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Disney's Evolution: From Unrealistic Oppressiveness To Unrealistic Wokeness

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Abstract:

Disney fairy tale movies have created a huge impact on children and society. It has evolved a lot over the years, but not always for the better. In the past, the stories were all about beautiful princesses waiting to be saved by a prince. The messages were often misogynistic and women had to be quiet, kind, and pretty, and their lives only got better when they got married. Movies like *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty* portrayed girls as passive and helpless. Even when Disney tried to improve things in the 1990s, like in *The Little Mermaid* or *Beauty and the Beast*, love still happened at first sight and the female characters still gave up a lot for men. In recent years Disney has gone the other way. Now it's all about being independent, strong, and not needing anyone. While that sounds good on the surface level it feels forced or unnatural. Characters like Elsa in *Frozen II*, or the new Ariel in the 2023 *Little Mermaid* remake are written to be perfect from the start. They don't fall in love; they don't make real mistakes and they don't grow. Romance is seen as a weakness and emotional moments are made as empowerment. This paper looks at how Disney moved from one extreme to another by first making stories that were too old fashioned and now making stories that try too hard to be modern. Both styles miss the mark when it comes to real people and real feelings. The best Disney stories like *Moana* and *Tangled* show characters who are strong but also emotional, brave but also flawed. This paper argues that Disney doesn't need to be perfect or "woke" just needs to be real.

Keywords: Disney, Fairy Tales, Movies, Woke, independent, Little Mermaid, Snow White, Woke

Disney plus is one of the top streaming platforms in the world. It gives a lot of importance to children and children's movies. Over the years Disney has released many fairy tales movies. The Most watched fairy tale movies on Disney+ is *Frozen*, *Tangled*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Cinderella*. The 20th-century Disney movies depicted submissive princesses, traditional gender roles, and idealized romance. They were often unrealistic and of oppressive standards. Then in the upcoming years Disney went the opposite direction, creating hyper independent leads and pushing progressive themes. So, these Outdated gender roles were overcompensated with unrealistic progressivism and it can negatively impact the audience.

In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* a 14-year-old snow white goes and lives with 6 Middle aged men (dwarfs) and one dwarf that is the same age as Snow White. In one scene the dwarfs find something scary in their house so they literally send the youngest to investigate. This raises a question about the moral aspects of the dwarfs where 6 adults send a child to face danger alone. Also, in the very first scene of the movie *Snow White* is portrayed with skin as white as snow and because of her skin tone is known as the

most beautiful woman of all time so it creates competitiveness over beauty. The evil queen and princess compete over beauty standards. So, it raises a question about what kind of beauty standards the movie is teaching children. Also, the queen makes her dress in rags. She goes to the dwarf's place and does all the chores but that is glorified but when her stepmother makes her do chores, that is shown to be bad which creates double standards.

In Disney's *Cinderella* (1950) she is shown to be forced into a life of unpaid labour and enforces an idea that women should silently endure suffering. Cinderella never fights back and it teaches that women must be submissive and endure hardship to deserve love. For example, when her stepsisters rip apart her dress, she doesn't resist or defend herself. Cinderella doesn't escape oppression through her own efforts but is rather "rescued" by the prince. This reinforces the notion that a woman's future depends on a man. Critics suggest that Cinderella's escape is an illusion, and that her marriage is just another form of servitude where she is trading one master (stepmother) for another (prince). The midnight time limit in the movie suggests that women are only valuable when they are young and beautiful. The glass slipper's exclusivity in Cinderella suggests rigid beauty standards.

In Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989) Ariel gives up her literal voice symbolizing female silencing in order to win Prince Eric's love. It shows women must alter themselves for men. Triton her father destroys Ariel's collection symbolizing male authority suppressing female curiosity and ambition. She fights with her father and lives in a man's castle that she barely knows which gives a message to children to run away from home. The film ends with Ariel in a wedding dress, abandoning her underwater world for a life on land with Eric. Ursula is the sister of Triton and as a birthright wanted to rule the sea. She is an independent, powerful woman who defies patriarchal norms but she's portrayed as a villain. Another thing to be noted is Ursula's appearance is inspired from drag queens and trans people. Critics said a queer-coded character is shown as the villain which enforces negative stereotypes.

In Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) there are theories that suggest Belle had Stockholm Syndrome and the movie is romanticizing abuse. The Beast locks Belle in his castle, controls her freedom, and initially treats her with aggression, yet she still falls in love with him in the end. There is a Power imbalance at the beginning of the movie between them where the beast forces her and oppresses her to have food with him. So, the relationship started as an abusive one. Despite Belle's independence, her story concludes with her finding love, reinforcing the traditional "happily ever after". Gaston's character in the movie tries to force Belle into marriage, treating her as an object rather than a person. Gaston is portrayed as a Hyper Masculine toxic man. The wilting rose in the movie is a symbolism for women to marry before aging out of their "prime."

In Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (2023) the problem is not with the casting of the lead actress but it is with the fact that Disney can't find stories of African/African-American origin. The actress Haley Bailey was subjected to racism and backlash over this. The change at the climax, when Ariel's the one who kills Ursula instead of Eric seems unnecessary, especially since the point of Eric being the one to kill Ursula and save the ocean was so that King Triton realizes that not all humans are evil. It makes Triton's change of heart feel way less impactful. The problem with casting a person of colour is that, when one race is represented by race-swapping an existing character, another race's representation will be replaced. To represent all the cultures Triton's daughters, have different ethnicities. None of King Triton's daughters have the same mother making sure that there is diversity for the sake of diversity is shown in the movie. There is Forced representation for monetary reasons and profits instead of actually making effort to create a black princess.

In Disney's *Frozen* (2013 & 2019) there is an elimination of male saviours entirely, portraying men as either useless (Kristoff) or manipulative (Hans). Elsa's only true love is her sister which suggests romance is irrelevant or unnecessary. Many fans interpret Elsa as queer-coded and some are made to believe Disney is hinting at LGBTQ+ inclusion but Disney is not confirming it and just breadcrumbing the LGBTQ community. Elsa remains single throughout two movies completely dismissing the idea of romantic relationships. So, it is either complete abandonment of relationships or love at first sight and there is no common ground.

In *Snow White* (2025) the protagonist actress told everyone she hated the original movie and made a point to change the plot so that they could have all the prince's scenes cut. These are poorly considered statements. Her lack of care for the original movie and her male co-star have made people call her out. This is not progressiveness or feminism. Peter Dinklage, a famous actor who has a genetic condition that causes dwarfism said in an interview "You're progressive in one way and you're still making a backward story about seven dwarfs living in a cave together" about Disney's representation of the dwarfs. Disney decided to create CGI dwarfs instead of casting actual dwarf actors to play the Seven Dwarfs. Since *Snow White* is a German fairy tale, critics argue that having non-Europeans play the lead is causing misrepresentation when her appearance is literally the name of the story.

Conclusion

Disney's fairy tale movies have often swung between two extremes by either reinforcing outdated gender roles or overcompensating with unrealistic wokeness. It romanticizes oppression or pushes forced progressivism. Disney movies like *Tangled* portrayed a realistic representation of love where the couple took their time to understand each other and fall in love with each other and was not just love at first sight. Disney should move towards a balanced approach, one that empowers female characters without erasing depth, romance, or relatability.

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