



SEDUCTION OF INNOCENCE: SKETCHING OF RACIST ELEMENTS IN ANIMATED CARTOONS

¹ Sreejitha P S

M A English and Comparative Literature

Pondicherry Central University

India

¹ Midhuna M Suresh

M A English Language and Literature

University of Kerala

India

ABSTRACT

Children find animated cartoons entertaining as the fast-moving coloured images capture their eyes and minds. TV Cartoons can make a heavy influence on children, so a critical analysis of the children-oriented media content is essential. Cartoons of racist and ethnic typecasting affect children in their cognitive domains as well as attitude patterns. This article examines the following problems: (i) How the race-related content and stereotypes have been presented in animated cartoons? (ii) Racist elements in other children-oriented media (iii) The psychological impacts of on children and (iv) Changes over time in media content and presentation.

Keywords: animated cartoons, children, racism, race, blacks, media content, psychology

I. INTRODUCTION

For more than a century animated cartoons are inextricably woven into every childhood. There is a closer interconnection between animated movies or cartoons and children than the earlier times. Cartoons are one of the foremost tools today that use colours to communicate something to children through which they learn and boosts up their curiosity and creativity. Colours are the prime reason for children to get fascinated to animated cartoons. But it is a neglected fact that outside the TV screen some of these vibrant colours fade out and fill up the young minds with blackness. There are a few cartoons which are not so funny because they seduce the innocence in children. Introduction to racism to children has been effectively done through the children's cartoons from 1930s. Going back to the history of racism in cartoons, an indelible list of such documentations can be seen in which the Blacks and the indigenous are underrepresented in terms of their colour, culture and dialect. It includes the mammy in Tom and Jerry; blackface in Mickey Mouse; the lazy African-Americans in Scrub Me Mama with a Boogie Beat; uncivilized native people in Jungle Jitters; the indolent African-American crows and illiterate, dark skinned labourers in Dumbo and the list goes on.... It is high time to rethink whether there is any chance for these coloured cartoons to make children 'colour-blinded' to certain colours as they are misled with the given symbols.

The skewed media can make significant paradigm shift in the cognitive patterns of a whole generation. Children oriented media do themselves well in introducing racism and other stereotypes. The media plays a strong part in magnifying the racial and ethnical differences and exaggerating their distinctiveness. Racialism is not just a matter of colour, prejudices and hatred. It has several forms within, deep rooted in all arenas of everyday life and culture. The notion of racism has been continuing for a very long time, which does not have any specific beginning periods. The homicide of George Floyd, who is an African American man in United States, is the very recent example of racism which opened up several discussions on systemic racism in all domains of culture and society.

Children are exposed to racial typecasts directly or indirectly, through electronic media, books and their experiences. This will help children to construct prejudices. As Erin Winkler rightly remarked in her talk titled *Children Are Not Colorblind*, "Children at this age, the whole world is their cognitive puzzle. They're trying to figure it out. And so when they notice patterns, if they're not getting explanations for why these patterns exist, they often infer that these are norms or rules, that this is how it should be, and in fact that these things must have been caused by meaningful or inherent differences between groups. This is why, although it can seem counterintuitive, our silence about race can in fact, and does in fact, increase prejudice." She explains that children's conceptions of race are highly correlated to their cognitive development (Winkler).

Early cartoons and animated movies were a breeding ground for racist representations. They carefully shaped black characters in hulking form with a lesser authority and brainpower. The images of blacks and their subordinate role in cartoons could make the children know about the social constructions of racial hierarchies. According to New York Times, by the age four a child can understand the basic racial stereotypes (Klass). Hence it is essential/necessitation today that the creators of cartoons must be more inclusive and vigilant while making the cartoons according to the psychology of the children.

II. INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF RACIALISM: BLACK SHOTS IN COLOURED CARTOONS

"A little childhood trauma builds character"

(*You Know What*, 0.16-0.18)

The role of media in shaping the stereotyped beliefs and attitudes need to be critically examined. Depicting the blacks, indigenous and ethnic minorities as the 'problematic other' becomes normal for mainstream media. By exaggerating racial and cultural differences, a set of prejudiced attitudes against identified minorities is built - from advertisements to mega movies. It has been a common trend to represent the marginalized communities as rough and ridiculous, and also 'less than' the dominant groups in terms of power, intellect and capital. These skewed media representations are commercially driven which are focusing on the gratification of the dominant society. When the children are introduced to the racial stereotypes through animated cartoons and movies, it distorts their ability to conceive the norms of collective identities and intergroup attitudes. Images of the dark Mammy, Jim Crow, the Savage, Mickey, and Sapphire are still thriving today, so their influences.

