

An Analysis of Disability in *The Little Mermaid*: Examining Disparities and Similarities in the Fairytale and Its Movie Adaptation

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Abstract

Differences and disabilities have always been a part of oral tradition and folklore. These differences greatly influenced story-telling that eventually stemmed from oral tradition. The western canon has included disability in their literature for some time now, but their portrayal of disability from the beginning to the twentieth century has drastically improved. Fairytales and folktales were historically associated with values and morals, and the moral system during the olden times was completely patriarchal and abelistic. The tales never offered any space for disability to exist as a simple part of an individual's life. This paper aims to investigate the representation of disability in Disney's version of Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale, "The Little Mermaid", and attempts to understand disability in the light of fairytales. There are some major and vital differences between the original story by Hans Christian and the movie by Disney, but do they accommodate positive signals that counteract the ableist society? Does the movie reflect the truth about a disabled person's life? Or is it still a profusion of negative elements that reinforce oppression and discrimination? This paper examines the narratives employed in the movie and the original fairy tale and attempts to address the issues of identity, stigma, and stereotypes based on the representation of disability in both genres.

Keywords: disability, disney, fairytales, representation, animated movies, discrimination

1.Introduction

"Once upon a time" is a phrasal utterance that can seldom be erased from the childhood of any individual. Stories are an ever-present element in almost every person's life, and they are still the most potent selling artefacts of the media house. Magical on goings, love stories, evil villains, powerful kings, fairies, friendly spirits, elves, pixies, and other entrancing elements of the fairy tales have always captivated their readers with much awe and creativity for centuries. According to researchers from the universities of Durham and Lisbon, the origin of fairy tales can be traced back thousands of years. It is believed that the story-telling history has been preserved through the mechanism of inheritance. Oral traditions were the main medium of dissemination for a major corpus of the medieval and early modern period literature: each time a story was told, minor details would change, and their morals and meanings were constantly evolving and transposing over the centuries according to the regions it travelled. Fairy tales are alive and well in today's environment. There is a perpetual birth of new fairy tales or the resuscitation and re-interpretation of the older ones, whether in books, comics, music, or movies. Writers have continued to reinvent, subvert, and reinterpret these stories recently. Merriam Webster describes fairy tales as children's stories about fantastical creatures and forces, while Oxford Dictionary alludes to them as mystical, idealized, or very cheerful. Fairy tales are magical stories that are far removed from reality and were written to explain incidents or phenomena that were too difficult for human-understanding (Eberly, 1988).

Stories have always occupied a major chunk of a person's childhood, so folktales and fairytales are ever present in our cognition. Most of the time, the disability that was portrayed in the fairytales was less than positive; disabled people were seen as people who had to overcome their disability in order to enjoy a happy life. They possess the ability to influence their audience in a way that still remains uncontested by any other form of media. Stories that are told to children to improve their creative boundaries are often the main themes for a lot of movies and cartoons. These tales mainly have been subtly communicating social, racist, and cultural messages to their young audience (Walkerdine, 1984). A dominant part of the fairy tales that survived the test of times had strong European roots, and when investigated carefully, it is revealed that

those tales were not originally intended for the young audience. The most famous fairy tale authors who were the pioneers of fairy tale writing were The Grimm Brothers, Charles Perrault, and Hans Christian Andersen; all these authors have consistently included adult themes like loneliness, death, sacrifice, abuse, romantic love, and abandonment in their works. Bettelheim, in his research, quotes German poet F.Schiller, who asserts that "deeper meanings" are ever present in fairy tales and that it has transferred more truth "than the one taught by life" (1976).

The children of the present century are exposed to the classic fairy tales not because of the books but because of their Disney adaptations. Disney's first fairy tale adaptation was The Brothers Grimm's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, which was released in the year 1938. With its grand success, Disney went on to adapt many other fairy tales from the European continent. They started giving life to the age-old stories and characters by polishing them to suit the taste of the popular audience by laying out meaningful connections to the present cultural age. The "Disneyfication" of the European tales gave birth to stories with happier endings, more magical aspects, fantastical healings, and miraculous transformations. Disney had a world of opportunities lying ahead of them as they started their animation journey with the fairy tales, and no one from the Disney corporation would have believed that they could help out their company from running bankrupt just by directing classic fairy tales.

