



# A study on the Changing Images of Female Heroes in Disney Animated Films

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**Abstract.** This paper examines the roles and actions of female hero images in Disney animated films from the viewpoints of social role theory and cultural dimension theory, drawing on the feminist background to investigate the causes behind their emergence and influence. According to the analysis above, the female hero image not only reflects societal trends and encourages social change, but it also serves as an instructional tool for the audience considering changing circumstances.

**Keywords:** Disney animated films, female hero images, feminism, social role theory, cultural dimension theory.

## 1 Introduction

Women in traditional patriarchal societies have historically experienced political oppression, social marginalization, economic impoverishment, and intellectual repression.<sup>[1]</sup> Nonetheless, as capitalism and civil society grew, people's awareness of concepts like freedom, equality, and rights expanded. Feminism started to acquire traction in this environment when the Industrial Revolution, which began in the late 18th century, also emancipated human production and gave women greater employment opportunities. Womanism, another name for feminism, is an ideology that challenges modern social interactions.<sup>[2]</sup> Understanding the nature of inequality is the main objective of feminism, which focuses on topics like sexual politics, power dynamics, and sexual consciousness. The feminist movement, refers to a social objective or social movement led by female revolutionaries. Its purpose is to combat prejudice against women, secure their due place and rights in society, and establish complete equality of rights between genders.<sup>[3]</sup>

The Walt Disney Company's animation studio is called Walt Disney Animation Studios, or WDS for short. The Walt Disney Company is the owner of Walt Disney Animation Studios. The studio was established in 1923 and has since created several popular animated features, television specials, and shorts. Disney is the world's oldest animation studio, and its business approach plays a key role in its longevity. Disney's work appeals to audiences of all ages. Disney has incorporated social beliefs into its films gradually from its founding to evade the early American cinema market's system of

film classification. Among these, "educational animation" has long been favored by youngsters and the middle class in America, which makes it Disney's flagship brand and the reason for the company's remarkable success in the marketplace.<sup>[4]</sup> Disney has consistently prioritized the commercial impact of their animated films, recognizing it as a crucial factor in their production decisions, all the while keeping a strong political position. Additionally, with the emergence of the feminist movement, Disney has actively responded to society by releasing feminist animated films.

Characterization is the term used to describe the traits, attributes, behaviors, looks, and other aspects of an individual that are typically expressed through language. An essential component of human spirituality is the image of women, which is not just a characterization but also a deep reflection of culture, history, and society. These days, whenever society continues to advance and change, female characters appear in films more frequently. As a motion picture, the Disney animated feature is the most watched worldwide. Furthermore, Disney animated films are a kind of movie that has drawn attention to the representation of female heroes. The "social role" idea was proposed by American sociologist George Herbert Mead as one of the related theories on character image research.<sup>[5]</sup> Human social behavior is studied in the Netherlands using the social role theory. Geert Hofstede, a Dutch psychologist, created "Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory" to quantify cultural value aspects from a psychological standpoint.<sup>[6]</sup> This study examines changes in the role types and behavioral traits of female hero images in Disney animated films from the perspectives of social role theory and cultural dimensions theory, using feminism as the research backdrop.

## **2 The Development Process of Feminism and Theories Related to Characterization**

### **2.1 Development of the Women's Movement**

The first wave of the women's liberation movement began with the feminist movement, which occurred during the European Industrial Revolution in the second part of the 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>[7]</sup> During this time, influential individuals including Mary Wollstonecraft, Olympe de Gouges, and Frances Willard emerged into fame. Three points of contention can be utilized to sum up the First Feminist Movement: 1. The effort of women for the right to vote 2. The effort for women's education rights 3. The strive of occupations by women. The first feminist movement was referred to as an improved movement, and women made some progress toward achieving their rights to careers, education, and voting rights. Women's employment opportunities were growing, women's education was becoming more widely accessible, and more women were gaining the ability to vote.<sup>[8]</sup> The antecedent women's movement derived from the first feminist movement. The second wave of feminism arose during the early 20th century and lasted until the 1960s. This movement was strongly influenced by the political, economic, and cultural developments in European and American countries following World War II.<sup>[9]</sup> During this period, there was "radical feminism," as represented by Kate Millett and others, and "liberal feminism," as represented by Betty Friedan, John

