Textual Analysis: Representations of Gendered and Racial Stereotypes in Disney Films

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The following is my textual analysis of three specific Disney films and their portrayals of
gender and race. I wanted to take an in-depth look at the racial and gender stereotypes embedded
within each film and how these representations are a reflection of the hegemonic views of our
society. The Walt Disney Corporation is one of the largest transnational media conglomerates in
the world owning major media networks, cable networks, sports teams, magazines, theme parks
and toys. Disney films were a huge part of many childhoods around the U.S. There was such an
appeal for the fantasy, the magic and wholesome values being taught within the context. The
values being represented in this media text can be influential in a negative way. Media texts play
a major role in producing and reproducing ideologies (Dines & Humez, pp. 1). Ideologies are
how we make sense of the world and put it into context. With media texts demonstrating these
types of “wholesome values” there is no way of ever changing the views of our society. The
reason Disney is singled out is based on the fact that they are most recognizable to the general
public and have a target market of young children. Although Disney movies possess positive
messages and values, they are also responsible for the negative media messages being reflected
by our society.

I’ve taken three very well-known films created by Disney and analyzed the representation
of gender and race within these films. The goal of this research is to show how Disney’s content
isn’t as wholesome as intended to be and represents the stereotypical views of our society.
_Pocahontas, Aladdin_ and _The Lion King_ are three of the bigger movies to ever be created at
Disney and all have examples of gender and race being misrepresented in different ways. I chose
these three movies for a couple different reasons. _Pocahontas_ and _Aladdin_ both represent a
different culture, other than the American culture, which had never been done up until that point
in time. _The Lion King_ dealt with the animal kingdom and I was interested to see if these
stereotypes were present even when dealing with a different species. I found many stereotypes hidden in movies of this nature. “Ideologies of gender promote sexist representations of women, and ideologies of race use racist representations of people of color and various minority groups” (Kellner, pp. 7).

**Analysis of Gender Representation**

Gender has been defined by many but isn’t understood by all. Gender represents and reproduces certain behaviors, expectations and roles which are connected to males and females (Bradley, 2007). To put gender into even simpler terms, it is what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a man; the qualities and characteristics. These characteristics are not only physical but behavioral and sociological. The media outlets are where societal stereotypes are represented most and are a poor reflection on our society. There is a reoccurring theme going on in regards to how media portrays gender and they always have the same basic characteristics that define what a man SHOULD be and how a woman SHOULD be. “Disney’s negative stereotypes about women and girls gain force through the way in which similar messages are consistently circulated and reproduced, to varying degrees, in many of Disney’s animated films” (Giroux, 1999). Speaking in terms of gender stereotypes in the media, males typically are the “alpha male” shown as confident, independent, aggressive and controlling. Females are warm, kind, loving housewives or searching for their happy ending. In regards to the physical appearance, men are typically shown as muscular, tall and handsome. Women are shown as tall, curvaceous and beautiful. Although these qualities aren’t exactly negative, they are hegemonic views that cannot be questioned or changed. Gender is to be decided by that individual and not by what everyone else views gender as. According to the Encyclopedia of Women and Gender, media stereotypes suggest there are expected roles for women including: women as sexual objects,
women as submissive and less knowledgeable, and women as domestic housewives (Pacheco & Hurtado, pp. 703). These gender expectations and roles can be seen in most Disney films but most specifically *Pocahontas, Aladdin* and *The Lion King*. I have taken these three films and analyzed not only the context of where gender is present but the characters that exemplify these gendered stereotypes.

*The Lion King* takes place in Africa where a new heir to the throne is brought into the world. Mufasa, the current king, and his wife, Sarabi, parent the newest addition. Mufasa is the King who reins power over the entire animal kingdom and all animals obey and respect him. When Mufasa is killed, Simba is to become the newest king being the first oldest male. There is no option for a woman to stand in place as ruler. The plot thickens and there is a new leader who steps up and takes Mufasa’s place. Scar, Mufasa’s evil brother and Simba’s uncle, takes the place with no fights from the felines who have abandoned hope after losing their king. This is a perfect example of media stereotypes regarding women being submissive. Only when Simba appears later in the movie does the felines fight against Scar to take their kingdom back which shows the need of a male hero to come into play at some point in the plot. An example of the typical male gender traits is shown best when Simba is practicing his roar to be king. In order to be king you must be big, strong, and powerful enough to protect your tribe and that is measured through how loud and fearful his roar can be. Also, when being taught to “pounce” by his father, this shows the men being the providers for their families while the felines stay in the den to clean and nurture the young lions.

When looking at gender in *Aladdin*, there are a few examples of the common theme of how women are represented and also the men who surround them. Jasmine among the other female leads is a young adult on her quest for independence from her controlling father. Her life
is surrounded and controlled by the men around her; her father, Aladdin, Jafar, the guards. Her best friend, who is a tiger, is also a male. Her father is in pursuit to find her perfect suitor and has a say on everything she does or thinks. She is on constant watch by the guards who protect the palace and herself from any harm. Jafar is on his quest to become sultan and hopes to manipulate Jasmine and her father in order to achieve that power. Finally we have Aladdin who is working to make Jasmine fall in love with him by lying and sneaking around. This is a good example of how women are shown as weak individuals who have no say and are supposed to be easily swayed into a decision they haven’t determined themselves. “Disney females live in a man’s world” (Coca, 2011). Along with being controlled by men, Jasmine falls into the over-sexualized role in which she manipulates Jafar by being seductive. This is an example of how women are seen as sexual objects and can only achieve what they want by using their bodies and sex appeal to do so. Another commonality is the happy ending complex being shown in most Disney films. At the end of the movie, Jasmine has finally reached true happiness when she is given permission to marry Aladdin. This is an example of women being portrayed as submissive and lacking intelligence to make decisions for themselves.

