



A Comparative Study Of The Characterization Of Snow White In The Select Film Adaptations

¹Devika K H, ²Dr Sreena K,

¹PG Student, ²Assistant Professor

¹Department of English Language and Literature,

¹Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham Kochi Campus, Kerala, India

Abstract: This comparative study examines the characterization of the iconic fairy tale character Snow White in three selected film adaptations: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Snow White and the Huntsman*, and *Mirror Mirror*. Through a close analysis of these adaptations, the study explores how each film portrays Snow White's character, highlighting how her representation has evolved. Employing a feminist lens, this research examines the depiction of Snow White in each film through the framework of gender representation, agency, and empowerment. It explores how the adaptations challenge or reinforce traditional gender roles and stereotypes, and investigates the extent to which Snow White is presented as a multifaceted and independent character.

The findings of this study contribute to the existing body of research on fairy tale adaptations and feminist readings of female characters in the film. By analyzing these particular adaptations of Snow White, the research sheds light on the changing cultural attitudes towards gender and women's roles, providing insights into the complex interplay between popular media and societal norms. Overall, this comparative study aims to deepen our understanding of the portrayal of Snow White in film, revealing the nuances and variations in her characterization and offering a critical analysis from a feminist perspective.

Index Terms - Disney, Feminism, Gender roles, Stereotypes

I. INTRODUCTION

The origin of the movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* can be traced back to the original fairy tale, which was first published by the Grimm Brothers in 1812 as part of their collection titled *Grimms' Fairy Tales* (or *Children's and Household Tales*). The Grimm Brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, were German folklorists and linguists who collected and documented traditional folk tales from various regions of Germany. Their goal was to preserve these stories, which were passed down orally through generations, and make them accessible to a wider audience.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (originally titled *Schneewittchen* or *Little Snow White*) is one of the tales included in the Grimm Brothers' collection. The story revolves around a young princess named Snow White who, after escaping the wrath of her jealous stepmother, finds refuge in the forest with seven dwarfs. However, the stepmother discovers Snow White's whereabouts and attempts to harm her multiple times, eventually leading to her demise.

In early 19th-century literature and other forms of media, the representation of women varied but was often shaped by societal norms and prevailing gender roles. Women were typically portrayed within the confines of domesticity and were expected to adhere to conventional ideals of femininity and virtue. One prevalent ideal of femininity in literature during this period was the concept of the "angel in the house." Coined by poet and critic Coventry Patmore in his poem of the same name, the "angel in the house" represented the image of an idealized woman who was selfless, nurturing, and dedicated to her domestic duties. Women were expected to prioritize the needs and well-being of their families and maintain a harmonious home life.

And Snow White, as depicted in the *Grimm Brothers' fairy tale*, often embodies qualities that were valued in 19th-century notions of femininity. She is typically portrayed as gentle, kind, and nurturing, adhering to the societal expectations of women as compassionate and caring individuals. Her beauty is emphasized, highlighting the significance placed on physical attractiveness as a desirable trait for women during the 19th century. One could argue that Snow White's passivity and submissive nature, particularly in her interactions with the male characters in the story, align with the expectation of women to be docile and obedient. Her ultimate goal in the story is often to find a suitable partner and live happily ever after, conforming to the traditional narrative of women seeking marriage and domestic fulfillment.

The popularity and enduring nature of the *Grimm Brothers' fairy tales* led to the adaptation of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* into various forms of media, including theater, ballet, and eventually, film. However, it was Walt Disney who brought the story to life as the first full-length animated feature film. In 1937, Walt Disney and his studio released the animated film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which marked a significant milestone in the history of animation. It was the first-ever feature-length animated film, combining traditional animation techniques with innovative storytelling and music.