Stuart Mill, and others, as well as "socialist feminism," as represented by Juliet Mitchell.<sup>[10]</sup> In contrast to the initial feminist movement, this movement exhibited a far wider range of concerns, encompassing marriage, family, employment, political rights, child-birth, abortion, and social welfare. Women's studies acquired recognition and became an established field of study in academic institutions during this period.<sup>[11]</sup> It garnered significant interest from scholars and students, leading to a transformative impact on the perception and societal standing of women. The 1960s and 1990s marked the beginnings of the third feminist movement, and during this time, key figures like Rebecca Walker, Catharine A. MacKinnon, Rebecca Traister, and numerous others emerged.<sup>[12]</sup> The anti-feminist movement had an impact on and gave rise to the third feminist movement. As an outcome, the third feminist movement is characterized by a distinct post-structuralist and post-colonial tone, and its scope has broadened beyond "women's issues" to include human rights, environmentalism, the anti-corporate struggle, and cultural creation, besides other aspects of life. The third feminist movement's development Broader gender equality and women's rights were pushed for by the Third Feminist Movement, which has emerged as the newest, most true, and comprehensive feminist movement despite the numerous controversies it faces today.

## 2.2 Theories Related to Characterization

### Social Role Theory.

The term "role" was originally used in social psychology by American sociologist George Herbert Mead, who proposed the "Social Role Theory" in 1959. In the opinion of Mead, social roles can be classified into the following categories: 1. They can be separated into ascribed roles and achieved roles based on the structure of social roles. Ascribed roles also called assigned roles, are assigned to a person at birth and established at the level of blood relations, congenital genetics, or physiological factors.<sup>[13]</sup> Achieved roles, sometimes referred to as self-imposed roles, are attained via individual actions and endeavors; examples include career, degree of education, and so forth.<sup>[14]</sup> 2. Depending on the degree of standardization of social roles, they can be divided into prescriptive roles and open roles. Prescriptive roles are ones in which the individual must control his or her behavior in line with defined social settings, and where society has relatively strong and unambiguous rules for the individual, which means that the rights and obligations of the role.<sup>[15]</sup> Open roles, which involve those of parents, children, husband, and wife, are not clearly defined, offer individuals flexible choices, and can be defined and developed by their interests and talents. 3. According to the goals pursued by social roles, they can be classified into utilitarian roles and expressive roles. Utilitarian roles refer to positions that seek benefits and practical interests, and this type of role stresses that the individual's purpose is to attain certain aims or interests, such as businesspeople, and individual operators, respectively.<sup>[16]</sup> Artists and scholars are representatives of expressive roles, which are determined by norms of society, values, and personal feelings. 4. Based on their mental state, characters can be categorized into conscious and unconscious roles. Conscious roles are those in which persons have a greater awareness and can take the initiative to shape and change their role actions, such as actors. Unconscious roles are those in which individuals, such as ordinary people,

are unaware of or have a weak awareness of role-playing and respond merely habitually in response to it.<sup>[17]</sup>



**Cultural Dimension Theory.**

Hofstede developed the notion of cultural aspects in the late 1960s, cultural dimensions theory is a scholarly framework that is oriented on cross-cultural communication and is used to describe distinctions between countries and cultures.<sup>[18]</sup> The following five dimensions are then the primary components of the cultural dimensions theory: 1. Individualism vs. Collectivism: This concept primarily explains whether society is more focused on individual or group interests.<sup>[19]</sup> Individualistic cultures tend to place more emphasis on the self, while collectivistic nations place more emphasis on the family, society, and the benefit of all. 2. Power Distance: The extent to which various societies tolerate the unequal allocation of power is described by this concept.<sup>[20]</sup> Lower power distances suggest having a tendency for equality and decentralization of authority, whilst higher power distances suggest a greater acceptance of hierarchy and authority. 3. Uncertainty Avoidance: This concept primarily characterizes a society's acceptance of uncertainty and the unknown.<sup>[21]</sup> Low uncertainty avoidance cultures are more open, flexible, and tolerant than high uncertainty avoidance cultures, which value rules, security, and control. 4. mask1 Masculinity vs. Femininity: It mostly explains how society perceives male and female heroes. In contrast to female culture, which emphasizes cooperation, caring, and quality of life, male culture places more emphasis on strength, competition, and achievement. 5. Short-term vs. Long-term Orientation: This explains how various cultures view time. Long-term-oriented cultures place more emphasis on future planning, perseverance, and discipline than short-term-oriented cultures do on instant gratification, conventional values, and norms of society.

