

Let It Go: Representation of Early 21st Century Feminist Approach

Abstract

Media has played a significant role in revolutionizing women's lives over a period of time. It has made the audiences to focus on the wants and needs of females through various modes of communication, including cinema. Feminist theorists like Mary Wollstonecraft, Elaine Showalter and many more, in this regard, have been trying to provide women with respect and recognition, which all human beings must possess, through their writings. They highlighted the importance of various gender roles performed by women in relation to males in patriarchal society. Their writings have made the female community to rethink about their 'self' from a radical perspective. Moreover, this has made women to have realization and acceptance of their abilities and intellect, challenging the set male norms regarding positioning of women. The present study aims to bring the role of modern feminists to let go male chauvinistic approach regarding positioning of women and explain the perceptiveness of early twenty-first feminists in highlighting the aspects of women's personality beyond the walls set by the male gender. This study brings forth these aspects of development of modern feminist approach in the 21st century through the content analysis of the script of the Oscar Winning Walt Disney animated film, Frozen, released on 19th November 2013 worldwide and the analysis of the title sound track, Let it Go, which reveals the desires and perspectives of 21st century feminist tradition in broader spectrum. The study reveals that Jennifer Lee, the writer of the story, brings in Elsa and Anna as role models for women. It reaffirms the fact that women have their own criteria for measuring the sense of being perfect in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: *Feminism; Gynocriticism; Women and Gender; Women's writings; Media*

INTRODUCTION

The title of the current study, *Let it Go*, has been extracted from the soundtrack of the Walt Disney animated movie, *Frozen* directed by Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee. It is a

Dr. Farah Hashmi

Lecturer, Department of English

National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad

E-mail: farahhashmi1@hotmail.com

3D computer animated musical fairy-tale motion picture, released by Walt Disney Pictures. It has been inspired from the enchanted Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen*. The story of *The Snow Queen* underwent many changes and finally the screenplay was written by Jennifer Lee, with the title, *Frozen*. It was an animated melodramatic movie, therefore, Kristen Bell, Idina Menzel, Jonathan Groff, Josh Gad, Santino Fontana and Christopher Beck had to give voice to the characters to enhance the sensational aura of the story. The directors of the movie hired Kristen Anderson Lopez and Robert Lopez to write and compose a song for the movie, which is very popular now-a-days. It is the highest grossing animated film of all times, which has been awarded two Academy Awards for preeminent animated picture and paramount original sound track, *Let it go*. It has also been the victor of two critic's choice awards for the song and the features as well. The rapid growth of the popularity of the film among the viewer's especially among the female viewers allowed me to find out the answer to the following questions posed in this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study is of great significance because it aims to recognize the reasons of popularity of the movie and critic's opinion. It has been currently released and has been the highest grossing animated movie of all times and has accumulated \$1.3 billion world-wide at the box office in a year. This movie has earned appreciation in terms of the features, themes and the lyrics of the movie. It is a story of two Sisters, *Anna* and *Elsa*, who were the princesses of Arendelle. Elsa, the princess of Arendelle was bestowed with cryo-kinetic clout which made her to produce ice, frost and snow at her will. One night, Princess Elsa accidentally injures her sister Princess Anna by freezing only a portion of her hair. The parents become so frightened that they take them to the Troll king who erases the Anna's memory about her sister's magic. Elsa becomes so frightened that she isolates herself because of the fear of harming her sister. When the girls are in their teenage, their parents die in a ship wreck caused by the storm. When Elsa comes to an age, the kingdom prepares for her coronation as Queen of Arendelle. In the ceremony, numbers of guests are invited including the Duke of Weselton, who seeks to exploit Arendelle for profit. On that day, Anna, the younger sister who is cute young and full of fantasized ideals about love meets Prince Hans of the Southern Isles and decides to marry him. On the other hand, Elsa worries that the world may not be ready to accept her ability. Elsa refuses to grant her permission to marry Prince Hans. The argument between the two sisters culminates in the exposure of her ability. Elsa becomes frightened and flees towards the mountains. She becomes fierce and casts off the restraints and builds a solitary ice palace. During her journey towards the mountains, she sings a song titled, *Let it Go* which is marked as the anthem of the early 21st century feminists.

