THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Femininity and Audience: A Study on the Audience Perceptions on Construction of Femininity in Fantasy Films

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Abstract:
Fantasy movies have a huge audience fan base. The money involved in the production of these movies was met by the large revenue generated by them. The unnatural world created by the visual effects draw the attention and interest of many movie lovers. Nevertheless, the gender portrayal of these movies follow the pattern of the movies of other genres. The femininity and masculinity propagated by these movies are abided by the rules of the patriarchal society. This research study aims to find out the audience perception about the femininity in the fantasy movies. In order to obtain a deeper understanding, focus group was used as a method to examine the attitudes of the audiences pertaining to the femininity portrayed in the high fantasy movies. The results presented the understanding and opinion of the audiences with respect to the roles and characteristics of female characters in top rated fantasy movies.

Keywords: Gender portrayal, femininity, audience perception, fantasy films

1. Introduction

Extensive research studies have explored the influence of media on viewers. The communicators employ print and visual media as a tool to manipulate the minds of the audiences. These are also used to propagate various ideologies through manifest and latent meanings conveyed by the media text. Movie makers have explored the reach and glamour of the silver screen to influence the spectators all over the world. Fantasy films which is built on an imaginary world also acts as a means to propagate the ideologies of the society.

Fantasy films often offer an escape route from the real world. The audience get absorbed in the imaginary world created by the visual effects and computer generated images. The narrative of these movies contain sorcerers, spells, swords, mythical creatures, and are often involved with some kind of magic which does not happen in the real world (Fowkes, 2010).

Gender portrayal in media has always evoked the interests of researchers. Gender is a significant element in the functioning of the society and hence the depiction of gender demands huge attention from academic and non-academic world. Many researchers distinguish gender from sex. Sex is considered as biological and gender as behavioural (Unger, 1979). It has different uses both socially and anatomically (Haslanger, 2000). Butler treats gender as "performance" (Butler, 1990).Many researchers argue that gender is a social construction. It refers to personal and psychological characteristics which are determined socially (Garett, 1987).

The term gender is explained in terms of masculinity and femininity and the qualities which are used to describe these concepts. Researchers have tried to examine the qualities which defines femininity and masculinity as ascribed by the society (Bem, 1974; Basu, 2010; Basu, Dasgupta, Chakraborty, & Basu, 2012).

The masculinity and femininity find its explanations from the behavioural traits exposed by people in various situations in their lives (Maccoby, 1998). Yet, these qualities are highly individualistic. The qualities other than those generated through physiological attributes are interchangeable between men and women. However, the prescription of gender roles and traits by the society and culture are strong enough to make individuals obey the general rules for the acceptance of the society (Courtenay, 2000).

Media is instrumental in maintaining the perception of gender roles and behaviour in the society. Movies exhibit the rules concerning masculinity and femininity and thus teaches the audiences through the depiction of characters who adhere to the traditional concepts of gender. Fantasy movies, though has a story line happening on a fictional world, follow the general rules regarding the propagation of the patriarchal society.

This paper analyses the perception of the audience regarding the gender constructions in fantasy films. The understanding and opinion of the audience regarding the characters of fantasy films are analysed through the method of focus group.

2. Review of Literature

Extensive research provides evidence that the number of male characters are significantly higher than number of female characters in movies (Smith & Cook, 2008; Lauzen & Dozier, 2002). Though there is considerable escalation in the status of women in the society, movies still stereotype the gender roles. The physical appearance of female characters is also given undue attention in the movies (Lauzen & Dozier, 2002; Steinke, 2005). They are depicted as thin, beautiful and glamorous and mostly with minimal clothing (Smith & Cook, 2008).

The society considers some qualities as feminine and some as masculine depending on common understanding and stereotypic perception (Watzlawik, 2009). The members of particular culture and society are demanded to be in coherence with these rules and norms imparted at a particular point of time.

Men are assumed to be active, ambitious, competitive, independent, brave and technologically oriented, women are expected to be compassionate, passive, dependent on others, emotional and sensitive (Bem, 1974; Watzlawik, 2009; Basu, Dasgupta, Chakraborty, & Basu, 2012).

Female characteristics ascribed by the society are also reinforced and strengthened by the movies (Steinke, 2005).The movies portray men as more career oriented and women as relationship oriented (Steinke, 2005; Smith & Cook, 2008). Women are shown to be sacrificing their career for love and relationships whereas men always uphold their ambition in career progression.

Images of femininity promoted by the movies are those of parenting, nurturing, romantic, committed and emotional women whereas the masculine images are endorsing strong, powerful, assertive and intelligent men (Connell, 2009; Milestone & Meyer, 2012).