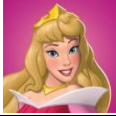
**3 The Changing Image of Female Heroes in Disney Animated Films**

**3.1 The Period of the first Women's Movement**

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Female Heroes in Disney Animated Movies.

Female hero	Imagery	Role type	Style
Snow White (Princess)		Ascribed roles, prescriptive roles, unconscious roles	Collectivism, higher power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, female, short-term orientation
Cinderella (daughter of a nobleman)		Ascribed roles, prescriptive roles, unconscious roles	Collectivism, higher power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, female, short-term orientation

<sup>1</sup> Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs Legacy and Achievements - 85th Anniversary — The Disney Classics



Female hero	Imagery	Role type	Style
Aurora (Princess)		Ascribed roles, prescriptive roles, unconscious roles	Collectivism, higher power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, female, short-term orientation




In terms of character types, early Disney female heroes can be categorized into Ascribed roles, prescriptive roles, and unconscious roles. Ascribed roles refer to characteristics or statuses a character is born with, such as Snow White and Aurora as kingdom princesses and Cinderella as a nobleman's daughter (Table 1). Prescriptive roles imply that the characters must regulate their behavior following a specific social setting; Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora can only pursue their lives by marrying; and Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora are involuntary roles, which means that their destiny is determined by an external force or fate, and they cannot self-select.

Most of the early Disney female heroes had collectivist behavioral approaches, emphasizing social and familial ties, group activities, and group bonding. Aurora, Snow White, and Cinderella are softer, and their goals are primarily the pursuit of love, focusing on belonging to a family and choosing to get married as a final behavioral outcome. Their characters tend to be feminine, focusing on immediate rewards, traditional values, and social norms. Second, early Disney female protagonists are more tolerant of authority and hierarchy, accepting rules, security, and control. For example, Snow White completely submits to the arrangement of social fate while participating and chooses to blindly accept the torment of the queen's authoritative position and also the prince's choice of love in the face, whenever faced with danger, she doesn't take the initiative to rescue herself but instead waits for the prince's salvation. Although Cinderella expresses a wish to attend the ball, she has to depend on fate and the decision of the dictatorial prince. Furthermore, the film portrays the ball as a magnificent setting, highlighting its significance in the prince's selection process. Aurora, who was afflicted by a witch's curse on her birthday, which imposed a predetermined fate upon her, and faced interference from her controlling parents during her upbringing, lacks the motivation to rescue herself and instead passively awaits the arrival of a prince to save her.

### 3.2 The Second Women's Movement

**Table 2.** Characteristics of Female Heroes in Disney Animated Movies.

Female hero	Imagery	Role type	Style
Ariel (Princess of the Mermaid Kingdom)		Ascribed roles, open roles, expressive roles, unconscious roles	Individualism, higher power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, mask1 male, short-term orientation
Belle (French Country Girl)		Achieved roles, open roles, expressive roles, conscious roles	Individualism, higher power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, mask1 male, short-term orientation

Jasmine (daughter of the Sultan)		Ascribed roles, open roles, expressive roles, conscious roles	Individualism, higher power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, mask1 male, short-term orientation
Pocahontas (Chief's Daughter)		Ascribed roles, open roles, utilitarian roles, conscious roles	Individualism, higher power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, mask1 male, short-term orientation
Esmeralda (Gypsy Woman)		Achieved roles, open roles, expressive roles, conscious roles	Individualism, higher power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, mask1 male, short-term orientation

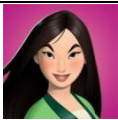
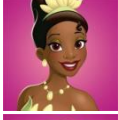
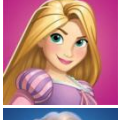
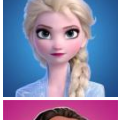


