Elements of Feminism in Language of Children's Animations

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Abstract   *In today's modern globalized world, the power and impact of media in different aspects of human life are universally acknowledged. The elements of feminism in media have been widely researched in the past, but, how feminist ideas are portrayed in children's media largely remains unexplored. The aim of this research is to explore the presentation of feminist concepts, notions, and ideas in a specific genre of children's media – animations – through verbal and non-verbal language including verbal discourse, expressions, and overall communicative symbolism. The sample of the study consists of fourteen famous animations which are selected through purposive sampling. The results reveal that the feminist ideas and concepts presented deal with the empowerment and liberation of women, and hinted towards real-life women's issues such as education, adolescence, abuse, oppression, gender equality in work and employment, personal choice and other political, social and economic issues rather than presenting stereotypical image of women.*

Key Words
Feminism, Language, Gender, Animation, Media

Introduction

Feminism, a movement, and ideology regarding equal rights and opportunities, and activism for women, initiated during the 20th century, has since then been a major part of the society. Media has been and still is, used as an important medium for addressing, implicitly or explicitly, social and political ideologies that are conveyed to the masses, and in the same way, feminism has also been portrayed in many forms in several genres of media. To inculcate these ideas into the minds of the people, it is deemed crucial to start portraying them from a basic level, and therefore children's media is targeted where a child develops initial concepts of these much deeper ideologies. To analyze what are the feminist concepts, notions, and ideas that are presented in children's animations through language, both verbal and non-verbal, and how they are presented, we have analyzed the animations which are selected from various children's animations companies/networks. This study aims to highlight the feminist concepts, notions, and ideas which are presented in children's animations And find out how language is used for the portrayal of feminist concepts in the selected animations. The objectives of the research are as follows:

- To examine the ways language is used to portray feminist concepts in the selected animations.
- To highlight how feminist ideas are implied in children's animations through verbal and non-verbal communication.

Literature Review

Feminism, an ideology, and movement, has transformed and developed over the ages to fit in with the appropriate contexts and needs of a particular time, but the message and struggle has been of the same nature - gender equality, female empowerment and striving to raise a voice for the oppressed women across different societies and cultures. Female empowerment includes self-appreciation, self-respect, gender neutrality in language, dignified representation of women in media and literature. The portrayal of women in the media has changed and developed over time, in both progressive and deteriorating ways. There has been adequate representation of women of most races in the media recently, in comparison to the 1930s-1960s when there was no women's suffrage, and segregation and anti-miscegenation were practiced. After 1960s, women are shown as "hard" manual workers, strong

business women/entrepreneurs, independent superheroines, and brave everyday women in movies, television, and comics. However, the decline in female empowerment has been seen in a lot of modern music, both the lyrics and music videos, presenting women as a weaker gender.

Historical Background of Feminism in Animations

Language plays an important role in promoting or condemning an idea or theory in children's media as well, particularly animations. In the earlier animation eras, animators portrayed females mirroring their conventional image in the society, attaching their specific gender roles (such as family-pleasing housewife and mother) and characteristics that are expected of them ("girly", delicate, dependent) with their characters in animations, which were mostly if not always, accompanied by stronger male leading characters. This kind of female representation was common in children's animations, and still is to some extent, but a shift in this representation was most notably practiced from the 1980s onwards. The 21st century developed and enhanced feminist perspective and portrayals of feminism in animations.

Sawyer (2010) has looked into female gender roles, binaries and identities with the help of Disney animated films from a feminist point of view. In order to do this, Disney princesses are being researched through four major Disney movies that have a prototypical Disney princess. The research is conducted to observe how being exposed to media influences gender, in particular, young girls. There is a tense environment between the Disney Corporation and feminists since the first Disney princess movie in 1937. This first public display of feminism that occurred during the early 19th century was related to women's suffrage and their right to vote. These women were moderate and conservative and did not primarily intend to change the dynamics of the home setting. They aimed to be able to vote and have equal working rights since they had assisted with issues and problems of World War I and some already had jobs due to it. Feminism was prominent during *Snow White* (1937) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). These women were pretty much still a stereotypical picture of housewives.