The animated film chosen for this study is an adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale, *The Little Mermaid*. It was released during a time when most of the Disney films performed poorly at the box office. *The Little Mermaid* was released in the year 1989 and won critical acclamation for its musical score and animation; and it also won two prestigious Academy Awards. *The Little Mermaid* is credited with introducing the art of Disney animated feature films back to life. It also sparked the beginning of the Disney Renaissance era. The movie was so successful that Disney released a prequel and sequel to *The Little Mermaid*, and its female lead Ariel is still one of Disney's unchallenged princesses of all time. This paper attempts to decipher the plot of the movie with regard to disability and explores how it is entwined with the narrative of the Disney-tailored version of *The Little Mermaid* at a fervent level. The ableist ideologies hidden in the movie are unravelled in this literary investigation of the movie, and the harmful images of disability are critically identified to provide a true representation of disability in the movie.

1.1 Significance of Media and Movies

Mass media and its instilled culture have a tremendous influence on global behaviour and value systems because we live in a system that is a cosmic consumer of them. A core issue with stereotypical media portrayals, according to Mattingly (2003), is that any simplistic portrayal of media supremacy obfuscates the audience's power—their potential to promote their own interests—and she claims that the media industry has invaded and conquered people's minds in order to perpetuate the ideologies of the ruling class's upper echelon.

The animated characters, especially the princes and princesses, are unconsciously stuck in the memories of their young audience, who in turn internalize the metaphors and stereotypic associations to synthesize the societal constructions of differences. One of the oldest genres of children's literature is the fairy tale. Children have created visual imageries of the princesses and perhaps other characters in these tales throughout history based on how they are depicted in the written text and the visuals that frequently accompany those texts. As a direct consequence, fairy tales are critical in helping young children gain their sense of individuality and worldview.

What necessitates questioning and criticizing Disney? Since they are a major provider of children's entertainment cartoons and programming, this has been highlighted more than once by cultural theorists because their work has consistently appeared to promote the beliefs of a restricted set of individuals. The utter omnipotence of Disney's reach into various sectors of daily existence causes the frontiers between "entertainment, education, and commercialization" to crumble (Giroux, 1995). Since children are more significantly affected by what they watch than adults who view similar media, it is essential to comprehend what children consume. Additionally, research shows that young kids understand and comprehend many more things from television than is commonly believed. (Bell, 1995).

The genuine freedom of "disnified fairy tales" for the contemporary reader would result from their intellectual comprehension and reconstruction of these tales on an intimate level. Fairy tales are said to be tremendously essential in the acculturation and socialization processes. Gender stereotypes for both men and women are influenced by how these narratives are conveyed in the postmodern world (Sturtevant, 2012; Bettelheim, 1976).

Fairy tales have historically been utilized as a legal means of reinforcing conventional gender norms and values. The "traditional" gender roles depicted in fairy tales and Disney movies demonstrate patriarchal power with deeply ingrained ideas of men's dominance over women and children (Smith, 2015). According to Barnes and Mercer, disability has been used as a means of "entertainment" and to arouse the sensibilities and insecurities of the general public who are not disabled. Disability is being leveraged to stimulate such emotions and emotions by portraying it as retribution for abhorrent behaviour. Disability is deployed as a deterrent to the non-disabled population from acting immorally or outside of social norms (2003).

The celebration of "Simpleton's triumphs, modesty, ethical posture, and charitable acts" discloses both justice and injustice to readers of fairy tales, according to Zascavage (2014). They can be "victimized, exploited, and harmed with little remorse" inside the narrative for characters who have been "othered" in fairy tales.