The construction and maintenance of femininity and masculinity are not different in fantasy films from films of any other genre. There is significant rise in the number of female characters in fantasy films than before. Yet, they are also depicted as sexually appealing and physically attractive (Byerly & Ross, 2006; Dehchenari, Abdullah, & Eng, 2014).

The female protagonists who are strong and powerful are portrayed in sexually appealing body shape paving way for male gaze and voyeurism. Xena, the warrior princess and Natasha of the Avengers are both strong female heroines who wear minimal clothing which expose their skin (Byerly & Ross, 2006; Dutt, 2013). The fantasy heroine, Wonder Woman is also pictured in sex typical body shape (Emad, 2006).

In most of the fantasy films the female characters possess supporting roles for male protagonists or antagonists. They are shown to be assisting heroes or portrayed as their love interests or as princesses in distress (Byerly & Ross, 2006; Lopez, 2010).

The fantasy movies draw in huge audience and fan bases making huge revenue (Thompson, 2007). The impact created by these movies are significant because of the inclusion of children and young adults as the target audience. The influence created by handsome and beautiful male and female characters are huge. In a study done by Barker (2005), many young girls watched Lord of the Rings trilogy because of the presence of Orlando Bloom as Legolas. The female protagonist, Eowyn, was liked by the audiences for her bravery and selflessness (Barker, 2005).

The differences in the representation of female and male characters affect the perception of audience about status of men and women in the society (Smith & Cook, 2008). Images constructed by the media creates misinterpretation of age and gender in the minds of the audiences (Lauzen & Dozier, 2002). This paper attempts to find out the perception of audiences with respect to the characters of fantasy films.

3. Objectives

    i.   To examine the perception of the audience regarding the gender roles played by the female characters in fantasy films.
    ii.   To analyse the audience perception with respect to the character portrayal in fantasy films.

4. Methodology

The research paper adopted focus group as the method for analysing the audience perception. The focus group discussion allowed gathering of general understanding about the topic of discussion. This helped to get more information about the audience perception and generated variables for a detailed future research.

Five groups of twelve members were selected using simple random sampling. Each group consisted of audience from different age groups from ten to fifteen, fifteen to twenty, twenty to thirty, thirty to forty and above forty years of age.

The characters were identified from the high fantasy movies released in the period from 2000 to 2015 and having the most number of users' ratings. The movies selected were Lord of the Rings trilogy, The Hobbit trilogy and the Harry Potter series. The primary female characters who have a major function to perform in the narrative were selected for discussion.

The female characters selected for analysis were Eowyn, Arwen, Lady Galadriel (The Lord of the Rings), Tauriel, Hermione Granger, Minerva McGonagall, Ginny Weasley, Molly Weasley, Bellatrix Lestrange, Narcissa Malfoy, Lady Galadriel (The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey).

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Characterisation and Gender Roles

The portrayal of female and male characters in the high fantasy movies generated discussion among the focus groups. One of the major characteristics discussed was the gender roles strongly pictured in these movies. The heterosexual division of labour was highlighted in the discussion.