Sharp (2011) examines the narrative and formal characteristics of the text to explore the idea that each of the female characters is somewhat free from patriarchal systems, and continues her "battle" against sexism in an individualized approach. The characters have been constructed with different and sometimes hostile backgrounds that affect their personal ideas of what sex-based domination actually is, so, the definite techniques each woman upholds for achieving liberation are unique.

Research Methodology and Sampling

In this qualitative research, the data has been collected, in the form of visual mediums i.e. by watching and observing the animations that are produced by the major children's media companies. The sample was collected through purposive and convenient sampling and the following animations were selected:

1. *Frozen*
2. *Tangled*
3. *Pocahontas*
4. *The Wild Thornberrys*
5. *Avatar: The Last Airbender*
6. *The Powerpuff Girls*
7. *Princess Mononoke*
8. *Kiki's Delivery Service*

Data Analysis

Analysis of the verbal language includes lexical choices which are as follows:

Lexical Choices

The choice of words in animations such as dialogues, narrations, the title of the animation, and names of the characters are very often tactfully manipulated to represent the meaning that is actually intended to be conveyed to the audience. Language acts as a potent tool in the form of these narrations and dialogues which is how feminist ideas are presented (these particular words and phrases will be mentioned below, as well as their connotations), and what exactly are these ideas are discussed and analyzed below.

The animated series, *The Powerpuff Girls*, revolves around the crime-fighting lives of three sisters, Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup, with superpowers. These three girls are the guardians and saviors of their city and its people, even though they are preschoolers, rather than a male superhero characterized by his machismo (He-Man from *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* is a prime example). Repetitive descriptions and dialogues in the

animated series reiterate this fact through the use of purpose-directed language. As the girls are introduced, they are described as being created from "sugar, spice, and everything nice". According to the narrator, "these were the ingredients chosen to create the perfect little girls," which suggests that a "perfect" girl is expected by the society to be the embodiment of sweetness and delicateness only, therefore, perceived as weak, a stereotypical view that has been created of girls through time (referring to the sexist 19th century nursery rhyme *What Are Little Boys Made Of?*). The narrator later states that this *"concoction"* had an *"extra ingredient"* added to it accidentally, called *"Chemical X."* Instead of the typical "*perfect little girls*", a trio of super-powered girls is created. Chemical X, an ingredient as mysterious as its covert implication possibly revolving around feminism, may represent the **eXcellence** that every girl should strive for rather than conforming to the disempowering and suppressing image that has been thrust upon them through centuries, and that they all have the potential to achieve something **eXtraordinary** in their life, as a woman deserves the right to have her status **eXalted** if she works hard and live her life as an autonomous individual. With these qualities or "superpowers", a woman is encouraged to accomplish greatness and break free of the bounds of mediocrity the society wants to impose on them. The animated series promotes the concept of heroism is a quality that is not only attributed to men as several early animations portrayed like Superman, Batman, Spiderman, and other superheroes of the male-dominated super-world.

Kiki's Delivery Service, a feminist-friendly animated film promotes the idea of triumphing over personal insecurities as an adolescent girl, embarking on a life passage to self-discovery and self-affirmation. Learning to be proud of and accepting oneself, and giving others a reason to accept their differences, as their own unique and beautiful self, at the same time celebrating their talents and autonomous way of life, is highlighted in several parts of the film, especially when the main character, the thirteen-year-old witch Kiki says, *"Maybe I can stay and find some other nice people who will like me and accept me for who I am."*

The feminist ideas regarding marriage and love are touched in Disney's *Frozen*. Queen Elsa, on her coronation, advises her sister, rather straight-forwardly, Princess Anna, *"You can't marry a man you just met."* This happens when Anna thinks she has fallen in love with Hans, who, later on, is revealed to be a liar and deceiver, planning to kill the royal sisters. What Elsa demonstrated by her wise take on marriage is that a woman must not be blinded by the façade of what seems true love at first sight, but rather give it time and thoroughly think about her decision. Marriage is a life-long commitment, and a sensible assessment of the future significant other requires time and cautious trust.