2. Critical Analysis of the Movie *The Little Mermaid*

The movie version of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* was adapted almost after a whole century, and Disney made some vital changes to the plot to suit its happy ending modus operandi. Disney usually takes inspiration from the western European folklore to suit their stories. This story by Hans Christian Andersen was chosen carefully and meticulous changes were made to the plot to suit the Disney narrative, making it the first movie to make Disney super popular all over the globe. While all the major characters and the narrative remains the same, Disney made prominent variations in the climax of the story and thus all conflicts are dramatized, clarified and articulated. While feminist critics found the movie to be extremely condescending, the movie performed very well in the box office and garnered a great profit for the corporate giant. The movie has no abstract concepts like book, Disney uses symbols to represent these with material objects like power is represented through the king's trident, the first kiss symbolises the love shared between Eric and Ariel, seduction is concretised through the shell necklace that the Witch wears. The identity dilemma of 16-year-old Ariel is, of course, the main plot of *The Little Mermaid*. Her patriarchal mer-society makes her feel disadvantaged, and she feels as though she does not belong. She longs for a world other than her own, where she might be liberated from the restrictions of her conservative culture and traditional family. Although her heart and thoughts are with those on land, her body is submerged in water. Ariel is portrayed as someone who is quite different from her other sisters, she is always engaged in excavating and collecting human objects from the sea bed, because she has an untold love for the human world. To fulfil her dream of becoming a human, she makes a dangerous deal with the sea witch Ursula. Ariel is represented as a Disney princess who is different from the lot, she is a rebel and she unapologetically pursues her dreams despite all the hurdles she faces. She gives all it takes to achieve her dream even if it meant putting her own life at stake and giving up something, she treasures a lot; her voice. Ariel eventually lives her dream life on land and is revelling in its glory when Ursula finds her with prince Eric and she would've missed the kiss of love. Ariel was seen as an important Disney character who encouraged her young audience to follow their dreams no matter what. Even though Ariel makes questionable choices throughout the movie, all her motives are directed towards her one desire of being able to live on the land. But Ariel becomes severely disabled according to the Mer-world as she loses the ability to talk or to swim, all for the man she loves. The character of Ursula was actually inspired from the drag shows that were famous then, she is the antagonist of the movie wherein she does anything to grab the power to rule over the seven seas. The portrayal of female characters in this movie is pretty strong and bold compared to all the other sweet looking Disney princesses and feeble women characters. The movie is considered progressive for its time where Disney infuses some radical ideas in the movies encouraging female liberation, women's emancipation even at a time when women were still considered as secondary class citizens. The movie was frequently viewed under the lens of feminism and it is also considered as a good movie to examine under critical disability theory which is dealt with in this paper.

3. Normative Exemplification of Disability in *The Little Mermaid*

The Little Mermaid came to the theatres during the Ronald Reagan era and played an imperative role in reviving Disney's reputation by saving it from definite death; this movie was instrumental in helping the company become the commercial juggernaut it is today. The movie was a huge success and was adored by movie critics; it grossed a profit of \$222 million worldwide. At the outset, reviewers destined the movie as "immortal", and the New York Times' Janet Maslin lauded it as "the best animated Disney film in at least 30 years". The profits garnered from this movie were used for the energetic expansion of the Disney corporation into practically into every dimension of American existence; Disney parks, Luxury Hotels, Disney-MGM studios, and premium tourist attractions like the Splash Mountain and Typhoon Lagoon were launched and made capital for the corporate giant.

"If we are to achieve a richer culture, we must weave one in which each diverse human gift will find a fitting place." This comment by Margaret Mead highlights the value of acceptance and diversity in society. A fairy tale usually illustrates the society in a quirky manner in order to mirror it. Disability, on the other hand, is a factor that features heavily in fairy tales but is less fanciful (Seider, 2020). Every fairy tale is an expression of the social inclinations of the time it was written. In light of this knowledge, it is crucial to examine the history of impairment and the stigma associated with it (Seider, 2020). When the Grimm Brothers and Hans Christian Andersen started writing their fairy tales in the late 19th century, the prevalent attitude towards infirmities and disability, in general, was negative. As they started publishing, the stories underwent significant revisions; they modified their tales to match their surroundings better, as any good scholar would do. When they originally began, they did not write for a youthful readership, but as time went on, they began to do so.

