

Disneyfying Her Looks

Analysing the Concept of Beauty, Femininity and Heroism Presented in *Moana*

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Abstract:

She is the fairest of all. Her skin is as white as snow, lips as red as blood and hair as black as ebony wood. She is Snow White, the princess who got famous through Grimm Tales which was recreated as their first and foremost feature films by Walt Disney in the year 1937. Then they brought onscreen a line of delicate princesses through their feature films, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Tangled Ever After*, *Frozen* and the saga continues bringing before us their 56th movie released in the year 2016, presenting Moana who has gracefully subverted the so-called concept of beauty and femininity. Disney productions have practiced it even before *Moana*, to be precise in the year 2012 with its *Brave* which also had made a novel break in the conventional presentation of delicate Disney princesses with Merida, the Scottish princess of the medieval era. Merida was the first self-reliant Disney heroine. Moana again is a true example of Disney's third wave feminism wherein she, unlike other Disney princesses, comes in the form of a fearless sixteen year old who, hates being called a princess and defies her father who forbids her from venturing into the vast ocean to save her island from ruin. The paper thus is trying to focus on the change that has come in the visualisation and perception of the so-called concept of beauty that Disney is trying to bring out through its *Moana* (2016).

Keywords: Beauty, Femininity, Heroism

In prehistoric times, the most vital facet in the selection of spouse was health. Any man or woman who is healthy was considered beautiful by not just men but by the society as a whole. Men to cope with hunting and family had to be tall and have a muscle mass. Women, on the other hand, to be able to cope with birth needed, full hips and large bosom. Hence, in an age when the weak had no much chance of survival, beauty was a healthy body, able to meet vital needs. Until fifth century BC, there was no clear definition as what beauty is. It is said that the so-called definition or concept of beauty is the result of evolution, that too of several centuries. Before the popularity of painting and sculpture, beauty was attributed to other virtues like truth, loyalty and harmony. And with the beginning creative arts such as painting and writing poetry, the artists and painters began to outline certain features which would help them to call something beautiful. Plato's "golden proportion" was the answer to the questions on beauty that was raised by Greek philosophers. The ideal face, according to Plato, is to be symmetrical that is, the ideal face width was considered as representing two-thirds of its length. Recently scientists have made a study on the

philosopher's finding and have concluded that he was right. This study is explained by the author in the book *Beauty: The Fortunes of an Ancient Greek Idea*. The Greeks along with the symmetry was obsessed with long blond hair too. They attributed those features to their goddesses, and later on, Romans borrowed these concepts of beauty. This is evident from the fact that women of Rome started using a peculiar kind of mixture to dye their hair to blond.

Later, in the Middle Ages, female beauty became a more complex phenomenon in the Western Europe. In that era women were just seen as physical challenge for men to win over. The clerics of the period held most of the oppositions against women. They were against the women's habit of wearing jewellery. Also, women, once they got married were forced to cover their head with a veil. Only virgins were allowed to show their hair. The popularity that was gained by blond hair was not appreciated during the era, and so blonde women started dyeing their colour to black. When Renaissance flowered and flourished, artists began to rebel against the oppositions laid by the clergy. The peculiarity that was widely seen and appreciated in the Renaissance period was the emergence of a new obsession in the art, namely the breast. Nudity began to get into even religious paintings, the most popular idea being the virgin breastfeeding the Child. The Virgin-Mother Mary's painting, though showing off the breast was seen as something very pure and devotional. Pale skin was seen as one of the ideas of beauty, but was replaced with reddened skin, which was till then unaccepted. Reddened cheeks were until then seen as sign of riots and sin. However, white cheeks were not fully removed from the idea of beauty, evident from the paintings drawn till the twentieth century. In the Tudor period, the fascination for large breasts shifted to small breasts, as that was considered to be healthier than the previous one. In order to cover their bosom women started to wear clothes that kept them tied down. Then came up the age of Puritans in which women were seen as just physical objects of bodily pleasure. Puritans marked makeup and dresses as sinful, and appreciated women's round forms. A century later this again changed. Beautiful women were those who were neither fat nor weak, with fragile waist. Hair was considered to be the most important accessory, and women of the age preferred large buns, bows, ribbons and feathers to decorate their hair. The family wealth was measured by the decorations on hair. Pale skin again became a fashion and size too became one of the features of beauty. The use of corset put women's health in danger, even more dangerous was the tool of iron that was used to straighten a woman's nose.

