



Research Paper

Pixelating Gender: A Critical Reading of Gender Roles in Frozen, Zootopia, Despicable Me and Minions.

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ABSTRACT: Animation films are cultural products that exist in the cultural domain for a significant period in the form of prequels, sequels, series and adaptations into different languages. The tremendous impact it has on coming generation calls for a critical reading of the gendered notions presented in this novel media form. A critical reading of the gender roles presented by Disney Studios and Illumination Entertainment Studios shows how the objective of positive representation is a distant dream.

Received 02 December, 2018; Accepted 08 December, 2018 © The Author(S) 2018.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Movies are the popular literature of our time. Film studies with respect to gender studies have already gained momentum with the publication of seminal texts such as *Popcorn Venus* by Marjorie Rosen, *From Reverence to Rape* by Molly Haskell, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" by Laura Mulvey and through insightful studies by Mary Ann Doane. Gender Studies as it is now is a field of interdisciplinary study devoted to the study of gender identity and gendered representation as categories of analysis. It also engages in studying the intersection of gender with other categories of analysis of identity including race, sexuality, class, disability and nationality. Though theories regarding post-feminist approaches are in vogue, the very need of a feminist reading of films with a focus on gender still has a tremendous scope, as the critical research in the area associated still hasn't achieved its objectives in representing a woman in a non-stereotypical, non-objectified role.

American Motion Pictures Association is the global organization designated to classify American Motion Pictures, home videos and television industry, based on ratings with regard to the suitability of audience in terms of issues such as sex, violence, substance abuse, profanity, impudence or other types of mature content. Ratings typically carry age recommendations in an advisory or restrictive capacity often in lieu of censorship ("The Film Rating System" par. 1). G (general audience) and PG (parental guidance suggested) ratings of movies make them consumable on a larger scale. As far as animation films are concerned, assumptions regarding gender and gender stereotypes are often discussed and criticized. Repeated exposure to these on a daily basis would definitely interfere with the construction of wrong notions regarding gender roles.

A literature review of the related studies shows how Disney as the forerunner of animation films in its current form has undergone so much criticism over several decades for its racist, sexist, highly sexualized portrayal of characters along with privileging and universalizing 'whiteness' (Bell 1995 and Giroux 2010). Studies by Frueh and McGhee as early as in 1975 and by Morgan and Rothschild in 1983 found out that early viewing of television contributed to the construction of sexist stereotypes among children and adolescents (Signoriellin.pag). Studies conducted by Stacy L. Smith et al on assessing gender-related portrayals in the top-grossing G-rated film showed that male outnumbered females in 2.5 to 1 and this figure hasn't changed for so many years prior to 2011. (2-19). Hoerrner, in a 1996 study concerning gender pattern of Disney films released over several years, revealed that viewers consistently consumed erroneous and demeaning depictions of women (213-28). In fact, being exposed to the media shows that "media consumption has a measurable influence on people's perceptions of the real world, and regardless of the accuracy of these perceptions, they are used to help guide subsequent attitudes, judgments, and actions." (Behm-Morawitz and Mastro 131). This chapter aims to look into the gender patterns, gender socialization and stereotypes of race and its association with gender in select films based on critical theories of Stuart Hall and Judith Butler.

Selected from Disney studios are *Frozen* and *Zootopia*. According to Stuart Hall's seminal essay *Encoding/ Decoding* (1973), going by the preferred reading both the movies have female protagonists in an empowered role. Be it Anna, Elsa, Judy Hopps, and Bellwether, their opinions and action do matter a lot in the

progress of the plot. Research and criticism over the years have made the studio incorporate changes catering to the changing needs of the time. The function of the gendered body of the protagonists and other characters, and the idealized image of a sexually appealing proportionate body caters to a different reading of voyeurism and male gaze (Mulvey 1989). Judy Hopps is an anthropomorphic character who is a bunny. The configuration of rabbit's body by attributing features of an overtly sexual female with big thighs and narrow waist can be explicitly seen all throughout the movie and in its posters. Struggle underwent and the eventual triumph of the protagonists in casting off evil and restoring peace appeal to the ideals of the nation as well.