Shotwell (2013) argued that initially the song was written and sung to cater children and would create good inspirational vibes. It contains anthemic powers and highlights a vision. The Song serves the transitional purpose in the story, when Elsa, the Snow Queen is ready to embrace which she was gifted with. The happiness comes from within her and she uplifts her confidence dashing away all the fears from the society. She understands her objective in life that she will be more alive and happier if she embraces the features which are part of her. He also argued that the original version of the song and lyrics were more power and intensifying that it touches the heart of the listeners and viewers (“Let it Go”, 2013). The Oscar Winning song ‘*Let it Go*’ remained as the No.1 soundtrack for nine weeks on the US music chart. It made “Frozen” the highest grossing animated movie feeling the mind of the people with unprecedented obsession. Kermode (2014) argued about the lyrics of the song that, “It is a glimpse of the future, a vessel for secret knowledge...*Let it Go* is a bravura piece of the musical story telling: The nervous minor chords of the first verse, jumping to an emphatic major key with the line “Well now they know”; the frantic, pulse-quickenning syncopation of the bridge; the explosive leap of the chorus, mirrored in the animation’s rapid ascent; and the final imperious shrug of “The cold never bothered me anyway”. It’s uncommonly fast for a powerful ballad, 100-137 beats per minute”(“Why Frozen’s Let it Go is more than a Disney hit—it’s an adolescent aperitif”).

Anna leaves in the snow storm to bring Elsa back leaving Prince Hans in-charge of the kingdom of Arendelle. Anna meets an iceman, Kristoff and his reindeer, Sven and asks her to guide her to the North Mountain. On the journey, they encounter Olaf, Anna’s childhood snowman who tells her that he was Elsa magical creation and guides them to her palace. Elsa refuses to come back and Prince Hans calls her rage by taking Duke’s men to arrest her. Her rage and fear accidently strikes Anna’s heart and she starts to freeze to death. Kristoff and Olaf seek for help from the Troll. Troll tells him that unless it is thawed by an ‘act of true love’, she will be frozen forever. Believing this they take her to Prince Hans and begs her for a true kiss, there and then she finds the real truth about Hans. He refuses and confesses him to seize control of Arendelle’s throne and leaves her in the room to die. On the other hand, Elsa is arrested by Hans for killing Anna and put her in treason. Elsa escapes from the prison and heads out into the blizzard on the fjord. She is unable to control her power and it froze all Arendelle. Olaf comes to Anna and tells her that Kristoff was in love with her. He tells him that “there are people worth melting for” (Lee, 2014). Hans confronts Elsa telling her to be responsible for the death of her sister Anna. The storm ceases suddenly when Elsa is in despair giving a chance to Anna and Kristoff to find each other. However, Anna seeing Hans about to kill Elsa with the sword throws herself between the two as she just freezes blocking Hans attack. As Elsa grieves on her being frozen, Anna begins to defrost since her decision to sacrifice for her sister

was a true act of love. Elsa realizing love to be the controlling power thaws the kingdom and helps Olaf survive in summers. Hans is deported to Southern Isles to face punishment for the crimes against the royal family. Elsa cuts off all trade with Weselton. Anna and Kristoff stay together. The two sisters reconcile and decide never to shut the gates of the castle again. The Fairy tale story focused on the characterization of female characters which has well been appreciated by a large number of audiences. One major breakthrough was the composition of the song, *Let It Go* by songwriters Lopez and Anderson-Lopez, which forced the production team to re-conceptualize and rewrite Elsa as a far more complex, vulnerable, and sympathetic character (Lowman, 2013). In *The Daily Telegraph's* words, instead of the villain envisioned by the producers, the songwriters saw Elsa as “a scared girl struggling to control and come to terms with her gift” (Lucinda, 2014).