The concept of beauty again changed in the twentieth century. The era retained many of the painful customs of the Victorian era, but also introduced even more painful ones. Corrective underwear was one such bizarre one. Long hair gave way to short hair, that is, hair cut to the ears and bob haircut were considered fashionable. Then in the 30's straight hair cut was replaced with loose curls. Paris which was till then the capital of fashion lost its place and New York became the new capital of fashion. The change came as an after effect of Second World War. After the war, naturalness started getting appreciated and long hair again became a fashion. Long hair was then the most appreciated feminine character. It was in the 1960s with the photo of model Twiggy, that beauty got defined on the basis of sexuality and fame. Therefore, plastic and cosmetic surgery became two important tools in reaching the ideal of beauty. The concept of beauty during the twenty first century is taken to extremes, wherein everything is acceptable and nothing is shameful. The concept of beauty became the attitude of the one who carries it and who sees it. Recently, in some tests carried out by scientists of Hong Kong, certain limits are fixed which could assure a woman's health and sexual attraction.

Although all these are there in the books and are used to argue on the topic, beauty is still considered to be something matching to the notions that are forced upon our conscience by the western eyes. Even when one argue regarding the liking towards extremes, even when one argue that everything is beautiful, even when one argue that nothing is ugly, it is not the reality. The western notion still rules the world. No one calls a thorn beautiful, but a rose. No one. Still white is beautiful and black is ugly. Chubby cheeks, rosy lips, fair skin, blue eyes, blond hair, the list of the features of perfect beauty goes on. Still people look for that perfect symmetry, “the golden symmetry” of Plato. Now, when the topic of the discussion is taken into consideration one need to analyse the characters presented through the movie *Moana* by Disney Productions. The characters are subverting all those so-called notions of beauty, femininity and heroism. In the movie, one can see a mere mortal, a sixteen year old girl convincing the demigod to restore the heart of Te Fiti, fighting her father, the pirates, the giant crab and the demon Te Ka to save her people, to save her world. She along the way fulfils the ancient quest of her ancestors and discovers that one thing she always sought, her own identity.

Before getting more into this, one may need to go through the plot of the movie. The movie begins with Moana’s Grandma narrating a legend to kids. The legend is, in the beginning there was only ocean until the Mother Island emerged, Te Fiti. Her heart carried the power ever known. It could create life itself. She shared it with the world. In time, some began to seek Te Fiti’s heart and the power of creation. They believed that, if they possess it, the great power of creation would be theirs. One day the most daring of them all voyaged across the great ocean. He was a demigod of the wind and the sea. He was a shape-shifter, trickster and warrior. He had the power of his magical fish hook, he was Maui. Maui succeeded in stealing Te Fiti’s heart. Without her heart Te Fiti began to crumple. It gave birth to a terrible darkness, blight upon all that she has created with her power of creation. Maui tried to escape but was confronted by another who saw the heart, Te Ka, a lava demon of earth and fire. Maui was struck from the sky, and he lost his magical fish hook and the heart to the sea, not to be seen again. Te Ka and the demons of the sea are still searching for the heart. The darkness continues to spread leading to the destruction of the whole world. Grandma continues with a note of hope that one day somebody will journey beyond the reef to find Maui. He/She will deliver Maui across the sea, restore the heart of Te Fiti and save the world. The kids are eagerly listening to the legend, but terrified, except for Moana who is anxiously listening to each and every word that her Grandma said. Moana’s father, the chief of the village interrupts the age old tale telling “No one goes outside the reef. Motonui is paradise”. On the same day Moana happens to go to the sea side. The ocean befriends her by playing with her, and then gives her the heart. The audience realise that she is the chosen one. She is too little to realise all these and loses the heart. But there was somebody who was watching all these, and that was her Grandma.