4. Discussion

4.1 *The Denigrated Existence of Disabled People in Hans Christian Andersen's The Little Mermaid*

This folktale about mermaids is expected to have been influenced by sirens from Homer's *Odyssey* and the Selkies from the Celtic and Norse mythology. When Hans Christian Andersen wrote the fairy tale, it is clearly evident that he had used some elements from both these characters to give birth to his story's female lead mermaid. The sirens were known for their dulcet singing voices, and the selkies were beings who gave up their tails to have a relationship with the humans; Andersen's Mermaid was well acclaimed for her sweet voice, and she also had a compelling affinity towards the human world. When Disney decided to do an adaptation of this fairy tale, they were very careful to choose the best parts of the story; therefore, Disney's version of Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* is quite different from the original. There were some critical and cardinal changes that the producers made to suit the contemporary era, and those changes were of great consequence.

4.1.1 Disability as an Obstacle for Romance

The original fairy tale by Andersen is in many ways contradistinctive to the later movie version by Disney. The tale enforces pity and sympathy towards the Mermaid, and it also infantilizes her disability, but the most pivotal alteration is the ending of both the tales; Andersen's tale remains true to its primeval nature, making the Mermaid commit suicide due to unrequited love. The fact that the Mermaid is not given a happy ending in the story is quite intriguing because it reinforces the fact that disabled people cannot be loved; it makes them unworthy, and romance becomes an unseemly topic in the story for the Mermaid. The Mermaid is totally dehumanized before she commits suicide, and her social relationship with the prince and the human world is immediately broken (Zipes, 1995) after she is denied the prince's love. Usually, the fairy tales of the nineteenth-century place disabled people in a socially isolated situation, where they are doomed to fail when they seek a love life (Doberstein, 2019)

4.1.2 Affliction and Decimated Identity

The Mermaid undergoes a series of changes once she decides to transform into a human; Andersen explains the process as highly excruciating. Her trials do not end once she has transitioned from a mermaid to a human; she undergoes a very painful process for becoming a human. Andersen expresses the deep anguish that the Mermaid undergoes when her tail splits into two, giving rise to human legs. The Mermaid after transition becomes a metaphor for disability as she becomes abnormal in the human eyes. The fairy tale verbalizes her bodily denigration to a physical inability that can be surveyed as a locomotive disability, and she also sells her voice to the sea witch, surmising her as a speech-disabled person. Andersen is thus seen positioning the Mermaid in a sect of disability that the disabled community of the present century can closely relate to (Zipes, 1995).

The Mermaid is ready to go to all extremes to go to the human world, so she decides to go to the sea witch, who asks her for an unimaginable sacrifice. She is forced to give up her enchantingly beautiful voice in exchange for a pair of human legs. Zascavage asserts that it is usually women in fairy tales who are punished with aphasia or muteness; he also notes that "with the loss of voice came the loss of power, the disrespect of the community" (2014). The Mermaid's chances to express her love to prince Eric become very bleak, and with the time constraint, it almost becomes impossible. According to the agreement with the Sea witch, the Mermaid was doomed to die if she failed to win Eric's love, and the loss of voice made it even easier to bring the Mermaid to her final exit because she finally ends up committing suicide and becomes sea foam. It is believed that Andersen and his display of muteness or aphasia was indicative of the general attitudes that the able-bodied people expressed; the then society had a tendency to associate disability with obstacles, punishments, and unhappiness (Schmiesing, 2014).

Moreover, the Mermaid does not have a name in Andersen's tale; she is referred to only as "the mermaid" throughout the tale, whereas other characters have names. This implies that due to her disability, she is seen as someone without an identity; it reiterates the fact that disabled people are an "embodiment of corporeal insufficiency and deviance" (Thomson, 2017) and can thus be devalued in the society.