Although in the later years of Disney productions started to drift away from submissive female roles and into empowering female roles, the typical characteristics still show through. Pocahontas broke the mold as far as Disney heroines and princesses go but still the film falls back into a stereotypical gender role throughout the film. One crucial difference in this film in comparison to other films is the ending. Throughout the entire film, Pocahontas is a strong, independent female who went after her dreams and rebelled against the controlling men who stood above her. Pocahontas falls into the classic norm of the hopeless romantic and falls in love with a man without even speaking a word to one another. She was the only princess who did not
end up falling in love though. Although this seems like it is sending a good message, it is not. Pocahontas decides to keep her loyalty to her tribe; she is falling into the stereotypical characteristics and what it means to be female instead of pursuing her own dreams.

Male representation in *Pocahontas* involves her father and her father’s choice of husband, Kocoum. Her father and Kocoum are both shown as big, tall, very strong men with war paint and weapons. Her father gives her no choice with whom she wants to marry and establishes his male dominance over her and the tribe. His voice is deep and powerful with an aggressive tone which follows the gender characteristics known by all.

**Analysis of Race Representation**

The representation of other cultures in Disney films was something as of recent with the release of *Aladdin* and *Pocahontas*. Fear of misrepresenting a culture or messing with the sensitivity of consumers was a big setback in the early years of production. Up until then, movies were still representing race but in an orthodox fashion and under the radar. Race was normally being represented by animals such as the orangutan in *The Jungle Book* who was clearly a representation of the African American culture. Trying to make a positive step in the right direction, Disney decided to face the lack of representation of race and put it under spotlight.

*Aladdin* is one of the most controversial movies for a variety of different reasons but in regards to racial stereotyping in particular. This was one of the first movies to have a non-white princess and also presented a different culture besides American. The portrayal of the Middle Eastern culture in *Aladdin* is being portrayed through the eyes of an American due to the lack of knowledge of the actual culture. The film exaggerates the culture to an extreme to portray it in a negative light. The Arabs speak with very heavy accents, have thick facial hair, wear turbans on their heads and are portrayed as the bad guys. They also are shown as poverty stricken with
angry attitudes toward others. This wouldn’t be such an issue if it was represented all throughout the film but it is not. Aladdin and Jasmine are both part of the Arab culture yet have American accents and are only different because of their slightly darker skin tone. The only reason Aladdin isn’t seen as a “bad guy” is because he is American-ized which makes him a good character. An interesting fact about the creation of the character Aladdin is he was modeled after a very famous American actor; Tom Cruise. Why would you model an Arabian character after an obviously American man with very distinguished American features?

Racism in The Lion King is shown best in regards to Scar and his posse of hyenas. Scar is the only lion in Pride Rock who is noticeably darker than the rest of the lions. Along with the darker appearance, he possesses evil qualities to match. The hyenas are part of Scar’s clan in the film who follow his every order. Hyenas are generally known as dirtier, sneakier animals and are voiced to be urban street thugs in the film. The voices are either African-American or Hispanic. These characters are the villains in the movie and are represented by our views of villains in the real world. This representation is more farfetched than the other examples but has been questioned and argued anyways.

Pocahontas was one of the first movies to introduce different cultures and also different cultures interacting with one another, or in other words, multiculturalism. Multiculturalism affirms the worth of different types of cultures and cultural groups (Kellner, 1995). The movie tried to achieve a good balance and mixture of the Indian culture with the American culture but seemed to fail miserably. When watching this film, I saw a lot of unsettling things that represented racial stereotypes. First and foremost, this movie presented the first interracial relationship in a Disney film. While this seems like a great breakthrough, it turns out they were the only couple throughout the films who did NOT stay together. Along with representing two
different cultures, the idea of “natives” and “savages” is represented in *Pocahontas* a great deal. When the English move onto the Native American’s land, they immediately become enemies and are out for blood. The English refer to the tribe as “savages” which is a term that also is linked to cannibalism, constantly threatening, or barbarism (Hall, 1995). When reading the lyrics to the song “Savages” in the film, the words send out a horrible message whether you are a child or an adult. Here is one verse in the song which undeniably represents racism toward the Native American culture;

> “What can you expect from filthy little heathens?
> Here’s what you get when the race are diverse.
> Their skin’s a hellish red; they’re only good when dead.
> They’re vermin, as I said and worse, they’re savages!
> They are not like you and me, which means they must be evil.”

Not only did the English settlers insult the Native American culture, they wished death upon all of them. The “savages” are said to be unlike them which automatically means they are evil. The idea of white supremacy is evident when the English express their hate for any other culture but their own. White dominance is a major theme running throughout this film and is definitely a reflection of our society. This idea is also present in another Disney classic, *Peter Pan*. Even if some of the examples of racism aren’t as obvious as others, there is no denying they are present.

**Conclusion**

Disney films have and will continue to represent societal stereotypes for years to come. The problem isn’t just about these messages being present in the films, but the fact that these movies keep being remade and recycled into our society with no changes to the films at all. Even after being confronted and questioned, Disney has made no changes to the context but bettered the picture quality. It goes to show that our society is stuck in our hegemonic ways and views.
The analysis of the three films was to show how race and gender reflect our hegemonic views and reflect on us as a society.
References