Then the viewer is drawn to the life in the island through Moana’s childhood as a toddler till she becomes the sixteen year old Chieftain of the village. Moana has always been attracted to the ocean, but is unknown of her destiny. Her father reminds her every now and then that she is meant to be in the island as its people’s next great chief. He says, “Motou is all you need. Stay on the ground. Happiness is where you are”. He adds to it by telling her that the ocean is “too dangerous”. But her grandma is a different person who is always trying to make her understand what she really is. She says to Moana, “Listen to what the voice inside you tells you. Even if it is something just opposite to what your father said. The voice

inside you is what you are, what you really are". But every moment in their conversation comes in her father who draws her back to the island. He tells her about her responsibility and duty towards the people, of her duty to raise the whole island higher. He reminds her that it is time for her to be what her people want her to be. Moana is moved by what he said and decides to give off her fascination for the ocean. She tries her best to be what they want her to be, doing all that she could from teaching kids dance to taking decisions on the villagers' problems. Then she comes across a problem faced by the fishermen of the village, absence of fish in the entire lagoon. She suggests the chance of finding fish beyond the reef and this infuriates her father who shouts at her and the people around, "No one goes beyond the reef".

Moana is sad and grumpy from her father's response and is consoled by her mother who tells her of her father's youth when he like Moana was in love with the ocean and tried to cross the reef, but to lose his best friend in the sea. Here her mother calls the sea "unforgiving", adding to the fear they have of the waters. She says that her father couldn't save his friend but is hoping to save his daughter. She adds, "Sometimes who wish we were, what we wish we could, is just not what is meant to be". Moana brings out all her feelings through a song beginning as "staring at it as long as I can remember". She pulls her instinct and goes to the mountain, the sacred place where all the chiefs of the village placed a stone as a symbol of their duty towards their people. But fails in the attempt and is drawn back to the sea. She takes a canoe along with her pet Pua, the pig and tries to go beyond the reef. But she loses in her effort and manages to get back to the land. There watching all this was her grandma who helps her to know who he really is by taking her to the cavern where all the boats of her ancestors were stored secretly. Through the paintings and carvings on the boats she comes to know who her ancestors were, they were voyagers. To her question on why all these were not revealed to her grandma tells about the way the ocean changed after Maui took off Ta Feti's heart. Grandma also takes her to the seashore to make her realise that she is the chosen one by introducing her to the ever-friendly ocean and by handing over the heart of Ta Feti. Moana who doesn't know to sail runs to her father by screaming she knows the perfect solution for the villagers' problems. But the chief as usual is infuriated and goes to the cavern to burn all the boats, but the news regarding his mother's illness stops him. Grandma on her death bed insists Moana to journey beyond the reef, find Maui, deliver him across the great ocean, restore Ta Feti's heart and save the world.

Moana starts her voyage that very moment. This time she crosses the reef and the next day realises that she is not alone, and her other animal sidekick Heihei was with her. In an effort to save Heihei from drowning her boat is wrecked and she asks for the ocean's help but the storm washes her off to a different shore. There she wakes up the next morning to know that she is where Maui is. She meets Maui, the demigod, the shape-shifter, the trickster, more over the hero of men, women and children. Moana tells him about her mission, but is tricked by him. But she somehow manages to be with him in the boat. She shows him the heart and comprehends that he is scared of the heart. Maui tries to get off the boat but the ocean doesn't let him to. Then they confront the pirates Cocomora, and later wins back Maui's fish hook from the giant crab. Moana adds to Maui's spirits by telling him what he is meant to be, a hero. Maui then agrees to help her and teaches her to sail so that she can deliver him across the ocean. But Te Ka strikes on Maui's fish hook and he backs out from the mission. Moana then gives the heart back to the ocean but her grandma's spirit strengthens her by telling her what she is capable of. Moana, once again, goes for the world, and this time opens to the fact that Te Ka is none other than Te Fiti. She manages to restore the heart with the help of Maui

and saves the world. Te Fiti restores life; she shares her power of creation again and blesses the world. Also, she as the new great chief of the village teaches her people to sail and gives their real identity back. She not only restores the heart of Te Fiti but also her village's identity.

