of femininity. The study highlights how these narratives, while evolving in appearance, remain fundamentally rooted in Proppian structures, ensuring their uniformity amidst diversity. This analysis offers insights into the socio-cultural and ideological implications of Disney's portrayal of princesses, revealing a complex interplay between tradition, modernity, and commercial strategy.

**Keywords:** Disney Princesses, Proppian Narrative, Gender Representation, Cultural Evolution, Media Ideology

Fairy tales have long captivated human imagination, with their timeless appeal transcending geographical and cultural boundaries. Their enduring charm can be attributed, in part, to the universal themes they embody. Despite their remarkable diversity, fairy tales often reflect patterns that resonate across cultures. This paradoxical quality of uniformity amidst diversity is striking. As Vladimir Propp observes in \*Morphology of the Folktale\*,

"This explains the twofold quality of a tale: its amazing multiformity, picturesqueness, and color, and, on the other hand, its no less striking uniformity, its repetition" (Propp, 8).

The transition of fairy tales into animated and cartoon forms has profoundly influenced contemporary entertainment, with the Walt Disney Company playing a central role in this evolution. Notably, twelve of Disney's animated films feature iconic princess characters adapted from traditional fairy tales. This study seeks to investigate the application of Proppian narrative structures within these films, while also critically analyzing the portrayal of modern princess archetypes. Although these characters are often positioned as embodiments of liberation and empowerment, they simultaneously align with the "Disney female image." This paper argues that such portrayals, while ostensibly progressive, function to perpetuate a distinct ideological framework associated with Disney, subtly cloaked in narratives of female agency and autonomy.

Disney princess is more than just a character type or category of movies. It is actually the name of a media franchise owned by the Walt Disney Company, created basically as a way of promoting their most popular heroines and selling numerous products. Andy Mooney, Disney's chairman of consumer goods was inspired into the princess franchise concept when he saw the enormous influence these characters have on the teenagers. To date Disney has eleven princesses in the list, they are Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora, Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan, Tiana, Rapunzel, and Merida. The two characters Elsa and Anna from the 2013 movie frozen are yet to be named princesses but they were able to place themselves one of Disney's top franchises alongside the princess group. The fact that it is highest grossing animated movie of all time, and is already Disney's biggest selling digital and Blu-ray release makes it unnecessary to have Anna and Elsa line up with others. From *Snow white* to *Frozen* all princess movies contained the perfect princess formula. Their physical attributes were so similar with big innocent eyes, tiny chins and short noses which make them appear meek and vulnerable. Even in their varied cultural contexts they share a common streak. Propp's theories can be easily related to these characters.

Vladimir Propp in his analysis of fairytales found them as containing thirty one components and eight broad character types which he described in detail in his short but crucial book *Morphology of the Folktale* It also explains why fairy tales have their own internal and easily recognizable logic and why they lend themselves so well to larger psychological themes, especially female sexuality and relationships. Whilst not all stories will contain all of Propp's narratives, it is difficult to find stories that contain none, and many modern books and movies fit nicely into his categories. Propp's definition of the hero has interesting implications for the Disney Princess movies in particular. In most narratives, the hero is assumed to be the protagonist, but in Propp's *Morphology*, he (and he is always a he, frequently named Ivan) is a pattern of behaviour. He is the person who disobeys or follows the interdiction, the person who is harmed by the villain, the recipient of a magical agent, the primary combatant who defeats the villain in a climactic struggle, and/or the one

who undergoes a physical transformation at the end of the story. Generally speaking, he also marries the princess, who exists mostly to transfer her father's power (the kingdom and all that comes with it) to him.

In most of the early princess movies the hero was the prince who came for rescue and the princess was a mere shadow. Over time Disney has made the princesses adventurous and bold. We can find a gradual transition among these thirteen girls. From the classical damsels in distress that we find in Snow-white, Cinderella and Aurora to the heroines Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan, Ariel and Tiana and Anna who seek adventure and hail from more varied ethnic groups and finally to the more independent trio Rapunzel, Merida and Elsa. Thus the movies try to satisfy as well as mould their target viewers' concept of womanhood. The representations of race and gender within the media influence the viewers whether through stereotypes or ideals to live up to. This is because the media is seen to play a significant role in offering a socializing power on the attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of its audience. As stated by Propp Disney Princess fairytales seem to follow a certain formula which makes them alike. The success of Snow white was followed by many princess stories with the same formula. Disney developed a formulaic approach to the production of content: Basic elements in its formula: good prevailing over evil, expressive, catchy songs, cute animal sidekicks for comic relief, young romance, sense of humour. Disney's princess formula never failed till *Frozen*. It's hard for a teenager to find similarities between the domesticated Snow white and ferocious Elsa. On close analysis we find them quintessentially the same. For analysing the transition and similarities this study divides the princess characters into three groups. The first group consists of Snow white, Cinderella and Aurora.