Any introduction is unneeded for the epic series of *Tom and Jerry*, an MGM Production of 1940s. The scheming Tom and the spunky Jerry have been inscribed into the juvenile world with their funny fights. Though the cartoon is unbeaten in its production and wide reception, its conscious insertion of selected racist stereotypes makes some scenes a bit much darker. The character Mammy Two Shoes is such a cautious inclusion done by the white imagination to satisfy the interests of mainstream media. Mammy is an African-American maid (her physical features, heavy 'black' dialect and jagged behaviour contribute to such an assumption) to the owner of Tom's and Jerry's house. Although Mammy had appeared in 19 cartoons, from *Puss Gets the Boot* (1940) to *Push-Button Kitty* (1952), in none of the episodes her name was used. According to David Pilgrim, the supervisor of Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, "it is probable that the name was, at first, a moniker used only by the people who produced the cartoon, then later by the media and cultural critics. The name is an apt descriptive label owing to the fact that in almost all episodes only her lower body is seen" (Pilgrim). In one of the episodes her full figure is shown in silhouetted form, wearing a bandana - a typical style of portraying black women in the Jim Crow era. Mammy is made as a homeowner to gain comic effects in the episode *Saturday Evening Puss* (1950), as the cartoon's creators believed that the depiction of a black female house owner is something funny enough to make the children remember that the power of owning and ruling a house always goes to the 'elites' and the role of a master never fits for the blacks as per the then prevailing norms - again, staging the preconceptions of the time.

In the episode *Mouse Cleaning* (1948), a temporarily black Tom lampooned a black man to get out of trouble with Mammy. This inclination to screen the racial attitudes of the white audience can also be seen in the episode, *The Lonesome Mouse* (1943). A frightened Mammy Two Shoes mounted a stool, and when the mouse shook the stool, her clothes began to fall off. A diamond ring, false teeth, a pair of dice, and a straight razor fell down from her clothes. This scene provoked The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) and other civil rights organizations, and they reacted against the racially insensitive depictions of blacks and other minorities in American popular culture, and it resulted in the removal of Mammy stereotype in the later episodes. Undoubtedly the child would conceive notions of hierarchical structure of the society which he/ she lives as the way of portrayal of a black and her subordinate role in the household influences them.

Mickey Mouse (Mellerdrammer), a 1933 animated cartoon by Walt Disney, has always been an all-time favourite for every kids. The character of Mickey Mouse itself carries the stains of racism as it has been supposed that Mickey Mouse is a recreation of Jigaboo, a character made to mock black people. When Mickey Mouse appeared in the earlier versions of the cartoon, he used gloves and facial characteristics, borrowed from blackface caricatures in minstrel shows. It is dreadful and racist when Micky Mouse himself stages a slavery. Mickey Mouse found an African tribe and named him Friday. *Mickey in Arabia* is a 1932 cartoon in which Mickey and Minnie travels to Arabia where a native Sultan attacks and kidnaps Minnie, and forces her to marry him. This specific representation of Sultan gives Eurocentric shades to the cartoon. This constructed stereotype is invigorated again by projecting that all Sultans are involved in force marriages and forcing themselves on women in general. Racism in Mickey Mouse is not just limited to animated cartoons, the 1932 annual publication of Mickey Mouse similarly contains racial epithets. The word 'Nigger' was used in the book several times. In the opening poem 'A Black Outlook', Mickey and Minnie fight against the 'Fierce Niggers'. Another strip of Mickey Mouse entitled *Circa* (1930-1933) had also been censored and banned from being published due to its inappropriate portrayal of blacks.

Perhaps, Van Beuren's *Plane Dumb* (1932) can be said as one of the most racist cartoon ever released. The series, undeniably is the concrete manifestation of racial or ethnic stereotypes. It features the characters Tom and Jerry, who are going to Africa, which is the most pertinent place for the Whites to make interventions and implications of racial typecasts. In this cartoon Tom and Jerry put on black face for the sake of disguising themselves in the conventional burnt cork makeup. The deformed dialect humour is another aspect. The practice of making dialogues in lame language for the non- white characters is a typical mockery through which the propagation of whiteness has been done by asserting themselves the power, identity and the supreme authority. There is a short musical sequence in the cartoon including "black skeletons" also need to be impugned. White supremacism tightens its net over every single scenes, not just limited to the designing of some ugly characters but also in the way they communicate, their gestures and the way they act. How easily these well-built oriental constructions of cognitive structures are passed on to the audience like a sweet legato!

It was normal for animated cartoons to stimulate racial caricatures and stereotypes during the Jim Crow period, and the popular series *Jungle Jitters* shorts were no exception. *Jungle Jitters* is a 1938 cartoon produced by Warner Bros. It was included in the *Censored Eleven* which was banned in 1968 because of its offensive portrayal of stereotype black people. The native people were depicted as cannibals. Those tribes were black, had large lips and loved chicken. As the cartoon progresses, a white man comes to their island and civilizes those native tribes. The whole act of transformation was always violent and ruthless. The indigenous people were exterminated from their own land by the dominating white people.