Feminism in the Nickelodeon animated series called *Avatar: The Last Airbender* through Katara and Sokka's grandmother's choice of words is evident, as she says to Katara, *"It's been so long since I've had hope. But you've brought it back to life, my little water-bender."* What she meant is that through the efforts of Katara, the destitute and desolate Southern Water Tribe's last water-bender, she finally believes that the tribe's condition will improve and return back to its original form. A young girl, who bears the responsibility of being the last water-bender of her tribe and wishes to redeem her people, is the reason for bringing peace, glory, and hope to her people, rather than the men of the tribe who failed to be victorious against the Fire Nation's army. She signifies the hope in bringing back the true, dignified status of women.

Non-Verbal Language

Language is a broad term, and it is not only concerned with spoken words and audible speech, but also communication that is comprehendible and perceptible with visual representation and symbolism which is analyzed below.

Visual Representation and Symbolism

Language speaks in images, and it is important to analyze the messages and symbolism in the visual elements of animation such as the characters and their actions, the settings, and overall imagery.

Hayao Miyazaki of Studio Ghibli is one of the few directors who are known to be explicitly feminist in his animated features, especially like the popular *Castle in the Sky*, *Kiki's Delivery Service* and *From Up on Poppy Hill* to name a few, because of the fact that in almost all of his animated films, there is either an equally important male and female protagonist, or when there is only a female in the main lead, she is always a multi-dimensional character carrying strong and positive traits in the most realistic way possible.

The first Studio Ghibli animated film that we will analyze in terms of its visual language depicting aspects of feminism is *Kiki's Delivery Service*, released in 1989, based on the novel by Eiko Kadono. The animated film has been critically acclaimed for its feminist-friendly themes. Kiki is an ambitious thirteen-year-old witch who has to take a journey to a place away from her home as it is a part of her coming-of-age ritual and live there for some time as an independent and self-sufficient young girl. She settles in a port city called Koriko, and faces some difficulties in the beginning, like causing a disturbance with the civilians and the police due to her clumsiness,

feeling the insecurities of adolescent life (by looking at the fashionable girls walking by and having fun with their friends, being pursued by a local boy named Tombo etc.), and being disappointed with her new life and inept flying ability. However, she beats all the odds, finds optimism in adversity, and proves to herself, the people around her, and her family back home that she is a capable girl with a resolute mind, as she earns her living working as a package delivery girl for a couple who owns a bakery. Even though her broom-flying skills are not perfect, she continues her responsibility remaining firm, despite the predicaments she faces along the way, like the birds and rain that interrupt her aerial route, being invited to a party she never makes it to due to her work, etc. Miyazaki is known to transform gender roles in his animations, like how he incorporates the coming-of-age practice, that is normally considered a practice young boys need to carry out, into Kiki's life. The dominant significant other is the couple who owns the bakery is Osono, the wife, who is also the manager of the bakery, while her husband bakes the bread. The women in this film are presented as professionals in their fields, such as Kiki's mother (a renowned herbalist), Osono, and Ursula (the talented artist who makes her own living and lives independently). The Tumblr blog called *Hayao-Miyazaki* comments on the pro-women representation aspect of *Kiki's Delivery Service*, "The reason that movies tend to struggle with the Bechdel test is that Hollywood really only allows two roles for women– Protagonist's Mother, and Protagonist's Love Interest. *Kiki's Delivery Service*, in a beautiful reversal of expectations, relegated the men to those roles, allowing this beautiful coming-of-age story to be a general reflection of women's lives in all their complexities."