Snow White is the first and original Disney Princess. Described by her evil stepmother's Magic Mirror as having "*hair as black as ebony, lips as red as the rose, skin as white as snow*". She is forced to seek refuge in the home of the seven dwarfs, where she hides from her evil stepmother, the Evil Queen Grimhilde, who is jealous of Snow White's beauty and seeks her death. Snow White is often described as a kind, optimistic, tidy and happy person who sees the good in everyone. She is based on the heroine of the German fairy tale *Snow White* (1812) by the Brothers Grimm.

Cinderella is often considered the "Leader of the Disney Princesses". Forced into servitude by her evil stepmother, Lady Tremaine, Cinderella's sole hope is meeting with the prince. Cinderella's name almost became synonymous with overnight transformation from rags to riches. In the movie Cinderella is an epitome of politeness and ladylike qualities. Aurora is often described as beautiful, kind, shy and sophisticated. She is also a hopeless romantic. At first, she is seen as a little naive and insecure as a result of being sheltered for most of her life but, unlike Snow White, she is somewhat pluckier and more opinionated. In later media, she is shown to have matured and become more self-assured, independent and confident. These classic era princesses are all domesticated and passive enduring the consequences of other people's actions. They all hope to end up with a prince in the end and

all of them sing of their wishes and dreams of princes who come to rescue these damsels in distress. These movies maintain the good evil binary through villainous step mothers and maleficent the evil fairy who act as foil to the innocent princesses.

Next five princesses who can be grouped together are Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas and Mulan. They all are adventurous, seeking a new world all of them sing of the world, nature adventures and self. Thus through them the traditional role of the princesses is remodelled into a more individualistic adventurous one and romance loses the foremost position in their lives. Yet they end up with a male companion as part of their adventure. Ariel is considered as a fully realized female character that thinks and acts independently, even rebelliously, instead of hanging around passively while the fates decide her destiny,. She takes a risk of trading her voice in return for humanity. Based on the Danish fairy tale *The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen, The character was inspired by the protagonist in Andersen's story, but was developed into a different personality for the film. This seems to make her look bold and adventurous but like majority of her group this adventure has nothing but a romantic relationship with the prince and she seems to be foolish enough to lose her true self for this. She's either mute or unable to walk until the very end, when her father has to bestow freedom upon her.

Personality-wise, Belle has been regarded as an independent, intelligent, courageous, and headstrong, as well as a feminist. The character has been universally lauded by critics, garnering specific praise and recognition for her intelligence and bravery. Animation historian Michael Barrier wrote that Belle "becomes a sort of intellectual less by actually reading books, it seems, than by hanging out with them", so in creating Belle there seems to have a deliberate effort to make appear intelligent. David Whitley writes in *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation* that Belle is different from earlier Disney heroines in that she is mostly free from the burdens of domestic housework, although her role is somewhat undefined in the same way that "contemporary culture now requires most adolescent girls to contribute little in the way of domestic work before they leave home and have to take on the freight, multiple responsibilities of the working mother".

Jasmine is based on Princess Badroulbadour from the One Thousand and One Nights tale of "Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp". Jasmine is fierce, bold, and confident, and she rarely allows anyone tell her what to do and what not to do. Jasmine hungers for independence, tired of the restrictions laid before her by her father. She falls in love with Aladdin while he is disguised as a prince, after he takes her on a romantic ride on a magic carpet. Princess Jasmine from the film Aladdin in 1992 introduced the first princess of colour and a heated debate which still continues regarding the inappropriate and cultural-oriental depictions of the princess, and this film. Jasmine's physical appearance is one that differs from any Disney princess that came before her. Her toffee collared skin, long hair, big gold earrings and skimpy clothing consisting of harem pants and small midriff baring top instantly made her physically different from previous princesses adorning the traditional ball gown. What is ironic is that Jasmine's attire does not represent the Middle Eastern, and

therefore predominantly Muslim society, she comes from. Instead, this Western depiction creates an inaccurate and sexualised image of the Oriental woman. , Jasmine's only power lies in her sexuality. At the end of the movie, she's reduced to seducing Jafar to save her life

