

Illusions of Romance: Trauma Bonding and Stockholm Syndrome in Disney's Beauty and the Beast (2017) and Tangled (2010)

Agnaya Santhosh

M.A English Literature

PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore

Dr Brinda Padmanabhan

Assistant Professor

PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore

Abstract

While Disney movies are commonly perceived as entertainment within the Hollywood cinema industry, closer analysis reveals that these films often embed psychological themes, which can transmit misleading messages to young audiences. This interdisciplinary paper argues that Disney manipulates young viewers' perception of romance by portraying it as a mechanism of control, specifically through the analysis of *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) and *Tangled* (2010). By applying trauma bonding theory and patterns of abusive relationships, this paper demonstrates how the narratives of these films may lead young viewers to associate love with control, thereby accepting distorted relationship dynamics, particularly those involving entrapment and dependence on the captor. The analysis illustrates that the heroines in *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) and *Tangled* (2010) develop emotional bonds with their captors as a survival mechanism, displaying symptoms resembling Stockholm syndrome.

Keywords: Disney, Stockholm Syndrome, Captor, Relationships, Romance, Trauma bonding theory, Beauty and the beast, Tangled.

Disney has significantly influenced global entertainment through films with complex psychological elements, shaping young audiences' understanding of love and romance. The studio uses characters experiencing isolation, trauma, and conflict as the basis for fantasy stories. Disney has set a universal standard for romance, often depicting heroines such as Rapunzel and Belle as isolated or captive and reliant on male rescuers, thereby reinforcing stereotypes of female vulnerability and male problem-solvers. Judith Herman's "Trauma and Recovery" (1992) explains how prolonged captivity can lead to emotional manipulation, which is often misread by hostages as a genuine connection. This theory helps explain the trauma bonding evident in Rapunzel's and Belle's relationships with their captors (Herman, 1992).

This behaviour is best described using Stockholm syndrome, analyzed through the lens of trauma bonding. It describes a situation where the hostage develops a sympathetic, emotional, and defensive connection towards their captors. The term itself originated in the year 1973 during a bank robbery in Stockholm, Sweden, where the bank employees were kept hostage for six days. It was reported that one of the hostages refused to take help from the police, who offered help and defended, and felt safer with the captor refusing to cooperate with the rescuers. This behaviour of the hostage left psychologists and criminologists, such as Nils Beejot, who later coined the term to describe this unusual behaviour. These behaviours include the development of an emotional bond with the captor, not trusting law enforcement and other authorities, sharing positive feelings, and a refusal to escape despite having opportunities. This syndrome arises from the survival instinct, where the victim's defense mechanism leads to seeing captors' small kindnesses as significant gestures of care. It is then combined with a state of learned helplessness

developed from dependence on the captor, therefore developing a powerful emotional attachment as a means of coping with the stress and terror being experienced by the victim.

Stockholm syndrome can be applied to characters Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) and Rapunzel from *Tangled* (2010), who develop emotional bonding and affection as a survival instinct towards their captors. Initially, the characters resist confinement and then gradually submit themselves and sympathize with their captors as the trauma bond finds its place in the characters' minds. These emotional bonds occur as a result of captors displaying phases of vulnerability, which are then misread and rationalized by the heroines of the narratives. The captors make use of this behaviour to their advantage by justifying their actions. In the movie *Tangled* (2010), Mother Gothel frames Rapunzel's captivity as a form of protection from the dangerous world, thereby fulfilling her selfish motives through Rapunzel's imprisonment.