Princess Mononoke, produced by Studio Ghibli and released in 1997, is a prime example of how visuals have been used to communicate certain messages. Although the major message is that of Man vs. Nature and how human beings are destroying the ecological balance as they advance, one cannot be oblivious to the representation of strong feminism in the animation. San, or Princess Mononoke (translated as "The Spirit Princess"), is a young woman who was raised by wolves and detests the irresponsible actions of the humans towards the forest that she feels the need to be a guardian of. San is Shown in the movie wearing tribal paint and patterns on her face and war-mask, symbolizing the battle most women have to face to obtain their right in the real world. San is presented as a free and independent young woman who is shown to stand up for her forest and its creatures with which she associates more with, and never backs down in an opportunity to fight the attackers and defend her family. In most children's movies and video games, a "princess" is someone to be rescued and the rescuer's courage gets the princess to fall in love with him, making the princess into a weak and dependent character. Whereas in *Princess Mononoke*, San feels it is equally her burden to save the forest as it is Ashitaka's, the male protagonist, they are both shown as heroes and even though Ashitaka risks his life to protect San, it is revealed that San prefers to go her own way as she is not a trophy to be won. She prefers to remain loyal to her wild family and not betray her guardian priorities just to be with him. The antagonist, Lady Eboshi in *Princess Mononoke* is also a female, the strong-minded, resourceful, tactful and intelligent matriarchal leader of Irontown, who is respected by the whole town. Even though she plays a negative role because she wants to deplete the forest's resources, her character carries much more feminist depth than her initial portrayal as an antagonist. She represents the women who think for the benefit of their loved ones (in Eboshi's case her town) and develop their actions with the most intricate bits of tact and genius. She is portrayed as a strong business-minded woman, thriving in a society where she is revered for her position. Also, the way Irontown is portrayed certainly shows the feminist imagery in the animation. The town follows the orders of Lady Eboshi, making it a matriarchal society, and how it flourishes with economic stability and prosperity under her leadership is a strong message for women to attain strong leadership qualities. The women of the town play a major role in running the town's social, economic and political set-up, and their input while decision-making regarding the town's well-being is welcome. They serve a great purpose as manual workers as well (they are shown pumping the machinery and handling firearms with great mastery) in the town, very much in control of their lives, and at the same time, loving and gentle with their husbands.

In these Studio Ghibli animations mentioned above, the feminist messages are depicted through the visual representation of female characters of all ages. Feminist ideals are conveyed to the audience in characters that are grown women like Lady Eboshi, young women like San, teenage girls like Kiki, making them even more relatable to the masses who watch them. Another point to be noted about Miyazaki's animations is that they do not only revolve around the romance aspect of the films that center around a female character, unlike many children's media (especially regarding a princess), showing that love is not the only imperative aspect attributed to a woman to achieve in her life, things such as social standing, individuality, equal representation, and power are also essential.

Walt Disney's Studios' Pocahontas, from the animated movie *Pocahontas*, is undoubtedly a strong feminist figure, especially when one takes into account the obvious fact that she is uneducated and lives in a tribal environment as she is a Native American. She is strong-willed, spirited and agile (characteristics classic Disney heroines lacked) and is open-minded about outsiders. She is wary of her betrothal with Kocoum, the tribe's brave warrior, who is to be her husband. She is always ready to broaden her perspectives, may it involve seeking wisdom from Grandmother Willow, or developing a trusting bond with an Englishman and being fascinated by the world

of the protagonist and her love interest, John Smith. She is depicted as the determined woman who convinces the men from two parties to cease the hostilities between them, thus being the reason for the peace and acceptance between her tribe and the outsiders. Pocahontas is not the only Disney aboriginal princess, Kida from *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* is also a noteworthy example of a courageous and self-assertive woman with power, who strives to bring harmony to her deteriorating kingdom.

Rapunzel from Disney's *Tangled* is a colorful feminist character, balancing the more comical side of heroines. The animated film is based on the Brothers Grimm fairytale, Rapunzel, yet the portrayal of the main protagonist is very dissimilar. *Tangled*'s Rapunzel is the total opposite of her literary counterpart, she is spirited, spunky and there is a lot of depth in her characterization. She is not only a pretty girl with big eyes and long, golden hair, but she is also an artistic, intelligent, cautious and well-read girl who has shown keen interest in learning things from every field (noted when her room is filled with books and artwork). Despite being locked inside the tower, she is ready to learn new things and has a broad perspective of things. Also, the stereotypical image of girls falling in love at first sight, especially if it is a handsome man, is treated with a feminist twist in *Tangled*. Rapunzel is wary of the good-looking thief, Flynn Rider (whose actual name is Eugene Fitzherbert), who she does not confuse as a rescuer or prince when he climbs the tower and hides in her room, but rather hits him with a pan to protect herself. Even the frying pan can be seen as a symbol of feminine power when it is comically used as a weapon throughout the movie if we compare it to a sword being a symbol of masculine power. It is a recurring object in the movie and proves to be very effective in hitting the enemy. When she goes on a journey to find her family with Flynn, she gradually falls in love with him after judging his integrity and honesty, and he falls in love with her as he notices her love for new experiences and undying spirit. Rapunzel's evil stepmother, although has a negative role, is a strong female character nonetheless. She is a single and powerful woman living on her own and providing for herself. She is clever when constructing her plans carefully, and is not the least bit intimidated by the two big criminals who are after the crown. Rapunzel is a picture of a good role model for young girls because she is brave enough to choose her own destiny.

