

## **Feminism in Pixar Animation:**

### **the growth and awakening of female characters**

#### **Abstract**

With the arrival of the four waves of feminism, women are more concerned with the spiritual and cultural aspects. The character traits of female characters in Pixar's animation are diversified and complicated, from the initial submissiveness to the later independence. However, male power still shackles the growth of female characters to a certain extent. For example, the absence of male characters in the story, the male audience's anxiety and desire to control, and the creator's creative intentions. This paper wants to explore the development and problems of femininity in Pixar animation.

#### **Key Words**

Pixar Animation, Disney, feminism, female characters

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## **Introduction(207)**

Initially, the first protagonists of Pixar animation are predominantly male, and they all have traditional patriarchal ideas. However, with the development of the plot, many female characters from the initial subservient male protagonists to the subsequent independent side. Gillam and Wooden called the development of this image the "post-princess era".

The development of feminist thinking has brought about the diversification and complexity of female character traits in animation. From being created, admired, and chosen, women became the active, controlling party.

However, Feminism still suffers from the male power's suffocating influence. First, from the story, some female characters grow because of the absence of male characters, which leads to a wrong way to present feminism. Secondly, the audience group creates a bias and the female figures may create anxiety for the male characters because of their sexual differences. Masculine culture, in order to eliminate this anxiety, displaces female images into certain single symbols through displacement so that they remain within their control. Finally, as creators (especially male directors), we should think about whether there is a genuine respect for feminism, but rather whether it is influenced by other factors, such as shifting audiences, the needs of the storyline, or the desire to please the female audience.

## **Literature review(209)**

Kristen Schiele explains the first to fourth waves of feminism in *Marketing feminism in youth media: A study of Disney and Pixar animation* (2020). Maclaran (2015) suggests that we are now in the fourth wave of feminism, which is driven by social media and the internet. She believes in examining how feminist themes and gender patterns are conveyed through film. Stover C. also analyzes the historical appearance of Disney women about the women's movement in the paper *Damsels and heroines: The conundrum of the post-feminist Disney princess*. This is extremely helpful in studying the growth and transformation of female characters in Pixar films.

During this fourth wave of feminism, Wooden S R, Gillam K. defined Disney films as the "post-princess era" in *Pixar's boy stories: Masculinity in a postmodern age* (2014). However, this definition is vague and still controversial. The "post-princess era" of animated feature films is no longer limited to romantic love stories with fairy tale themes, and the protagonists are no longer limited to women with "princess" qualities, but "new men" with partly female qualities. The main characters are not limited to women with "princess" qualities, but "new men" with partly female qualities. But this represents the Disney film by making female characters masculine, to reflect feminism.

## **Chapter 1**

### **The origin, development and influence of the feminist movement on cinema(264)**

In 2019, Disney remade Aladdin. Princess Jasmine is no longer a rebellious supporting character, but a new female figure who dares to fight against patriarchal authority and refuses arranged marriages. The Aladdin remake is a component of the Walt Disney Company's response to rising consumer expectations brought on by the MeToo movement, which demands that media giants like Disney provide a fair portrayal of women in their media. (Smith, Choueiti, & Pieper, 2016) The "fourth wave of feminism" can be seen in these expectations.

The political transformation was the main topic of the first phase. The second phase concentrated on promoting gender parity, women's freedom, and job and economic equality. The third phase emerged in the 1980s and 1990s with an emphasis on women exploring gender plurality, "having it all," and balancing career, sex, and parenthood as sexual freedom and employment options for women became more established. The fourth wave entered the twenty-first century as women turned to spiritual worries about the planet and all of its creatures, dedicating themselves to the welfare of the environment, the underprivileged, and the world. (Harriet Kimble Wrye, 2009). Four waves of feminist movements that over time reflect varying goals, objectives, and strategies represent the multiplicity of feminism. (Maclaran, 2015) The British feminist Prudence Chamberlain (2017) defines the Fourth Wave by its focus on justice for women—particularly those who have experienced sexual violence, but also including

sub-narratives. In short, the four feminist movements gradually transitioned from the political, economic, and sexual dimensions to the development of a spiritual civilization. This also slowly influenced the storytelling of animated films.

## Chapter 2

### The transformation of female characters in Pixar's animated films(834)

Compared to the widespread phenomenon of the princess as the protagonist in Disney animation and the appeal and defense of women's independence and rights, at first, most of Pixar's feature-length animated films instead did not show very strong feminism. Feminism is not as the main body of the film, but more as a secondary auxiliary cultural pavement.

In addition, Pixar also gradually focuses on the psychological state of female characters, emotional portrayal, character building, etc... In the past, the films with female characters as the main characters are as follows.

Film title	Female leads or coleads	Original theatrical release date	Synopsis
<i>Brave</i>	Merida	June 22, 2012	Princess Merida violates a tradition that causes havoc in her realm because she is determined to follow her own path in life.