Another incessant example of racial cartoons comes from The Universal Pictures. In 1941, *Scrub me Mama with a Boogie Beat* was released. This animated short features a clan of lazy African- American tribes. They reside in a town called Lazytown. They are unattractive, idle and slow-witted. A white lady comes to their Lazytown, revives all these people to be more constructive and added colours to their lives. The occidental concept of 'West enlightening the East' is again enforced through these cartoons.

The Dick Tracy show is an American animated series from 1961 to 1962. The protagonist is detective Dick Tracy. He, along with his subordinates resolves a crime each week. Joe Jitsu and Go Go Gomez were the caricatures of Mexican and Asian stereotypes. Joe Jitsu is a Japanese stereotype. The character is made funny with his dialogue delivery. For instance, he uses "So solly" in place of "so sorry" and "Excuse prease" for "Excuse please". He was really short as compared to the other characters in the series and his face was drawn in typically offensive scrunch with a yellow complexion. Go Go Gomez was condemned for his appearance and accent. The 1990 Los Angeles Times observed Go Go Gomez as "shaped like a Mexican jumping bean,

wore a sombrero and frequently napped in a hammock.” (“Stereotype are Removed”). Though they were pictured as diligent police officers, they used a substandard accent and humorous apparel. There are other categorized caricatures in this cartoon. “Hemlock Holmes is a British stereotype who speaks with a Cary Grunt type voice and Heap O’Callory is an overweight Irish cop who speaks with a bit of a brogue.” (“Stereotypes are Removed”)

Early Disney cartoons featured characters that helped kids to think on how they expected other races to look and act. They inserted racist jokes simply into their shots even into the '90s.

Cartoons are not the only exceptions- there are other children-oriented medium that frequently constructs the stereotypes and hence normalizes the races, culture and identity. The racist and classist elements come to the surface when a cross eyed reading of children’s comic books, music and nursery rhymes are done. As it has been said about cartoons, every nursery rhymes also may not be sugary enough to make everyone cheerful. Some of them are too racist because they’re one- dimensional such as *Baa Baa Black Sheep*, *Humpty Dumpty*, *Ring around the Rosie*, *Ten Little Monkeys*, *Eeny, Meeny, Miny, Mo* etc. These four- line songs ransack all the candidness of a childhood. Comic books are another form of entertainment for children. Based on theories of social psychology, comics can affect the levels of aggression, social behaviour and attitudes. It may not be really funny to watch our favourite superheroes fighting enemies based on their colour. Whitewash Jones in *Young Allies*, Lothar in *Mandrake, the Magician*, Falcon in *Captain America*, Ebony White in *The Spirit* are a few cases of the representation of racial typecasts.

It has been recognized that children watch television approximately for 18,000 hours from the age of four to twelve. Most of the children are more interested in watching cartoons. By the time they reach the age of two or three, they are fantasized by the superheroes in these cartoons and try to imitate them. As said by Khaled Habib and Tarek Soliman in their paper *Cartoons’ Effect in Changing Children Mental Response and Behavior*, a well written scenario, right audio & Visual effects and a descent looking character, are all the main factors for the child to get stuck for the cartoons hero, and enough for his brain to begin automatically following his path and trying to be a copycat even for the finest details, including way of speaking, thinking, body language... and even the way of dressing up.” These animations are not just to delight them, it also help in developing the cognitive skills of children. The mental health of a child from age 3-6 is affected by cartoons. So it is really important to recognize the impact of the portrayal of the constructed stereotypes through these cartoons. The Disney films and cartoons that mirror xenophobia, racism and sexism are criticised by few people. (Sternheimer). But we have to scrutinize the impact of these representations on children. It is ironic how the very people who choose to ignore issues of inequality are usually the same ones who fear children are hugely influenced by violent cartoons, and children who watch these cartoons will eventually copy what they see (Sternheimer). The racial bias in these cartoons are cascaded into the mind of children. When the stories of white are being shown on media, children tend to think that the world cares for the white people only. As per the research by Sharmin in Michigan University, it has been proven that due to the audio visual effects and colours, children are much attracted to animated cartoon content as compared to conventional ways of learning.

III. CONCLUSION

“It is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.” (Baldwin 334).