STUDY OF THE SELECT FILMS

When examining the perspective of film studies and the role of gender in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, it is essential to consider how the film's portrayal of gender reflects the cultural context of its time. One key aspect of the film's gender representation lies in the characterization of Snow White herself. In her book *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, Elizabeth Bell discusses how Snow White embodies traditional femininity and domesticity. She states that Snow White is portrayed as a passive and docile character, focused on her appearance, housekeeping, and waiting for a prince to rescue her (Bell, 1995). This portrayal aligns with the gender norms prevalent during the 1930s when the film was released, reflecting traditional gender roles and expectations. According to Mary Adams' paper "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Reflections on Snow White", the queen's enmity and fixation with her beauty represent a fear of aging in society and the pressures women experience to maintain youthfulness. (Adams, 2001)

Furthermore, the role of the seven dwarfs in the film raises discussions about gender and masculinity. Anne-Marie Thomas, in her article "Becoming Animal in Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs", argues that the dwarfs represent a departure from traditional masculinity. She suggests that their diminutive size, childlike behavior, and nurturing qualities challenge stereotypical ideals of male strength and dominance (Thomas, 2006). An analysis of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* reveals that the film can be criticized for its lack of feminist elements and its adherence to traditional gender roles. Snow White's portrayal as a passive and submissive character, waiting for a prince to rescue her, reflects a conventional and patriarchal view of femininity.

Furthermore, the absence of agency and empowerment in Snow White's character is highlighted by Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". Mulvey discusses the concept of the "male gaze" in cinema, whereby women are objectified and positioned as passive objects of desire for male viewers. She contends that Snow White's passive nature and objectification reinforce patriarchal power structures (Mulvey, 1975).

The representation of women in early 21st-century media and films has witnessed notable advancements and increased diversity, reflecting changing societal attitudes and the influence of feminist movements. Women have been portrayed in a more multifaceted manner, challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes while highlighting their agency, strength, and complexity. In terms of representation, there has been a greater emphasis on diverse female characters with more depth and varied narratives. Strong female

protagonists have emerged across various genres, showcasing women as leaders, innovators, and independent individuals.

Snow White and the Huntsman a 2012 American film which is an adaptation retells the story of Snow White, who in a new perspective, empowers her stepmother Queen Ravenna, a wicked sorceress. It is a 2012 fantasy film directed by Rupert Sanders. It presents a darker and more action-oriented take on the classic fairy tale of Snow White. The story follows Snow White (played by Kristen Stewart), a young princess who is imprisoned by her wicked stepmother, Queen Ravenna (played by Charlize Theron) after she usurps the kingdom's throne. However, Snow White manages to escape and seeks refuge in the Dark Forest, while the Queen sends a Huntsman (played by Chris Hemsworth) to track her down.

In this adaptation, the film explores themes of power, femininity, and resilience. Queen Ravenna symbolizes the corrupting influence of power and beauty, as she uses dark magic to maintain her youth and dominion over the kingdom. Snow White, on the other hand, embodies resilience and purity as she resists the Queen's oppressive rule. The character of the Huntsman also transforms, from a hardened and cynical individual to someone who becomes invested in Snow White's cause and fights alongside her.

The representation of Snow White in *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012) can be seen as a progression from the original fairy tale, incorporating modern storytelling elements and reimagining the character in a more empowered and active role. The film presents Snow White as a resilient and courageous figure who takes charge of her destiny. In the original fairy tale, Snow White is portrayed as a passive and innocent character who relies on others, such as the Huntsman, to protect her. However, in *Snow White and the Huntsman*, the character is depicted as a strong and capable warrior, leading a rebellion against the evil queen and reclaiming her kingdom.