Film title	Female leads or coleads	Original theatrical release date	Synopsis
			Merida is given one wish, and in order to break a monstrous curse, she must rely on her bravery and her archery prowess.
<i>Inside Out</i>	Riley and Joy	June 19, 2015	Riley, a young girl who has been torn from her childhood in the Midwest and sent to San Francisco, has emotional struggle as she learns how to navigate a new city, home, and school.
<i>Finding Dory</i>	Dory	June 17, 2016	Everyone learns some things about the true meaning of family when Dory, a kind but forgetful blue tang fish, starts looking for her long-lost parents.
<i>Cars 3</i>	Cruz Ramirez	June 16, 2017	Lightning McQueen sets out to prove to a new generation of racers that he's still the best race car in the world.
<i>Turning Red</i>	Mei Mei	March 11, 2022	The girl Li Mei-lian (Mei-mei) is experiencing growing pains, but she is a

Film title	Female leads or coleads	Original theatrical release date	Synopsis
			<p>little more special than others: when she is particularly excited, she turns into a giant red panda story</p>

Due to the change in mainstream thinking in Western countries, along with the fourth wave of feminism, Pixar's creators gradually noticed the importance of female characters. Take Toy Story's Shephdess as an example. In the first film, she was a traditional woman under the shelter of male wings, who will only stay at home alone waiting for the return of Huddy's adventure, sensitive and afraid of adventure. However, in the fourth film, her reappearance, there has been an image change. She no longer treats herself as anyone's appendage, but as the image of a new era of new women. When Huddy saw her broken arm in the field was shocked, but the shephdess calmly picked up her arm, skilled bandaging, and no weather Huddy formed a stark contrast. This kind of characterization precisely caters to the feminist trend of the current social environment.

In "turning red" (2022), the Chinese female director uses feminism as one of the main themes. Mei Mei, a young girl of Chinese Australian descent, is going through a metamorphosis in her adolescence. She has that strange dream one rainy night, in which she has the restlessness of adolescence, the ignorance and desire for the opposite sex,



and the uncontrollable red energy. Until she woke up in the morning to find herself transformed into a giant red panda, even emitting a strange smell. A moment of panic, shyness, overwhelmed, and difficult to say, so she wanted to find a crack to hide in. This is exactly what every ordinary girl looks like when she first experiences menstruation. In many cultures, a girl's menstruation is so obscure and difficult to talk about. In some villages in Indonesia, women move into a "menstrual hut" when they have their period and are not allowed to touch the boys in the family, and food is brought in separately. They see menstruation as a form of "black magic. On the contrary. in "turning red", the women in the Mei Mei family initially chose to seal the unstable power of the red panda. They see the emotional instability of adolescence as a scourge until Mei Mei appears and she chooses to reconcile. Of course, the film does not limit itself to menstruation and menarche, but the story emphasizes the need for women to determine whether their unique desires and emotions are "power" or "trouble". They need to decide whether to hide, repress, and domesticate the emerging femininity and feminine consciousness. The ancestor who relied on the power of the panda to protect her people during the war, and her descendants, who chose to seal the panda with the risk of losing control in the "new world" of peace and prosperity, become good wives and mothers, the "perfect women". With a somewhat absurd and symbolic story, it tells girls that they can choose to hide and seal, but they can also accept and embrace the red panda in their body. The United Nations (1999) wants to develop this virtue. The dialogue and characterization in this movie treat women on par with men. According to the discourse, the Lee family honors Sun Yee as much as male forebears. (Mohamad

Saripudin,2022) The attitude of open exploration of sexuality is undoubtedly influenced by the fourth wave of feminism.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **The problems of feminism in film making(399)**

##### **1. The growth of women comes from the absence of men**

The director of "Turning red" had a previous film "Bao" which won the Oscar for animated short film. One is a cute humanoid Bao, and the other is a girl who turns into a red panda. But the similarity is that in both works there is a controlling mother, a child who wants to be free and live her own life, and a father who basically has no presence ..... In "Turning red" the mother, a woman, represents the traditional female point of view, always emphasizing the need to follow the rules, to be obedient and to The mother in "Turning red" represents the traditional female point of view, always emphasizing the need to follow the rules, to be obedient, and to be resigned to one's fate. But the daughter also wants to break away from the ideas of her parents' generation and wants to live out her own life and become more independent. MeiMei, as a woman who can become a red panda, is forced to take on a series of responsibilities that belong to women.

##### **2. Male viewers' anxiety and replacement concept**

Female images can create anxiety for male viewers because of sexual differences. To eliminate this anxiety, masculine culture replaces female images with certain single

symbols by displacing them so that they remain within their control. For example, as seen by the fact that Elsa does not have a romantic partner, romantic heterosexual love appears to have been reduced to a minor plot point or eliminated entirely. Interestingly, some Frozen fans have theorized that Elsa might be the first gay Disney princess because she is a Disney queen whose quest does not involve finding a husband.( Auba Llompart,2020)

### 3.Comments on the director

What we need to think about as creators is whether the creators (especially male directors) are really thinking from a respectful feminist perspective. This is because as the on-screen story is involuted, the audience group has changed. Initially, Disney and Pixar only created stories for children, but now they need to focus on the "family" and hope that the film has richer content, feminist ideas are certainly one of the pawns to attract the female audience's resonance. Therefore, Pixar created female characters, probably for a fuller story (all male characters will also have a fuller characterization), or to please the female audience.

## **Conclusion (100)**

With the four waves of feminism, feminist culture has gradually been recognized by mainstream culture and has influenced the creation of Disney and Pixar films. In the past two decades, the female characters in Pixar's animated films have become more fleshed out, more independent-minded, and richer in storytelling. From the initial appendage or vase role to highlight the male role, they have become the sole protagonist. Yet still face many problems. In order to solve it, creators should understand more about female psychology and the social context of feminism, so that feminism no longer becomes some kind of political correctness.

Word count: 1804

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