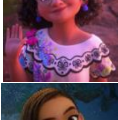

Character types in Disney animation have gradually shifted away from pre-gifted characters and toward more accomplished ones. Examples are Princess Belle and Esmeralda, who endeavor to alter their present circumstances through their diligent endeavors. There have also been more accepting characters who try to reinvent their roles according to their skills and interests. Because Ariel, Princess Belle, and Princess Jasmine are dissatisfied with conventional marriage arrangements, they defy the constraints and expectations that traditional society places on women. In diverse ways, Esmeralda and Pocahontas defy social norms or save the tribe. Second, while pursuing certain objectives or interests, utilitarian, expressive, and self-conscious roles convey a person's inner sentiments, attitudes, and values. They can also take the initiative to mold and modify their character behavior. In Disney animated movies, Ariel, Princess Belle, Princess Jasmine, and Esmeralda belong to expressive roles (Table 2). They try to achieve these aims by rebelling against parental arrangements, dispelling biases in the outside world, or pursuing their pleasure and independence. They express their yearning for freedom, true love, and personal values through their behaviors and feelings. On the other hand, Pocahontas plays a utilitarian role in which her objective is to defend her family and tribe from harm. The female heroes of this era finally develop autonomy and make an effort to overcome racism and patriarchy, rather than standing by and expecting to be saved.

At the behavioral level, female heroes exhibit individualistic tendencies and deviate from stereotypical feminine features by displaying certain masculine traits. They enjoy putting their ideas into action. For instance, Ariel, Princess Belle, and Princess Jasmine start pursuing their interests and exhibiting individualistic beliefs. Despite this, they have a short-term focus and view love as the ultimate goal of their endeavors. Furthermore, both Pocahontas and Esmeralda exhibit distinct levels of individualism and have certain masculine traits. Their loyalty to their own beliefs and decisions, as well as their contributions to their families and tribes, add depth and appeal to these characters. In contrast to the female heroes of the first feminist movement, the female heroes of this period are still dominated by authority and lack the power to oppose it, and the culture has a strong inclination to avoid uncertainty, with a higher emphasis on norms, security, and control. Unlike previous heroes who waited for men to decide their destiny, Ariel,

Princess Belle, and Princess Jasmine still depended on men to find solutions to their issues. Love remains their ultimate desire, regardless of how they express their disapproval or opposition; their final conduct shows up in marriage or reunification with their family. Second, rather than relying mostly on spontaneity, their goal-realization process depends on outside circumstances. While Pocahontas and Esmeralda are different from the other three female heroes in that they can solve some problems, they ultimately choose love and go back to their families, which unavoidably leads to more short-term oriented bondage, when faced with authoritative dominance and high uncertainty avoidance.

### 3.3 The Third Period of the Women's Movement

**Table 3.** Characteristics of Female Heroes in Disney Animated Movies.

Female hero	Imagery	Role type	Style
Mulan (Civilian)		Achieved roles, utilitarian roles, conscious roles	Individualism, lower power distance, low uncertainty avoidance, mask1 male, long-term orientation
Princess Tiana (Waitress)		Open roles, expressive roles, conscious roles	Individualistic, lower power distance, low uncertainty avoidance, mask1 male, long-term orientation
Rapunzel (Princess)		Open roles, expressive roles, conscious roles	Individualistic, lower power distance, low uncertainty avoidance, mask1 male, long-term orientation
Elsa. (Princess)		Achieved roles, utilitarian roles, conscious roles	Individualistic, lower power distance, low uncertainty avoidance, mask1 male, long-term orientation
Moana (Chief's daughter)		Achieved roles, utilitarian roles, conscious roles	Individualistic, lower power distance, low uncertainty avoidance, mask1 male, long-term orientation
Raya (Tribal Princess)		Achieved roles, utilitarian roles, conscious roles	Individualistic, lower power distance, low uncertainty avoidance, mask1 male, long-term orientation
Mirabel (General)		Achieved roles, utilitarian roles, conscious roles	Individualism, lower power distance, low uncertainty avoidance, mask1 male, long-term orientation
Asha (Civilian)		Achieved roles, utilitarian roles, conscious roles	Individualism, lower power distance, low uncertainty avoidance, mask1 male, long-term orientation