Moana is the first ever Polynesian Princess presented by Disney. She is a mere mortal who amazes the viewer every now and then, right from the beginning till the end. Her looks, if measured with the looks of other Disney princesses, she is different. The shade of her skin and features but are adding to her beauty thereby giving a new dimensions to the so-called concept of beauty. Also, in world where women are still marginalized, Disney is brave enough to present her as the chief of a whole village, a figure ready enough to lead both men and women, a figure that is being appreciated by her parents, a figure that is chosen by the ocean to do something that both men and women, including the demigod Maui were fearing to do till then. It is not for the first time that Disney is attempting this. The traditional line of delicate Disney princesses had a novel break with Merida, the Scottish Princess of the medieval era through *Brave*, released in the year 2012. She broke the stereotypes by defying an age-old custom, causing chaos in the kingdom by expressing the desire not to be betrothed. But her soul and spirit blazed as bright and rebellious as her fiery red hair. *Moana* can be considered the second in the line, after *Brave* to present a heroine who can win over anything without a soul mate to support her. Even Maui is there with her in her efforts, it's Moana who is stronger and will powered than Maui. She is the one who helps him get back to form. She is the one who adds to his spirits by comprehending all his weaknesses by convincing him to talk about his sad past of being a child abandoned by his parents and took care by the Gods. Her willpower and courage are evident right from the foremost frame showing her as a child who is amazed by the narration of the terrifying legend by her grandma, when all the other kids were screaming with fear. Her grandma because she acts different from all the other women of the village is tagged as the village crazy woman. Here, through the old woman, Disney shows the reality.

Any woman who goes beyond the rules set by the patriarchy is kept apart as crazy or mad. They are criticized and ignored. Grandma is a very good example for this. But when taken into consideration the whole village, she is the most sensible of them all, who acts as the guardian angel not just to the village but to the whole world. She foresees the perils to be faced by her village long before, and years later all those things become reality, in the form of rotten crops and absence of fish in the lagoon. When Te Fiti is considered, she is the epitome of purity and kindness. Once her heart is stolen by Maui, she changes into a different being, a very disastrous demon. Here the makers are tricky enough to change the gender, transforming the mother to a demon. Maui is the hero as well as the villain of the movie. His weapon, the magical fish hook, is what is making him what he is. Heroism using a fish hook is another way of breaking the stereotypes. Also, the figure of Maui is something to be considered. Unlike the children classics and other stories, *Moana* shows Maui as a very huge person, with very wild curly hair and tattoos covering his whole body. It is said that many fans of the demigod were taken aback when they saw him in the trailer. But with his big, very big figure, Maui has become the favourite of both kids and their parents who fell in love with the movie.

Moana is the true example of Disney's third wave feminism wherein she, unlike other Disney princesses, comes in the form of a fearless sixteen year old who, hates being called a princess and defies her father who forbids her from venturing into the vast ocean to save her island from ruin. Altogether, it can be said that, through its *Moana*, Disney have succeeded in

establishing that beautiful side of a princess, which is always considered by the world as ugly. The self-reliant princess, along with her people, her grandma and Maui is breaking all the stereotypes that are always accepted by the world. *Moana* is that hope that Disney is providing with the viewer to redo and rethink the established notion of beauty, heroism and femininity. A sixteen year old girl beating the pirates and the giant crab Tamatao, when even the demigod was scared of is commendable. She is beautiful in all possible ways. There is beauty in her courage. There is beauty in each and every dialogue she delivers. There is beauty in her victory. She is the real hero. She is the perfect definition of femininity. She is Moana.

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