*Pocahontas*, inspired by the known history and folklore surrounding the Native American woman Pocahontas, and portrays a fictionalized account of her historical encounter with Englishman John Smith and the Jamestown settlers that arrived from the Virginia Company. The film was harshly criticized by Chief Roy Crazy Horse as historically inaccurate and offensive for glossing over more negative treatment of Pocahontas and her tribe by the British. Roy claims that Disney refused the tribe's offers to help create a more culturally and historically accurate film. An editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* pointed out America's fascination with the Indian princess who was rarely shown as having anything more important in her life than her male relationships. Critics argue that the film presents damaging stereotypes of American Indians. Some criticism has surrounded the representation of Indian characters, like Grandmother Willow, Meeko, and Flit as animals. These critics contend that portraying these Native American characters as animals has a marginalizing effect.

Disney categorises a character as princess when she is a human and is born a princess or marries a prince. The second group has Mulan who though not born princess or becomes a princess through marriage. Thematically, *Mulan* explores the age-old idea and concept of remaining "true to yourself," with co-director Tony Bancroft summarizing Mulan's role in the film as "the story of a girl who can't help who she is but she exists in a different society that tells her who she is supposed to be. a turn of the circle from such age-old Disney classics in which passive heroines were rescued by blandly noble princes. Here, it's the girl who does the rescuing, saving not only the prince but the emperor himself from oblivion, and this in a culture where women were expected to obey strictly prescribed rules. Mulan, atypical and unlike most previous female roles, is courageous and more self-reliant. She also does not fit in with the expectations of a young Chinese girl of the time; despite her natural beauty, she is clumsy, outspoken, and independent rather than graceful, silent and demure. Her meeting with the matchmaker ended in chaos because of this, (with help from a certain cricket), and the matchmaker claimed that even though she had the looks of a bride, she would never find a match. However, her courage, intelligence, and determination helped her through her adventures, in which she disguises herself as a male soldier in order to fight in the Chinese army in place of her wounded father.

One important change in these movies is that the choice of the princesses became less Eurocentric. They belonged to varied ethnic groups such as Arab, Native Indian or Chinese. Yet it is notable that along with Tiana the black princess these are moved to the back of the princess line up. This group marks a Disney Renaissance. The clothing provided for them differs in the case of Pocahontas and Jasmine and makes them look more adult with more skin exposure. This sexualisation can be seen in all renaissance princesses but it is more in the case of the two.

After this adventurous group comes the trio Tiana, Rapunzel and Merida. Tiana is portrayed as being a hardworking, ambitious, and beautiful young woman who has no love interest (at the start of the film). Living in New Orleans, Louisiana, Tiana strives to achieve her goal of opening her own restaurant (an ambition inspired by the accomplishments of real life restaurateur Leah Chase). She is the first Black American princess in the group. However, she is transformed into a frog after trying to break a spell cast by a Bokor on Prince Naveen that had changed him into a frog also. Tiana spends most of this film as a frog. Throughout the film, the pair must embark on a quest to find a way to break the spell.

Rapunzel is based on the heroine of the German fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm. In *Tangled* she is depicted as a princess born with long, magical golden hair, stolen from her parents, the King and Queen of Corona, at infancy, is raised by Mother Gothel, an evil and vain old witch and exploits her hair to remain young and beautiful. Incarcerated in an isolated tower for eighteen years, Rapunzel enlists the help of a wanted thief named Flynn Rider to see the floating lanterns in time for her 18th birthday. The character has been generally well received by most critics. Particular praise was awarded to her spirited personality and contemporaneity.

Despite her mother Elinor's desire to see Merida as a proper royal lady, Merida wants to take control of her own destiny. She has honed her skill in archery, and is one of the most skilled archers ever seen. She is also skilled in sword-fighting and cross-country horse riding on her horse, Angus. Here we can find that Disney through Tiana, Merida and Rapunzel tries to introduce more independent girls.