Although the existence of normative relations is shown as central to the plot, one can also read into these films a tendency towards non-conformity to domestic ideals. Both the Disney movies do not show marriage or a "happily ever after" kind of ending in its climax. The normal plot of women being rescued is given screen space, but gladly there isn't an explicit message of conformity. The villainous acts done by characters in both Zootopia and Frozen have its association with gender. Though Elsa has uncontrollable powers to make icicles, the violence perpetrated by her knowingly or unknowingly hurts Anna. Similarly, Bellwether (Sheep) appears naïve but she is the real culprit of the movie. Luckily Elsa is not made viciously evil. By giving her a queer edge with the song 'Let it go' she shows her inability to fit into the label as expected of her. Bellwether is a victim of marginalization by the predator folk in a system. She too experiences sexism and discrimination in the workplace. She gets castigated despite being the deputy Mayor and is forced to do the job of a secretary. Racism and sexism are self-evident all throughout the movie.

Zootopia has a female lead Judy Hopps, but it shows how extremely tough her journey is. The kind of sexism at work in the workplace can give wrong notions about survival. All the officers shown are males with a powerful physique who don't even bother to be friendly with their new recruitment (Judy Hopps) who came as a part of 'Mammal Inclusion Initiative'. Although one cannot say ignoring her is kind of workplace sexism, apparently, it can be considered so since there is a clear absence of females in 'Zootopia Police Department'. The meter maid role given shows a clear take of sexism and stigmatization at the workplace. Taking a negotiated position decodes this message as - No matter how many medals you have earned all throughout your academic career one dominating boss is enough to marginalize you. All these characteristics are attributed to Judy Hopps despite showing her unwavering courage to face the stormy situation. All the qualities negatively attributed to bunnies - too small, too weak, too emotional to be in law enforcement - seems like the same characteristics that are often negative stereotypes for women (Jusino par. 5). Denying the fox "jumbo pop" by showing the board "we reserve the right to deny service to anyone" (Zootopia.00:19:07-00:19:34) clearly symbolizes the kind of boards that was kept on roadsides and restaurants even after the civil rights movement denying Afro-Americans from using Caucasian-Americans premises.

For kids, Zootopia carries a positive message as far as empowerment is considered. Disney has dared to chance its arm in depicting a political allegory, but on a deeper level, Disney is still in blind alley as far as the stereotypical portrayal of ethnicities are considered. Mr. Big anthropomorphized as rat, is shown as a powerful Don, who is about to attend his daughter's wedding. Explicitly he is given an Italian accent alluding to the Mario Puzonovel, and film titled The Godfather. Although Zootopia is so full of big mammals, making their presence felt, but the real masters are tiny ones. The borders of femininity and masculinity don't intersect anywhere as animals have clear gender roles in their environment. The only character that can be considered effeminate is the charming receptionist Cheetah Mr. Clawhanger who doesn't think for a second to call Judy Hopps cute which makes her feel uncomfortable. Nick Wilde, the fox played by Jack Bateman is given a kind of saviour role in helping out officer Judy Hopps. Romance is not at all given any sort of screen space, but violence is, lending the movie a PG rating.

Frozen is an adaptation of a fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen. It is the tale of two sisters and their eventual realization of love for each other despite being away from each other. The preferred reading will make the children realize their love for siblings or cousins celebrating their companionship and all. Since Frozen is the first full-length animated movie to find its position in billion clubs, the text has its own significance at the national and international level. Frozen became a cultural phenomenon by breaking records worldwide. The ratio of representation of the central characters with agency shows two females to five males. Gendered representation for ethnicity is shown only for males. The crowd in the palace hall at the time of ball shows representation for colored people with is devoid of agency.

Gender roles clearly denote femininity and masculinity, but breaking of the stereotypical image associated with 'weak, submissive and afraid of unknown things' kind of image got replaced with fearless, dominant and all set for adventure kind of image for princess girls. No explanation is given for the possession cryokinesis powers by Elsa. No fairy godmother or voice over is there to denote that fact but the king says to the troll that she was not cursed but was born with the powers. Forced domestication for a deviant behavior is shown by locking up Elsa and restraining her from playing with her sister. Elsa is considered as the champion for the rejected and ostracized. As one critic puts it "She's a young woman in difficult circumstances, frightened, trying to understand her abilities and burdened by expectation and convention. It's easy to

sympathize with her and marvel at her ability . . . Next to her, Anna is very much a child who needs to grow up.” (Pal par.7)

Olaf is a gender-less being but the shared idea of building snow ‘man’ makes him appear as a male. He is the representation of the girls’ happy past and aids Anna in finding the true act of love. Along with Olaf, Elsa also creates a monster that guards her palace. Both the genderless creations by Elsa illuminate the accepted gender role for males in performing their duty of protecting the girls. It is made evident through the voice cast of these characters. The performed gender role of guarding and protecting an all-powerful queen by male monsters naturalizes the assumption of the protective roles assigned to male members.