Racial innocence frames racism and racialization as upshots of individual ignorance. It has been a necessary element to recognise in a multiculturalist state, that promotes anti-discrimination policies. It has been operated by some normalised racial discourses. It becomes a key to corrupt the cognitive patterns of children and thus gives the slot to endorse the structural racial inequalities to be reproduced in children’s media. Racism and children’s media have strong ties with each other as it is used as one of the initial tools in constructing racial stereotypes. Most of the mainstream media, in its contents as well as in creation of their icons or characters, are the producers of several stereotypes and this repetition of stereotypes makes normalization effortless. How do the cartoon characters become racial manifestations? As said by Eve Tuck, an Indigenous professor of education at the University of Toronto, these portrayals are racist because they’re not true to real life and also one- dimensional. She states, “They’re never accurate, they’re exaggerated, in the way a character sounds or even how they move their body. They’re never the way people from those communities would ever represent themselves. They’re always the evil character, or a joke. They’re not taken

seriously and never fleshed out or developed. We know nothing about their interior worlds. Their only role is to carry out a stereotype created by white imaginations.” (“Disney Plus Warning”)

Civil rights movements in the United States during the 1950s brought out masked dominions of racism and demanded deconstructions in its existed practices. Following the Civil right protests, NAACP revitalized all arenas of American popular culture, including animated cartoons. As a result of NAACP protest, there was the historic verdict of U.S Supreme Court on the case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954 by which the Mammy character was withdrawn from the *Tom and Jerry* cartoons. As directed in court verdict, *Tom and Jerry* scenes were revised and edited in the 1960s (Duignan). In some of the corrected ‘re-mastered’ cartoons, a white woman began to appear as new Mammy and was renamed as Mrs Two Shoes. She is also a fat lady and often grumpy, but unlike Mammy Two Shoes, she has a family, as revealed by several photographs. The voice of the character was also edited out and replaced with the dubbed voice of a white woman.

In 1968, a group of cartoons by Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies were banned due to its ethnic stereotypes, specifically the portrayal of African natives. The group of banned cartoons is known as *Censored Eleven* which included *Hittin’ The Trail To Hallelujah Land* (1931), *Sunday Go To Meetin’ Time* (1936), *Uncle Tom’s Bungalow* (1937), *Clean Pastures*(1937), *Jungle Jitters*(1938), *All This and Rabbit Stew*(1941) and *Coal Black and The De Sebben Dwarfs*(1943). These cartoons had the shades of Jim Crowism and were beyond any repair. On that account these were banned by United Artists. *Coal Black and The De Sebben Dwarfs* is a parody of *Snow White* by Disney. This series features only black characters. *Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips* of 1941 was banned because of its offensive stereotypical portrayal of the Asians. The Japanese people were caricatured as those with big eyes, buck teeth and short. In case of cartoons like *Scrub me Mama with a Boogie Beat* and *Magical Maestro*, the whole series was discarded from broadcasting. In 1993, *Magical Maestro* was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant"(Wikipedia). But there was controversy that *Magical Maestro* had racial elements. When a cymbeline hits Poochini’s head, he is turned into a Chinese man with a coolie hat and he is again transferred into a blackface singer when ink is sprayed on his face. Not all cartoons can be categorized under the shadows of racism. Recently Cartoon Network launched a Public Service Announcement (PSA) -“Tell the Whole Story-Be Anti-Racist”, which has gone viral. Steven Universe, a cartoon character explains to his students about the inevitable role of Lewis Latimer, a black inventor in the invention of filament for bulbs. In the PSA, Stevens said “Thanks to systemic racism, most of your story tellers prioritized white accomplishments,” and claims history was "modified to make white readers comfortable.”(*Tell the Whole Story* 1.04-1.06) As CN has tweeted about the afore said PSA "Black inventors, heroes, and leaders are often left out of history. Ask yourself as you're learning...who is the focus? Why? Question the story”. (Towers)

Amazon Prime video now provides a disclaimer for early *Tom and Jerry* cartoons that caricature Mammy Two Shoes. The animations, it warns, represent “some ethnic and racial prejudices that were once commonplace in American society ... that were wrong then and are wrong now” (CBS News). Disney provides a warning note before the show as well.

Though cartons like *Arthur the Aardvark* is considered as a progressive anti-racist cartoon, it too comes from the white perspectives. *Arthur* and *Buster* discuss about the brutalities that blacks have to face in their neighbourhood and how they should stand up against such racial discrimination. A real anti-racist show should illustrate a true native black or indigenous rather than a masked white since it is the ethnic group who had experienced the discrimination and whites are mere narrators. So what’s radical in it to cast a white and telecast their perspectives again? Animated cartoons like *Peppa Pig*, *Strawberry Shortcakes* and *My Little Pony* teach kids about the value of friendship and to accept the difference. This is really an optimistic turn. Such socially committed cartoons can help to mould the cognitive structures of the future generation.

It is appreciative that the rate of racist depictions over the time had been incredibly reduced. Recently released cartoons, in its content and characterisation are more inclusive in nature, which is a positive sign. A strong censorship should be needed for these types of children oriented media as it impacts and influences the children immensely. We need colourful cartoons devoid of black shots for a multi-coloured future.

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