The Mermaid in the tale is othered because she cannot fit into the normal lifestyle of the human world; she struggles to fit into the royal castle of prince Eric. Even though the mermaid lets go of so many luxuries of her mer-world to be with Eric, she receives the love she rightfully deserves from Eric. Despite her many sacrifices, the prince does not reciprocate her love. He appreciates the Mermaid as a friend, but due to her muteness, he still treats her like a "less-than-a-human-creature" as he makes her sleep outside his bedroom on a velvet pillow like a pet dog. She tries communicating with the prince through gestures and body language, but he ignores all signals, as observed by Yenika-Agbaw (2011). The fairy tale seems to imply that spoken language, specifically, is better than non-normative means of communication like gestures and body language. The prince ultimately chooses to marry a princess who has no discernible limitations, despite the fact that the Mermaid is pretty and devoted (Grzelka, 2019). The Mermaid is seen

as an 'other' by the royal servants and the humans in general, she is seen as someone who does not know the lie of the land. Due to her new human legs, she is unable to walk properly and often slips, stumbles, and falls; this locomotive disability combined with her inability to speak is "construed as an 'alien condition' and heightens her 'otherness' and eventually puts her at the bottom of the social ladder, even below able-bodied animals" (Yenika-Agbaw, 2011).

The Mermaid's romantic rival in the tale is an able-bodied princess, with whom the prince falls head over heels in love. Even though the prince and the royalty were enamoured by the beauty of the princess, she was still seen as the 'other.' The prince had no romantic passions associated with the Mermaid, even though it was not fully because of her disability; it cannot be denied that her disability had a role to play in this. Even though the Mermaid was admired by all and had a good friendship with the prince, she remained outside the societal circle, and she was the unknown 'other' who did not gain legitimacy.

4.2 *The Movie Adaptation of The Little Mermaid (1989)*

Contrastingly, in Disney's remake of the story, the Mermaid and the prince have a happy ending; Ariel wins the love of prince Eric, and she becomes a human just like she had always wanted. The climax of the fairy tale and the movie is totally different, and the way the story proceeds in both genres are integral for understanding the society during Andersen's time and the period of the movie's release. The Mermaid Ariel, the female protagonist of the movie, becomes a metaphor for disabled people; the tale "resonates" with children and young audiences who feel different from their peers.

4.2.1 Beauty over Brains: Narrative Incorporation

While introducing the character of Ariel, Disney made sure that she was aesthetically very pleasing to behold. Like the usual romances of Disney, Princess Ariel is enchantingly beautiful before and after her transition. Conventionally, romances featuring disabled people are compensated by attributing them with "increased aesthetic, erotic and metaphoric significance to physical bodies" (Baldys, 2012). The attractions of Ariel are presented in flagrantly hyperbolic visuals and language. Princess Ariel is presented as a very witty, beautiful young girl who is very determined. Later, when prince Eric finds her on the shore, he is instantly attracted to her physical beauty; the first impressions of the disabled character are consciously tailored to be of 'physical boldness and attractiveness' (Baldys, 2012).

4.2.2 Disability Reconstructed

The fairy tale and the movie adaptation have so much in common, but many vital elements are subverted in the Disney movie. The movie emphasizes on showing a healthy romantic relationship between a disabled and non-disabled person; Disney showcases how Eric was ready to accept Ariel as his romantic partner even when she was mute. Except for Eric, all the others in the castle see Ariel as a liability; even though they admire her for her beauty, she is deemed undesirable to the royalty as she cannot talk and walk properly. Ariel in the movie is shown as a witty young woman right from her introduction. She manages to communicate effectively with Eric even though she is mute, there is no direct mention of the usage of a specially designed sign language in the movie, but Ariel is able to form a good bond with Eric.