The notion that unprotected headstrong girls need to be married off is the ideology that is at work even for trolls. Thus, the ideology of forcing girls to conform without even acknowledging what needs are there for a woman is depicted by trolls. Although through preferred reading positive gender portrayal is depicted, taking a negotiated position shows that films are not free from stereotypes in showing race and sexuality. Looking at the voice cast also shows a preference for Caucasians, the only Afro-American behind the voice cast is Maia Wilson who dubbed for Buldath the troll. The image of the ideal woman with etiquette and proper upbringing is the requirement for Kristoff, who lives with reindeer and is brought up by trolls. He questions Anna’s upbringing when she carelessly puts her feet on top of his sled “Were you raised in a barn?” revealing his assumptions about gender roles and upbringing. When wolves attack them, he prevents her from helping him in fighting off the wolves and says “I don’t trust your judgments”, as she has fallen in love with a guy whom she met for the first time. Finally, when she asks the donkey, Sven to jump he says “you don’t tell him what to do I do”. (Frozen.00:40:20-00:43:05). Although Kristoff appears to be the hero figure, there is inherent misogyny that is at work in all his conversation.

Illumination entertainment is relatively a younger production house compared to the stalwarts in the market. Even though they started late, their popularity is comparable to Disney house due to their well-crafted stories and Universal’s distribution along with franchises. They don’t have an exhaustive list of films like their competitors but the studio in its childhood itself has swept the market of animation films with its Despicable Me series. Hence the two films that fall under our specific timeline are Despicable Me 2 and Minions. Both the films have this bright yellow being talking gibberish mixed with slightly comprehensible English like a two or three-year-old child. Minions is a prequel/ spin-off to the Despicable Me series.

Though Minions are genderless beings naming them has made them fit into the binaries of gender. Although Minion’s gender identity is a fluid one, the preference for an androgynous appearance is all out on screen. Again, the main focus is on three minions Kevin, Stuart, and Bob. It shows their evolution, their hunt for an evil master and adventure thereof. Despite showing its evolution the studio has completely kept quiet on the mode of reproduction and no existence of females is shown in any of the minion categories. It is after finding their place in urban streets of the city that they decide through clothing which gender they should showcase. Acquisition of gender through the twin processes of socialization and conditioning shows minion’s choice of label for their gender. Minions decided to dress up as men because they found this faction the more dominant of the two from their outsider position. As Kate Bornstein says, “I see fashion as a proclamation or manifestation of identity, so, as long as identities are important, fashion will continue to be important. The link between fashion and identity begins to get real interesting, however, in the case of people who don’t fall clearly into a culturally-recognized identity.” (Bronstein 3)

Minions, by their mere wardrobe choice, seem to exhibit the choice of their identity. Male clothing can obviously exert a male identity, which they might have figured out as favorable for survival and progress in the new world exposed to them. The importance of a name and the external aspects of clothing and fashion emphasize the role of make-believe in the current society. Some minions are shown to dress like chaperons and do take up household chores in Gru’s family again they are not given any names nor are they given any agency in the story.

The femme fatale, Scarlet Overkill is again a villainous woman leading a successful life. She is super-villain turned boss who is adept in planning and thieving along with her husband, Herb. She’s a master thief, an accomplished pilot, and an expert fighter. Her huge, fairytale citadel towers over London and includes a treasure room swollen with loot. “An ambitious woman, she’s skilled at marketing her brand and building a criminal empire. In fact, compared to the series’ other villains, Scarlet’s skill set are by far the strongest.” (Massey par. 3).

Although Scarlet is shown as the femme fatale, the studio doesn’t spare her as representing her hyper-sexualized nature. Unscrutinized sexism is all over Minions with the sidekick minions acting to subvert or reduce the success of the first female supervillain and it restricts her screen time to just twenty minutes. None of the male villains were shown to possess any of these qualities other than being a nerdy geek leading an empty life just focusing on just being bad. The other villains shown do have families but again there is a clear absence of mother figures except for Gru. In Minions, even though minions had no source of exposure to ways of modern man, they too embody certain middle-class sensibilities.