Nickelodeon, while being socially conscious, has a fair share of feminist-friendly animated series, with strong and multi-dimensional female characters, such as Eliza from *The Wild Thornberrys*, Reggie Rocket from *Rocket Power,* Ginger Foutley from *As Told by Ginger,* most of the female characters from *Rugrats* and *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, Helga Pataki from *Hey Arnold!*, and many others. The portrayal and actions (in different episodic situations) of the female characters in *The Wild Thornberrys* also represent a positive image of girls and women. The Thornberrys are a family who travels around the world to shoot wildlife documentaries, Nigel Thornberry (the father), is the presenter of their show, Marianne Hunter Thornberry (the mother) operates the camera, whereas Eliza and her elder sister, Deborah (Debbie), are home-schooled as they travel with their parents all over the globe. Eliza has the special, but secret, gift of communicating with animals. They also have their 'pet', Darwin, the chimpanzee, and the feral child, Donnie, their adopted brother. This animated series is an unconventional 'girl cartoon' as the main female characters are quite unique, in terms of appearance and personality.

Marianne is depicted as a woman who, rather than being in front of the camera (despite the fact that in the media usually glamorized female presenters are shown to do in order to get more views), is behind it, shooting and editing the wildlife documentaries. Her job on The wildlife show is equal to her husband, Nigel, something the employment and career world lack – equal labor, a variety of jobs for women, or work that requires technical skills. Even with all of this work, she is a responsible mother, always making sure her daughters finish their homework, taking care of Donnie, establishing authority and a sense of duty in her children, and is often the most reasonable-thinking character, making sure everyone is safe from any trouble. Debbie is a teenager, who although complains of the nature trips with her family and not being able to socialize with others of her age, is almost always shown to secretly enjoy her perspective-broadening and knowledge-increasing travels, making her stand out from other teenagers when she meets them, representing the importance of being a girl with life-enhancing experience and learning, and being open for adventure. Eliza, the girl with the leading role, is always resolving the problems of the animals wherever she goes, which affects every episode's situations involving the other characters as well. She is depicted as an intelligent and agile "pre-teen" girl with a genuine interest in learning about the world around her, caring about the environment and the wildlife, always bright-eyed for an adventure. Her adventures are sometimes dangerous, yet she is a picture of a young girl with a resolute mind and bold attitude, never giving up in situations that become risky, posing as a positive role model for young girls. She is also depicted as not being concerned with her looks and being confident in her own skin, as she is shown having big teeth with braces on them, two braids, freckles on her face, and wearing glasses. Her clothes, (as well as the clothes of Debbie and Marianne) are not at all glamorous, but rather plain, as well as comfortable-looking and functional.

Conclusion

The conclusion of the research reveals that the selected animations carried both overt and covert implications of feminist ideas and concepts through the dialogue, narrations, titles of the animations, themes and story, actions of the characters or the situations they are in, and depiction of the characters (including their visual representation and personality). The kind of feminist ideas and concepts that were highlighted in them through the verbal and non-verbal language were mostly concerned with the empowerment and liberation of women, and hinted towards real-life women's issues such as education, adolescence, abuse, oppression, gender equality in work and employment, personal choice, matriarchal systems and the male-dominated society, women's suffrage, and other political, social and economic issues. The female audience was encouraged to feel comfortable in their own skin, to concentrate on intelligence, tact, moral high ground, and being productive to their surroundings and other people. Also, the ideas expressed in these animations through language to young girls promoted the building of self-esteem and a positive self-image. There were implications that encouraged young girls to be confident and strong in the practical world; be in control of their own lives as independent individuals and not always need a "prince" to come to rescue them and fulfill their hopes and dreams with honesty and hard work. These concepts make the animations not only a joy to watch but educational and thought-provoking as well.

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