4.2.3 Able-Bodiedness as a Desirable Feature

Prince Eric chooses the disguised sea witch Ursula and decides to marry her, even though he had a great relationship with Ariel. This decision subtly conveys the fact that, somehow, able-bodiedness is the ideal feature (Zascavage, 2014). The representation of the disabled Ariel and the able-bodied Vanessa is totally different; Ariel is consciously designed as a charmingly beautiful woman that everyone is awestruck by her beauty, but the disguised Ursula does not need such charm to attract the prince to her. The portrayal of disability in the movie highlights the 'otherness' of people with disabilities (Doberstein, 2019).

4.2.4 Inclusion and Magical Reality

Able-bodiedness is portrayed within the movie as an ideal state that completes or makes a person whole, and that ideal state can only be realized through a 'Magical reality' (Schmiesing, 2014; Kirkpatrick, 2009). Ariel, towards the end of the movie gains human legs and a human soul after many daring exploits and heroic acts by her father and prince Eric. After the sea witch Ursula is defeated by magic and unconditional sacrifice, Ariel regains her lost voice, making her fully able-bodied. Ariel emerges victorious in all her feats towards the climax of the movie; she marries the prince that she first fell in love with, gets the human legs that she desired, and got to live on the human ground that she was obsessed with all her life. Disney employs a final magical touch to the movie when they make Ariel get back her lost voice and give her permanent legs; that is seen as a miraculous cure given to her to make her just fully able-bodied and thus blurring the differences.

4.2.5 Disabled 'Other' as Inferior

Ariel, even though she is one of the mermaid princesses, always has someone instructing and directing her on what to

do. After she reaches the human world, her disability makes her place in the social strata even bleak; Prince Eric and Grimsby attempt to control her speech, appearance, and actions (Doberstein, 2019; Smith, 2015). Her knowledge of the human world is remarkably inadequate; Ariel relies on the badly astute seagull, Scuttle, to teach her the uses and names of the human things she had gathered. When Ariel willingly disables herself to win over the love of prince Eric, this half-baked knowledge does not help her much; she was totally wrong about most of the things, like combing her hair with a fork. These struggles weigh down her opportunity, even more, when she tries socializing with the humans (Mattingly, 2003).

5. Conclusion

Disney being a global commodity, provides a very rich ground for knowledge acquirement and social skill development in both children and adults. Disney and fairy tales share a common ground when it comes to producing family culture, which mostly turns out to be the guidelines for everyday life. The level of influence that stories have in the minds of children is exorbitantly high, and thus, the representation of social groups and individuals is of paramount gravity. The way Ariel and the Mermaid are portrayed in the movie and fairy tale, respectively is not very similar, but when it comes to disability, the treatment of the disabled female protagonist is not very accommodative.

Ariel and the Little Mermaid are both used as metaphors for navigating romance as a disabled person; even though the disability is not very severe or inexorable, there is an infantilization of disability in both the fairy tale and the movie. There are myriad artifacts in the plot of *The Little Mermaid* that point toward able-bodiedness being a desirable trait; Ariel getting her legs and lost voice and marrying the man of her dreams only after getting her voice back in the movie somehow communicates that able-bodiedness is an intricate piece of patch in the fabric of a successful social life. The core plot of Hans Christian Andersen's tale conveys that disabled people have huge hurdles to overcome in order to lead a 'normal' life; the Mermaid in the narrative is representative of the disabled community throughout the tale and the movie, and she is treated as an outsider even after she transitions to a human being with legs. The Mermaid has to grapple and combat all through to win the love of the prince, which eventually does not come to fruition in the fairy-tale but proves rewarding in the movie.

'More persons throughout the world see their lives through the prisms of the possible lives offered by mass media in all their forms. That is, fantasy is now a social practice; it enters, in a host of ways, into the fabrication of social lives for many people in many societies' (Appadurai, 1996). The influential exports of mass media and especially Disney in the contemporary world allows history and culture to be retold and rewritten; the treatment and acceptance of stigmatized identities and subaltern groups can be made better with a more accommodative and inclusive narrative. An unvarnished representation of minority groups is the "key to reimagining our society as one that accepts all people" (Doberstein, 2019). The unspoken hunger for difference can only be blurred when erroneous and flawed representations that offer limited versions of the reality of disability are challenged.

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