In this adaptation, both Queen Ravenna and Snow White undergo feminist retrospection. To begin with, protection against any sexual harassment or assault is an aspect of feminism. And accordingly, the initial part of the movie presents an internal monologue of Ravenna: "I was ruined by a king like you once.", "Men use women; they ruin us.". These phrases suggest that she was a victim of rape by the dark army that invaded her land. The abuses she faced during her adolescence have changed her perception of the outside world. She justifies her wrongdoings as a means of survival. Towards the middle, Ravenna asks her brother, "Am I not kind?". She needs a male's validation even though she can rule over a thousand men. Patriarchy questions the competence of women, no matter how powerful they are. It acts as a malignant element that disintegrates the willpower of women, making them question their abilities. Following this scene, the movie exhibits an island on which Snow takes refuge. The island is inhabited by only women members and women warriors. It renders the fact that women can be a formidable entity on their own, efficient enough to survive and offer protection.

During the early centuries, women used to wear high-waisted gowns with long sleeves, which were usually worn over an underskirt. And Snow White wearing silver armor presents itself in contrast with the dress politics of the period. She makes the statement that women can take up weapons and armor. And the denouement of the movie criticizes the concept of Disney's 'Happily Ever After.' Where Disney promotes the idea of female dependency on men for happiness, the new adaptation of "Snow White and the Huntsman" lambasts this traditional concept and puts forward that a 'happily ever after' doesn't need a man. A woman alone is capable of molding her story and providing happiness. She is self-sufficient. She is the ultimate power that can both create and destroy. She is the beginning, and she is the end.

From a film studies perspective, *Snow White and the Huntsman* incorporates visually stunning cinematography and intricate production design to create a dark and atmospheric fantasy world. The film utilizes visual effects and cinematographic techniques to immerse viewers in the fantastical elements of the story, emphasizing the magical and otherworldly aspects of the narrative.

Regarding feminism, the film presents a reimagined and empowered portrayal of Snow White. In her analysis of the film, Laura Mulvey discusses how Snow White, played by Kristen Stewart, moves away from the traditional damsel-in-distress archetype and embodies a more active and resilient female protagonist (Mulvey, 2012). Snow White's character demonstrates strength, courage, and agency as she takes charge of her destiny and becomes a leader in the battle against the evil queen. Furthermore, the film explores themes of female solidarity and the struggle against patriarchal power structures. The relationship

between Snow White and the warrior Huntsman, played by Chris Hemsworth, evolves into a partnership built on mutual respect and cooperation, challenging traditional gender dynamics.

In 2012, the roles of women in society had evolved significantly compared to previous decades. Women had made significant strides in various spheres of life, including education, employment, politics, and leadership positions. While gender inequality and challenges persisted, women in 2012 had more opportunities for self-determination and were increasingly recognized for their contributions. Pursuing higher education represented a significant shift from previous eras where women's access to education was limited.

Tarsem Singh directed the fantasy action movie *Mirror Mirror* in 2012. It offers a humorous and fantastical interpretation of the traditional fairy tale of Snow White. The main character of the movie is Snow White (Lily Collins), an orphaned princess left by the disappearance of her monarch's father. Snow White's evil stepmother, the Queen (played by Julia Roberts), seizes power and establishes an absolute monarchy. To restore her birthright and retake the kingdom, Snow White, who is unwilling to play the victim, joins forces with seven dissident dwarfs.

The movie challenges traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Snow White is initially portrayed as a sensitive and loving child, taught by her father to be kind and gentle. However, the king's inability to teach her skills traditionally associated with masculinity unintentionally instills a fear of abandonment and reliance on men. The movie critiques the egocentric and spendthrift nature of the queen, whose extravagant lifestyle leads to high taxes and the starvation of the kingdom's people. Snow White questions the queen's actions, leading to her order for execution. Fortunately, the seven dwarves save Snow White and teach her their skills, including the art of defense.

Snow White's development of self-defense highlights the difference in mindset between men and women. While violence is often associated with men, Snow White's use of self-defense promotes peace. She returns stolen tax money to the people, demonstrating her political capability and brilliance in ruling a kingdom. In a combat scene with the Prince, he refuses to fight her solely because she is a girl, reflecting patriarchal beliefs that women are not worthy opponents. The prince's comment about her throwing "like a girl" reinforces the expectation for women to display masculine traits to be considered eligible for combat.