A comparative analysis of *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) live-action adaptation, directed by Bill Condon, against the original literary source reveals the narrative shifts while actively reinforcing the trauma bonding theory, along with Stockholm syndrome. In the live-action film, Belle is the daughter of a wealthy merchant, ostracized by the village. Along with a deep exploration of the Beast curse, a symbol of a magical rose with a countdown shifts the climactic focus. The original source gave importance to obedience and inner virtue, while the 2017 version emphasizes themes of feminism, personal growth, and a critique of toxic masculinity. In the 2017 version, Belle's confession of love towards the Beast ends the curse and brings the Beast back to life, whereas in the original literary work, Belle's acceptance of the marriage proposal leads to the Beast's transformation and their union. This type of narrative film has the potential to portray control as an intense form of love. Such a portrayal of unhealthy relationship dynamics fosters the

misconception that a submissive partner should tolerate harmful behaviours, thereby idealizing imbalanced dynamics. The heroines in these narratives do not typically seek rescue; instead, they develop an emotional bond with their captor. This can impart a reckless lesson to young minds, where women should endure harmful relationships to maintain their relationship with their partners. This type of relationship is founded on captivity rather than mutual choice.

In *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) live-action adaptation, trauma bonding is very evident from the beginning. Belle does not enter the castle because she wanted to offer herself as a sacrifice in the place of her father, who trespassed on the Beast's castle. Initially, the Beast is pictured as arrogant, stubborn, and emotionally stable, setting a dynamic of captor and captive situation. It is due to the captivity that their relationship begins. As time goes by, Belle does not resist her captivity and develops an emotional bond with the Beast. From trauma bonding perspectives, his small gestures, like granting access to his library or providing new clothes, are interpreted as kindness in the eyes of Belle. All these actions of the Beast are perceived as care by Belle, who is vulnerable and isolated from the rest of the world, leading her to develop sympathetic feelings and attachment towards the captor, which is a classic Stockholm syndrome indicator. The 2017 live-action narrative of *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) is drastically contrasting to the original 1740 literary version of “*La Belle et La Bête*” by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeuave. In the book version, Beast is gentle and courteous from the beginning, in contrast to Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), not cruel or arrogant. Even when Belle decides to leave Beast, he supports her dreams. Disney's deliberate removal of such significant acts and replacement with a crude version of control over the heroine was intended to create dramatic tension and impart misleading ideas. This adaptation of Disney utilizes the emotional attachment between captor

and captive, thereby aligning with the symptoms of Stockholm syndrome, contrasting with the original tale of mutual respect and voluntary affection.

Disney's Tangled (2010) shares a similar dynamic nature, yet in a different way. Unlike Belle's captivity, Rapunzel's captivity begins in her infancy, with her captor, Mother Gothel, who keeps her imprisoned in the false wall of protection. Gothel's manipulations are carefully developed to create dependence on Rapunzel. The reinforcement was masterfully crafted so that when Rapunzel leaves the tower, she feels both guilt and anxiety despite escaping her abusive relationship, where her perspective has become distorted in favour of Gothel. Rapunzel breaks free from her captivity upon forming a connection with Flynn Rider and discovering the world, which shatters the image created by her captor in her mind. This portrayal is in contrast with Disney's Tangled (2010) version. In the Brothers Grimm's 1812 version of "Rapunzel," the witch is pictured as a guardian. There was no emotional bond developed between them. Rapunzel does not feel any guilt about leaving the witch, unlike the Disney version, Tangled (2010). The Grimms' character made her own escape and was an independent figure, not a victim of manipulation. Disney's adaptation significantly alters it and creates an emotionally abusive relationship, and serves as a clear case study in the development of trauma bond.

There are several solutions to address this issue, like creating a change in the way films are consumed by the audience. Creators can write a story where abuse is not promoted as romance, and should be praised. Modern storytelling should focus on developing mutual respect as well as spreading awareness among children and young adults to analyse media to help them identify red flags and not consume the content passively. There should be a shift from passive consumption of the content to active questioning.

In conclusion, the article works on the contemporary Disney films, especially *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) and *Tangled* (2010), portraying relationships rooted in captivity and showcasing them as romance. thereby suggests an underlying psychological aspect, such as Stockholm syndrome. This narrative shows emotional dependence and captivity as the basis of a love story, blurring lines of genuine affection. It highlights the need to bring media literacy, encouraging critical questions about genuine affection. These narratives often present a “happy ending” to young audiences, so it is important to deconstruct these works. Awareness of the difference between toxic and healthy relationships and taking essential steps to prevent the normalization of toxic relationship ideas as romantic should be taken into consideration.

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