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Fatphobia in Disney Movies: Implications and Imprints on Children's Wellbeing

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Walt Disney Movies is one of the leading and most influential media giants in the world. They play a pivotal role in shaping children's perspective of cultural ideals, gender roles and body image through their visual representations. Most Disney protagonists, especially the princess characters, project unrealistic body standards and are highly sexualised in their actions. Fatness has always been associated with ugliness. Fat Disney characters are either funny, clumsy, foolish or aggressive. An analysis of a few famous Disney characters would help to further establish this argument. The stereotypical representation of fat characters is in fact problematic, leading to fat bullying among youth. This tendency also increases the chances of development of eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia among children. Contrary to this discrimination, what we need currently is an acceptance of all people, irrespective of their body size and weight.

Keywords: Fatness, Disney characters, Fatphobia, Eating Disorders, Body positivity.

Disney Incorporated is one of the leading and most influential media giants in the world. Walt Disney movies produced in the United States, have entertained and engaged children of all age groups all over the world, even before the last century. These movies function

as a source of inspiration, influencing children right from a very young age, and serve as cultural indicators and legitimate icons for specific roles, values and ideals, often teaching them much more than the age old institutions of learning, like schools and religious centres (Giroux, 1995). They also play a pivotal role in shaping children's perspective of cultural ideals, gender roles and body image, mostly perpetuating age-old stereotypes of beautiful, handsome and ideal princes and princesses. Such portrayals leave deep rooted negative imprints on children's physical and psychological wellbeing and hence they demand a thorough study.

Most Disney protagonists, especially the princess characters, project unrealistic body standards and are highly sexualised in their actions. Disney movies lack realistic and well-rounded female characters. (Johnson, 2015). Women take on less important roles than their male counterparts and are highly sexualised, mostly portrayed as passive. (Conley & Ramsey, 2011) They lack power, and project the stereotypical feminine features, thereby re-emphasising their gender roles. (Pryor & Knupfer, 1997) With children being exposed to these movies very easily and repeatedly, it gradually leads to the thought or internal implication of these portrayals being the acceptable norm. Imbibing these ideals in turn leads to physical and psychological disorders in young girls. It is hence important to address and acknowledge this fatphobia in Disney movies.

Disney characters are the best examples of the stereotype "what is beautiful is good" (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). The protagonists and other important characters in Disney movies and shows are perfect, beautiful and highly virtuous. However it is indeed highly problematic that the villains and other minor or negative characters are mostly fat, ugly and unattractive. Myers (2002) points out, "Children learn the stereotype quite early. Snow White and Cinderella are beautiful and kind. The witch and the step-sisters are ugly and wicked" (p. 428). Physical attractiveness, in these movies, is thus directly proportional to integrity, competence and responsible behaviour. Such association of beauty to goodness in movies, through repeated portrayals, results in affirming the stereotype strongly, and imprinting the same in young minds. This reinforces the idea that being

overweight is undesirable and makes it difficult for children who are overweight, to see themselves as worthy of love, respect and happiness.

Fatphobia is very prevalent in society and it is quite unfortunate that it is also found in Disney movies. Fatness has always been associated with ugliness. Fat Disney characters are either funny, clumsy, foolish or aggressive. They are also irresponsible, incompetent and are shown as inferior to the protagonist. They lack physical strength and/or even common sense at times. Most fat Disney characters are so clumsy that they often end up in trouble, making themselves a laughing stock. These characters lack any progress or growth in the movie. Fat characters are also bullies. They are comedic sidekicks and are never portrayed as heroes/heroines. An analysis of a few famous Disney characters would help us further establish this stand.

Clawhauser (Zootopia 2016)

Clawhauser in the animated movie Zootopia is a male cheetah, who is a member of the police department, often described in the movie as the flabby-doughnut loving cop. He is overweight, always eating donuts and sipping cola, while other officers manage the serious and important matters at the police department. He is funny, shy and the perfect supporting character for the protagonist. His fatness instantly brings about an air of silliness and provides a channel for comic relief. And Disney choosing a fat character for the same is definitely not an accident.

The Matchmaker (Mulan 1998)

The Matchmaker in Mulan is a fat, ugly looking lady described as scarier than the undertaker. She is a minor character who also appears to be villainous, but is in actuality, meant to be laughed at. She is also a cranky and unreasonable woman, who judges Mulan based on her appearance. The scene in the movie where the matchmaker catches fire in her bottom and runs around to extinguish it is an example of slapstick comedy, inviting laughs from the audience.

The Sultan (Aladdin 1992)

The Sultan from Aladdin is a character intended as a comic relief. Though he is the emperor of Agrabah, his appearance invites

laughter and mockery unlike the way one would expect an emperor to be. His purpose in life is to find a prince charming for his daughter Jasmine. He is short, fat and stout and is so gullible and silly. He is tricked throughout the movie by his councilman Jafar, which the Sultan is totally unaware of. Several other scenes and instances from the movie evoke laughter upon the Sultan, and his stout appearance greatly helps to enhance the comical element.

Ursula (The Little Mermaid 1989)

Ursula or the Sea Witch is the devilish obese antagonist in *The Little Mermaid*. She is portrayed as a huge creature that is half woman and half octopus. Ursula is shown as shockingly ugly and evil. Her actions and demeanour are totally unfeminine, further bringing out into question the traditional idea of gender and performativity; good women are supposed to be womanly, silent and meek, while bad women like Ursula are obese, loud and unfeminine. She is the evil one who deliberately stops the Little Mermaid from success. As per *The Gospel According to Disney: Faith, Trust and Pixie Dust*, Ursula is probably the most grotesque characterisation that Disney had ever created for a female villain until then (140). Her looks and appearance enhances her evil character and brings about a striking contrast between the beautiful protagonist who is virtuous and kind.