The movie challenges societal notions that men should not cry while women are expected to be emotional. Snow White defies this stereotype by standing up for herself and dismantling the misconception that women are dependent on men in challenging situations. By defeating the beast and her evil stepmother single-handedly, Snow White subverts the traditional narrative where the prince saves the princess. The film concludes with Snow White suggesting it is time to change the ending, indicating a desire for more empowered and independent female characters.

Mirror Mirror showcases a visually captivating mise-en-scène, characterized by elaborate production design, vibrant costumes, and imaginative sets. The film embraces a whimsical and fantastical aesthetic, with each scene carefully crafted to create a visually rich and immersive world. The use of bright colors, intricate details in costumes and set designs, and stylized cinematography contribute to the overall enchanting atmosphere. The visual elements in the film enhance the storytelling and support the narrative themes. For instance, the contrasting color palettes between the Queen's opulent and dark attire and Snow White's vibrant and lighter costumes reflect the dichotomy between good and evil. The extravagant sets, such as the Queen's grand palace and the enchanting forest, create a sense of awe and contribute to the fairy tale ambiance.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, movies like *Snow White and the Huntsman* and *Mirror Mirror* offer reimagined and often darker interpretations of the Snow White tale compared to the classic Disney version. These adaptations may present more complex characters, nuanced storylines, and different visual styles that can engage older children and adolescents who are drawn to more mature themes and aesthetics. While the Disney version of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is known for its iconic animation, memorable songs, and a more traditional fairy tale narrative, the 2012 adaptations can provide alternative perspectives and modern

sensibilities that may resonate differently with children. These adaptations may challenge gender roles, offer stronger and more independent female characters, or explore themes of empowerment and self-discovery.

The passage of time and evolving societal norms have influenced the portrayal of Snow White in various adaptations. Over the centuries, narratives have been reinterpreted to reflect changing cultural attitudes and expectations. Older versions of Snow White may align more closely with traditional gender roles and romanticized ideals, while newer adaptations may aim to subvert or challenge these conventions. Along with it, over time, feminism and gender studies have influenced the portrayal of female characters and themes in various adaptations of Snow White. Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) reflects the gender norms of its era, presenting Snow White as a passive and romanticized figure. However, with the rise of feminist movements and increased awareness of gender representation, subsequent adaptations like *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012) and *Mirror Mirror* (2012) sought to challenge traditional gender roles. These adaptations feature more empowered and independent versions of Snow White, aligning with feminist perspectives emphasizing female characters' agency and strength. They explore themes of female empowerment, sisterhood, and self-discovery, reflecting the influence of gender studies in challenging traditional narratives and promoting diverse representations of women in media.

REFERENCE

- Adams, M. (2001). "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Reflections on Snow White". *Marvels & Tales*, 15(1), 32-41.
- Bechdel, Alison. "The Rule." *Dykes to Watch Out For*, no. 5, 1985, p. 12.
- Bell, E. (1995). "From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture". Indiana University Press.
- Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm. "Snow White." Translated by Jack Zipes. "The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm", Bantam Classics, 2003.
- Ingall, M. (2007). "Disney's Female Employment of The Beauty Myth. The Lion and the Unicorn", 31(2), 165-180.
- Mulvey, L. (2012). "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, the Symbolic Repression of Snow White". *Sight & Sound*, 22(12), 30-33.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. Screen", 16(3), 6-18.
- Patmore, Coventry. "The Angel in the House." *Victorian Poetry*, edited by Stanley Appelbaum, Dover Publications, 1995.
- Sanders, R. (Director). (2012). *Snow White and the Huntsman* [Motion Picture]. Universal Pictures.
- Singh, T. (Director). (2012). *Mirror Mirror* [Motion Picture]. Relativity Media.
- Thomas, A. (2006). "Becoming-Animal in Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs". *Women's Studies*, 35(6), 529-548.