Minions are aware of the relationship between a husband and wife, they know how to read and write. *Despicable Me 2* answers quite well in terms of representation but again the only heroine, Lucy Wilde who is braver than Gru finally takes the position of the subordinate weak woman who has to be rescued from another villain by the hero. Again adherence to the stereotypical representation of a woman is amply evident. Whatever dreams and desires one possess as a villain, women are finally meant for rescuing and marrying. The presence of three little girls and role of paranoiac overprotective daddy figure by Gru again caters to the taste of wallet owners of kids who had difficulty in vocalizing or showing love initially. Though the previous sequel had Gru's mother in few scenes, she is completely out of the silver screen in part 2. The absence of mother figure gives the paranoiac dad who was 'superbad' a 'superdad' image. The little children act as etiquette developers taming the wild hero, touching on his sensitive emotions and making him fit into the role of a father. Though minions always loved serving an evil master, with the all-powerful hero Gru they too have accepted the new mode of civil life making jellies and jams. The reassertion of male dominance is evident through stereotypical portrayal central character. He is given the accent of a Mexican showing the kind of stereotypical portrayal of non-native American. The villain El machotoo is shown as a Mexican who runs a restaurant. Thus stereotyped representation of ethnicity can be read lavishly by associating negative traits of drug making and smuggling with Mexican ethnicity which has been propagated by dominant ideology makers. The ratio of representation of characters with agency in *Minions* shows one female to three males. In *Despicable Me 2* the representation is four females to six males including the three minions Kevin, Stuart, and Bob.

A close scrutiny of the select films reveal the underlying gender patterns in what is considered the new-age children's fiction to be conforming to the notions of the elder world out there. As the psychology of the average child spectator develops through the perusal of these movies, he or she gets slowly vacuumed into the prominent notions of gender and ethnicities, making them aspire to take either direction with strong conviction about their choice. The choice is laid out and obviously, it is at the outset itself. The aspiration would be aligned either to the dominant male or female characters, depending on the gender identity of the viewer.

A clear observation on gender roles shows a change in trend towards the representation of femininity. An embracing of masculinity and the adventure associated is shown by certain progressive female characters but propagation of domesticated gender roles and women being happy in that is widely propagated. Contemporary females, unlike traditional ones, have evolved a lot but without exception, every female character is shown to be saved by a man in a crucial moment in the plot. The roles that females depict are either of an angelic, selfless, brave, chaste, young woman or of a femme fatale figure who is aggressive, overtly sexual and unpleasant or ugly. "Woman in patriarchy is entrapped in both these images which do not oppose but succeed each other" (Gilbert and Gubbar 217). Careful scrutiny of characters dimension reveals how males are depicted as multi-dimensional and females are represented as one-dimensional in most of the select films for study.

The patterns of ownership of the female counterpart and compulsory heterosexuality through the 'happily-ever-after' message conveyed through a larger part of these films align the aspirations of a male viewer to orient his desires on a softer female counterpart, who subdues her rebellion in favour of his machismo. The subordinated existence of women is made natural and sanctioned by the agency at work.

A female viewer in her position seeks to orient herself along the sensibilities of the female characters, who are most often seen as docile, domesticated and matured even though at the outset they were of a rebellious kind. The known existence of a woman in the society is through the adoption of the roles of caring and nurturing mate and mother. They aspire to fit into the petite figures of the heroines to be deemed desirable for the men folk, for in it lies the essence of their existence. It is drilled into their system that they need to be in constant wait for the male partner, who romantically overcomes hurdles and undergoes a series of adventures to get to their destiny, that is, the women-kind. A patient wait and a domesticated existence are preferred with perfected ladylike manners and a desirable frame and figure. The preparation ground is set at this stage to evolve into pleasure tools. Moreover, a damsel-in-distress like helplessness in women is seen to be desirable as it boosts the machismo of the male characters. More than often sexual innuendos are uttered at their expense by the male characters, portraying patterns of ownership and pleasure envisaged by the males by possessing the females. In what is supposed to be a children's movie, the inclusion of all these stereotypical elements about gender seems to normalize these notions as sanctioned by the society and culture.

A constant viewing of films of similar nature is sure to drill the gender identity choices into the system of the child. The cases of deviations from the preferred patterns of gender and sexuality are presented in this dear-to-heart entertainment medium itself. Even though deviant sexuality and gender patterns are given representation, they are most often pushed to the backstage or portrayed as transforming over a coming-of-age session or in the worst scenarios, showed as outright negative and undesirable. The common sense of the child viewer grasps the hegemonic apparatus at work in this medium of mass culture and seeks to align oneself to the accepted notions of identity and existence. As the ratio of female to male characters in the select movies proves, it is definitely a man's world out there with soft, feminine women dependent on him and his adventurous machismo.

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Lakshmi P. Gopal" *Pixelating Gender: A Critical Reading of Gender Roles in Frozen, Zootopia, Despicable Me and Minions.*" (*Quest Journals*) *Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science* 6.12 (2018):11-15