Tiana and Rapunzel singing of their dream differ much from the dreams of the classical princesses. Tiana as she sings in the film was almost near her dream when she finds herself in trouble and from there her dream becomes associated with Prince Naveen. So she is made weaker and less independent. In the same manner Rapunzel dreams of a new life and adventure as she is depicted in the beginning of the movie as confined in the tower and managing her too long magical hair. She also has no love interest in the beginning. But she finds Flynn Rider to help her in her adventure and eventually getting liberated from the tower she ends up as hopelessly in love with him. Merida is the first Disney princess in the line-up to not have a love interest in her film. Unlike the other princesses, Merida does not sing in her film. She tries to subvert the notions of princess. But her independent spirit seems to have put her in trouble. Her relationship with her mother is strained and she tries to patch up in the end. *Brave* pretty accurately portrays the strains in any relationship between a mother and early teen daughter. And Merida has learned to reconcile in the hard way. While being the strongest princess in the group she too has to compromise for the society. Disney had to change the decision to give a princess makeover to Merida due to resistance from fans. While movie Merida is childlike in her features, wears a simple dress, and carries a bow and quiver, her Princess alter ego has an hourglass figure, a face covered in makeup, a gold-embroidered off-the-shoulder gown, and has no weapon at all. This make over gave her a more polished princess appearance which Disney chose for her to fit in the princess group.

Whatever else Disney claims that Princesses are about, they're really about selling dresses and dolls. Merida also follows the Disney formula while her adventure is restricted to saving the society.

The most celebrated sisters Anna and Elsa could not find a place in the group even two years after the release of the film *Frozen*. Nevertheless Elsa and Anna have established themselves as princesses with a huge number of fans. Though was inspired by the *Snow Queen* fairy tale *Frozen* has nothing in common with the snow queen except the fierce Elsa who turns a Snow monster in the course of the story. The snow queen is strong enough to enslave a man with her kiss and is a foil to Hans Christian Anderson's Gerda who has her innocent heart and tears as her asset. Disney could have used Snow Queen's strength over the male in *Frozen*. But Elsa in the beginning of the film itself is told about controlling her power. She, like Rapunzel, stays away from the world to keep her power a secret. Like Merida she is forced to help another woman in her life. Her independence is inhibited by her emotional attachment to her sister. Anna and Elinor thus become tools of taming these reckless ladies. And it is interesting to see How in *Brave* and *Frozen* the Princesses and their female companions get more attention than all the male characters. The movies are titled with adjectives like tangled, brave and frozen which distinctly indicate the protagonists. In the middle of *Frozen* Elsa is crowned and becomes the queen which probably is the reason for her not being made a Disney Princess. Power does not seem to be a criterion for being a princess. The free Elsa sings of her freedom and slams the door like Nora in *The Doll's House* by Ibsen. The song "Let it go" became a symbol of power and coming out Anthem for the lesbians and transgender but film tells that Elsa's liberation lifelong solitude and eternal winter for others. So that Elsa is tamed in the film to create snow to please others within the confines of her palace. Thus she remains a snow white who is domesticated even after she lets down her hair and changes into fashionable attire throwing her crown and cloak.

In conclusion, Propp's formula reveals that fairy tales, despite their apparent diversity, retain a fundamental uniformity in their core structure. As Marian Roalfe Cox observes, even a single story such as \*Cinderella\* can exist in as many as 345 variations (Cox, 471). Disney has made considerable efforts to diversify its princess lineup by incorporating colorful costumes, distinct cultural origins, ethnicities, and varied territorial settings. Nevertheless, these characters share significant commonalities, and the apparent differences often seem intentionally designed to captivate diverse audiences.

The Disney princess formula, while appearing to celebrate individuality, does not allow for substantial deviation from traditional archetypes. In the 21st century, the princesses are crafted to exhibit traits of independence and liberation, distinguishing them from their more passive predecessors. However, this shift appears to be a calculated marketing strategy aimed at appealing to a younger, predominantly teenage demographic. Ultimately, the portrayal of their independent spirit is tempered, ensuring that these

characters conform to the conventional ideals of a "proper" princess by the narrative's conclusion.

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