The Queen of Hearts (Alice in wonderland 1951)

In the movie, Alice describes the queen as a fat, pompous, bad tempered old tyrant. The Queen of Hearts is the main villainous character, who is impatient, sadistic and tyrannical. She is fat with an obese physique, unruly, dominating and egotistical. She is everything that Alice is not. She loves punishing and decapitating anyone who messes with her. Her appearance and haughtiness becomes even more striking as her husband the king, is a tiny man.

Visual representations matter: that art, whether considered “high culture” and placed in galleries and museums , or pop culture and part of the television, movies, books, and digital media we engage with on a daily basis, are central to the shaping of our ideas about our humanity, of our selves, and of other people. All too frequently seen as apolitical or immaterial to the “real” world, visual

representations are, in fact, of utmost importance in showing us how we should and should not behave in our private lives; how we can and cannot act in public; and what is acceptable and unacceptable regarding body size and shape. The visual representation of fat and fatness, for good or bad, is a social justice issue entwining the personal and the political in numerous ways.(Snider, 116)

The stereotypical representation of fat characters is in fact problematic. One major negative outcome of this problematic representation of fatness is youth bullying among fat students. Studies show that fat youth becomes an easy target for bullying in schools and colleges. (Weinstock and Krehbiel, 2009). Youth bullying has been identified as a serious problem among students with adverse long-term effects.(Craig & Pepler, 2003; Rigby, 2003). Bullying is often defined as aggressive behaviour intended to harm, with the more powerful person or group attacking a less powerful one (Nansel et al., 2001, p. 2094). With fat characters most often portrayed as silly and irresponsible, it leads to the assumption or internalisation of the idea among fat kids, that they are less powerful or less important. It also gives an impression among the other kids that fat kids are gullible and silly, in turn making them easy targets for bullying. All areas of lives of the victims are affected as a result of bullying, according to Mishna and Alaggia (2005). They are either physically harmed or scarred psychologically and emotionally for life, making them prone to depression, anxiety and unhappy lives .

Another implication of this inherent fatphobic representation is the production of low self esteem in kids. Children who identify themselves with overweight or obese characters who are portrayed in a negative light tend to develop low self-esteem and a negative body image. This in turn leads to a lifelong struggle with self-confidence and body positivity. This contributes to the development of eating disorders and self criticism among children.

The 1994 National Education Association from US reports, “For fat students the school experience is one of ongoing prejudice, unnoticed discrimination, and almost constant harassment. From

nursery school through college, fat students experience ostracism, discouragement, sometimes violence. Often ridiculed by their peers and discouraged by even well-meaning education employees, fat students develop low self-esteem and have limited horizons. They are deprived of places on honor rolls, sports teams, and cheerleading squads and are denied letters of recommendation” (p. 1).

Unfortunately, it is quite common that the media exploits contemporary cultural trends and contributes to fat shaming through unethical means. By constantly showing thin bodies as ideal, they reinforce harmful beauty standards. Promoting weight-loss products, new fad diets and fitness programmes through advertisements give out the message that fatness is something that should be altered. This kind of exploitation leaves young people questioning themselves and their self worth.

Marylin Wann(2009) in her foreword to *The Fat Studies Reader* talks about the effects of fat discrimination among children. “Fatter children are sadder, lonelier” while “average-weight children who fear becoming fat may eat too little, thereby slowing growth and delaying puberty” (xix). Their relationship with food becomes a strained one right from childhood or teenage.”The pressure to be thin,” Rebecca Weinstein (2014) points out, “is overwhelming. The devastation that is happening to kids because of weight, bullying, shame, fear, pills, surgeries, and profound pain is ever-growing” (11).

The difficult association with food in children brings us to one of the major health concerns in the US, Anorexia Nervosa. Also known as Anorexia, it is an eating disorder. It is characterised as an unusual eating habit that one develops mostly because of one’s low body image. *The Stanford Children’s Health Website* in its article “Anorexia Nervosa” defines it as a form of self starvation. Mostly occurring in children and teens, it is a result of societal pressure, weight related issues and family influences. The article further describes two types of Anorexia. The Restrictor Type is when children hugely limit the intake of food, often starving and surviving on the bare minimum. The next type is Bulimia, which is characterised by excessive eating or binge eating, and then forcefully throwing up everything you just ate,

to clear out the intestines. Anorexia is a dangerous disorder that can possibly affect a person's immune system due to malnutrition. Leaving the child totally weak, it can hamper his/her overall growth and even end up being fatal. The representation of fatness in media thus becomes all the more powerful as it acts as a foundation to how children associate fatness.

Fat phobia and the overwhelming cultural narratives of fatness are constructions fueled far more by the drive towards normative bodies than by solid medical evidence.... It is the stigma that these cultural narratives propagate about fatness, the black cloud of misunderstanding and hatred that heavily hangs around the shoulders of people of size, that medicalized accounts and those focusing on impairments alone fail to address (Herndon 126).

While mainstream media and giants in the industry try to negate and vilify fat characters, what is actually needed is a welcoming approach that views all body sizes and all body types the same. It is important for the media to be mindful of the messages that they send out about body image. There should be a representation of diverse body types in a positive light, validating the fact that there is no one "right" way to look. Movies should emphasise the inner qualities and intelligence of characters to promote the idea that a person's worth is not determined by their size or shape. Moreover, there should be an inclusive approach and a celebration of all body types, focussing more on one's overall health and wellness, rather than weight and size.

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