- The groups felt that the female characters in The Lord of the Rings trilogy were not given much importance. The boys belonging to the age group of ten to fifteen and fifteen to twenty did not regard the female characters in the movies with any significant role to play. However, the girls of the same age groups commented that their interest was aroused by Arwen and Eowyn by adopting a position in their interest even while the interests clashed with those of their male protectors including father, brother or uncle. These group of girls belonged to the adolescent age and they usually have a romantic perception about life and its various aspects. When Arwen took a stern position pertaining to her love life even against the wishes of her father, they saw it as an expression of her independence and the strength of her will. The members of the other age groups pointed out the deteriorating strength of Arwen in the three movies. The first movie of the trilogy depicted her as brave and adventurous by rescuing Frodo from the Nazguls while in the second and third she was shown to be weak and as a damsel in distress. Moreover, following the formula of movies of various genres, her wellbeing acted as a catalyst for her lover to win the final war and her father to help him in doing so. Thus according to the audiences, the traditional roles of heroines depicted by movies are reinforced by the character, Arwen, as the hero's love interest, as his motivation in winning over the antagonist and to become his queen at the end and live life happily thereafter.
- The groups above the age of twenty found Eowyn to be independent, but found that her portrayal emphasized the need for a companion to fulfil her wishes. Moreover, though, superficially she was shown to be brave, deeper analysis could show that she was not courageous enough. One of the members between the age group of thirty and forty emphasized that her being shown with Merry in the battle with occasional shots of terrified face clashed with the character traits of Eowyn in the book, Lord of the Rings, written by Tolkien from which the movies were adapted.
- The audiences had mixed responses about Galadriel. Some found her as eerie and supernatural, some found her soothing and spiritual. The power to foresee the future and to have telepathic conversation made her special for many audiences. The white light which followed her shots made her weird for some audiences. However, the role of Galadriel too matched with the traditional gender role, according to the members of the groups. She was depicted as a woman who could offer shelter and advice to the ones who were lost.
- The depiction of Galadriel in The Hobbit trilogy also aroused varied opinions about her. Some audiences perceived her as strong, by mentioning the scene in which she fights with the Dark Lord. But some members of the group saw her to be dependent on men like Saruman, Gandalf and Lord Elrond. However only a few had this outlook about Galadriel. Most of the audiences perceived her as powerful.
- Tauriel was perceived as a strong character by all age groups, both men and women. The audiences felt that her role was a deviation from the usual gender roles performed by women. Her portrayal as a warrior and her skill with the blade was shown to be extraordinary. Yet, she is not noble and does not enjoy higher status among elves. This is a repetition of showing the queens and princesses to be weak and women of the lower strata to be strong. However, audience above the age of thirty, felt that the need for the male companionship is repeated in the case of Tauriel also, exposing her femininity in the form of love towards Kili.
- Regarding the role of protagonists in the Harry Potter movies, most of the group members had the opinion that girls and women in Harry Potter movies were assigned the traditional gender roles. They gave the instances of Hermione, Ginny Weasley, Molly Weasley, Narcissa Malfoy to substantiate this claim. While Harry and Ron are often required to respond to the exigencies of the moment, Hermione is often found to rely on knowledge from books. Other characters like Molly Weasley and Narcissa Malfoy can be seen to be mothers principally engaged in managing their household and caring for their family. Harry Potter movies depicted more female characters than any other movie under discussion.

5.2. Female Protagonists as 'the Other'
- The audiences observed that the female characters did not have much functions compared to their male counterparts. They performed the roles of supporting the heroes or the male protagonists and their roles were defined with respect to the roles of male characters. This argument was in line with the concept of "other" put forward by Simone de Beauvoir (De Beauvoir, 2011). The narrative revolves around the male characters.
- The groups stated that the heroines, especially the lovers of the heroes did not appear in the battlefield. The lover of Harry Potter seemed to be removed from the sphere of action and being pushed into the periphery. The lover of Aragorn, Arwen, also did not come to the forefront. She waited for Aragorn to come back after being victorious in the war, sacrificing her immortality. This is in accordance with the patriarchal imagery that the society even today subscribes to.
- Nurturing and protective nature of women was celebrated in Harry Potter series. The audiences stressed that through Molly Weasley and Narcissa Malfoy, the protective nature of the women were picturised in these movies. Some of the audiences suggested that Aunt Petunia also showed maternal feelings towards her son. Galadriel, in the movie, Lord of the Rings, also exhibited her protective nature towards Frodo.
- According to most of the audiences, Hermione in the movies were more attractive and better looking than Hermione in the book. This could be because of the perception that in movies the female characters should have attractive physical traits. Even fantasy films were not exceptions. In Lord of the Rings and the Hobbitall female characters were beautiful, fair, young and with long and wavy hair.
- The audiences felt that in the Harry Potter series some of the female characters were portrayed homemakers. They were shown to be at home, taking care of their children and husbands. They went to the fights only when situation demanded. Audiences stated that many of them were not portrayed to be working.

- • The settings in which characters were depicted had great significance in the construction of gender. Members of the groups stated that most of the female characters are either shown indoors or in idyllic settings. In Lord of the Rings, Galadriel and Arwen were shown indoors whereas Eowyn could n be seen with the men in their battlefields. But most of the men were portrayed outside.

6. Conclusion

Creativity is in its abundance in fantasy stories and movies. Yet, the portrayal of female characters still follows the formula of traditional gender roles depiction. The ideologies of a patriarchal society are maintained through these movies. Since these movies are watched by audiences of all age groups, it could be concluded that these ideologies diffuse into everyone regardless of age, sex and income.

The focus group discussions could bring out preliminary information about the perception of the audiences. The construction of femininity was achieved through various components. The female protagonists share a little screen time when compared with male characters. The audiences perceive the gender roles portrayed by the female characters in these movies.

The social construction of femininity was evident in the movies. The fantasy films where the stories unfolded in a magical world were no different from movies which portrayed real life characters, with respect to the dissemination of femininity.

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