Disney animated films during the Third Feminist Movement defied conventional ideas of patriarchy, masculinity, and racism in terms of character types. Women in these films no longer sought love and family as their primary source of identity, and they no longer depended on male intervention for personal growth and transformation. Disney also dabbled in more diverse development, introducing female heroes with a range of skin tones. scribed roles no longer indicated female heroes' inherent status, and princesses in the conventional sense might achieve character transformation via personal effort and growth. Achieved roles and open roles gained popularity during this time. Mulan, Rapunzel, Elsa, Moana, Raya, Mirabel, and Asha are examples of success and utilitarian roles (Table 3). Through her adventures and battles, Mulan demonstrates her strength and value as a woman. By accepting her strength and individuality, Elsa saves the kingdom and herself. Through courage and wisdom, Moana saves her island and achieves personal growth. Raya is a young dragon tamer who, by bravery and perseverance, finds the heavenly dragon and fulfills her mission and goals. Through her learned endeavors, Mirabel explores her family's magical heritage and succeeds in saving her family from the impending catastrophe. Asha eventually conducted the people's aspirations by displaying bravery and tenacity in the face of Rosas's unidentified dangers. Additionally, Tiana and Rapunzel fall into the group of expressive and open characters that attempt to reinterpret their respective roles considering their skills and interests. After going through many encounters to break the curse, Tiana and Naveen are finally reunited. Eugene's intervention alters Rapunzel's fate by helping her discover her dreams and fulfilling love.

Regarding behavior, female heroes of this period prioritize individualism, as the collectivist family bonds that used to constrain them are no longer present. Their masculinity is demonstrated by their independence, autonomy, and strong character. Mulan's quick decision to replace her father in the army is an example of selected, self-reliant behavior driven by self-interest. Tiana takes it upon herself to overcome the demanding situation and achieve her dream without relying on anyone. Rapunzel decides to flee with Eugene in an attempt to identify who she is. In the middle of hardship, Elsa's sister Anna helps her discover her place. To save the family, Moana depicts the independent lady who saves the group from harm. With the hopes of the family resting on her shoulders, Raya sets out on a solitary quest to locate the dragon. The only person who can save the deposed magic family is Mirabel, who lacks magical talent. In the end, Asha defeats King Menefico, the king of Rosas, and preserves her clan. Furthermore, these female heroes have a more egalitarian and inclusive stance when it comes to power dynamics. They reject conventional notions of authority and hierarchy, actively seek their aspirations and objectives, and strive to challenge cultural stereotypes about gender and race. They exhibit tolerance, openness, and flexibility; they meet obstacles and uncertainties head-on, follow their aspirations, fearlessly go out on daring adventures, and adjust to different environments and situations.



## 4 Conclusion

The shift in the portrayal of female heroes in Disney animated films can be traced to the evolving social ideology and the changing preferences of the audience. Animated movies, being a form of mass media, have a significant impact on spreading ideology by mirroring societal occurrences. Concern for gender equality and women's rights and interests in society is growing along with the feminist movement's steady ascent. In this instance, as ideology advances, so does audience demand. Disney is a well-known entertainment company that can only satisfy the demands of the public by changing with the times. As a result, the company's response to the shifting societal trends is evident in the way that female protagonists are portrayed in Disney animated films. Which impact then will these changes have? Firstly, the way that female heroes are portrayed in Disney animated films is changing. This will not only help the audience relate to the characters and feel a connection, which will encourage them to watch the entire film, but it will also serve an educational purpose. Second, Disney animated films break gender norms and stereotypes by highlighting female heroes who help kids develop healthy social identities and self-images while inspiring the public to work toward gender equality and self-actualization. Disney, the most influential company in the world, considers audience expectations as well as the sociological backgrounds of various nations and areas while producing movies. Disney has not only gained commercial success with these female hero characters but has also subconsciously influenced the global audience's understanding of women's power and identity, as well as pushed the social concept of gender ahead.

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