Lee (2014) recalled: “Bobby and Kristen said they were walking in Prospect Park and they just started talking about what it would feel like (to be Elsa). Forget villain. Just what it would feel like and this concept of letting out who she is[,] that she's kept to herself for so long[,] and she's alone and free, but then the sadness of the fact [*sic*] that the last moment is she's alone. It's not a perfect thing, but it's powerful” (August & Mckenna, 2014). Del Vecho explained that “Let It Go” changed Elsa into a person “ruled by fear and Anna was ruled by her own love of other people and her own drive,” which in turn caused Lee to “rewrite the first act and then that rippled through the entire movie. So that was when we really found the movie and who these characters were” (Achillies, 2014). Another major breakthrough was developing the plot twist that Prince Hans would be revealed as the film's true villain only near the end (Achillies, 2014). Hans was not even in the earliest drafts, then at first was not a villain, and after becoming one, was revealed to be evil much earlier in the plot. Del Vecho said, “We realized [what] was most important [was] if we were going to make the ending so surprising[,] you had to believe at one point that Hans was the answer ... [when] he's not the answer, it's Kristoff [I]f you can get the audience to leap ahead and think they have figured it out [,] you can surprise them by turning it the other way” (Achillies, 2014). Lee acknowledged that Hans was written as “sociopathic” and “twisted” throughout the final version (August & Mckenna, 2014). For example, Hans mirrors the behavior of the other characters: “He mirrors [Anna] and he's goofy with her ... [T]he Duke [of Weselton] is a jerk, so he's a jerk back. And with Elsa he's a hero” (August & Mckenna, 2014). It was difficult to lay the foundation for Anna's belated turn to Kristoff without also making Hans' betrayal of Anna too predictable, in that the audience had to “feel ... her feeling something but not quite understanding it ... Because the minute it is [understood,] it deflated” (August & Mckenna, 2014). At one point, Anna openly flirted with Kristoff upon first meeting him, but that was changed after studio chairman Alan F. Horn pointed out that it would confuse and annoy viewers since Anna was already engaged to Hans

(Branes, 2014). Lee had to work through the issue of how to write Anna's personality, in that some of her colleagues felt Anna should be more dysfunctional and co-dependent, like Vanellope von Schweetz in *Wreck-It Ralph* (Laporte, 2014). Lee disagreed with that position, but it took her almost a year to figure out how to convincingly articulate “this is what Anna’s journey is. No more than that. No less than that” (August & Mckenna, 2014).

In the end, Lee successfully argued Anna's journey should be presented as a simple coming-of-age story, “where she goes from having a naive view of life and love—because she’s lonely—to the most sophisticated and mature view of love, where she’s capable of the ultimate love, which is sacrifice”(Laporte, 2014). Lee also had to let go of some ideas that she liked, such as a scene portraying Anna and Elsa's relationship as teenagers, which did not work because they needed to maintain the separation between Anna and Elsa (Laporte, 2014). To construct Anna and Elsa's relationship as sisters, Lee found inspiration in her own relationship with her older sister. Lee said her older sister was “a big inspiration for Elsa,” called her “my Elsa” in an op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times*, and walked the red carpet with her at the 86th Academy Awards (Lee, 2014). Lee explained, “[h]aving to ... lose each other and then rediscover each other as adults that was a big part of my life” (August & Mckenna, 2014). This thing also reflected the presence of autobiographical element in this story. The production team also turned Olaf from Elsa's obnoxious sidekick into Anna's comically innocent sidekick. Lee's initial response to the original “mean” version of Olaf had been, “Kill the f-ing snowman,” and she found Olaf by far “the hardest character to deal with” (August & Mckenna, 2014). Elsa was observed as a female role model and most viewers found association with that character. Elsa has been described initially as a weak submissive and fragile girl who is unable to understand her powers and later develops the wisdom of handling her powers.

Research Question

Following research questions were formulated for the present study:

1. What is the significance of the dramatized fairy tale, *Frozen* written by Jennifer Lee?
2. What are different aspects of the 21st century feminist approach revealed in the story of *Frozen*?

Objectives

The objectives of the study are:

1. To recognize the abilities of women.
2. To analyze the plot of the story of the Movie, *Frozen*.
3. To highlight the radical perspective of 21st century feminists.

4. To cherish the elements of self-discovery and conscious building of women globally through media.

METHODOLOGY

Gynocriticism is one of the feminist theories established by Elaine Showalter. Elaine Showalter established this theory to explain the development of sub-cultures in our society. In this theory, she classifies three phases of women's writing. The first phase is known as 'Feminine Phase' which focused on imitation of male form of writings by the female writers. The second Phase is the 'Feminist phase' which focuses on women's rejection of the male standards and values for women's writings. They criticized the fixed gender roles of women in the society and showed disgust for negative stereotypes. The third phase is, Female phase, women writers started to focus on the theme of self-discovery and self-actualization and tried to produce a literature of their own. They aimed at improving the perception of women about themselves and the abilities they are gifted with. It was a more conscious raising journey dealing with distinctly feminine subject matter, shift in the gender roles and development program for women. This phase enables women to perceive and embrace their abilities, talents and values. It aims at the enlightenment of women in the early 21st century. This approach allows research to be conducted from the aspect of gyno-criticism.

DISCUSSION & ANALYSIS

Through the content analysis of the plot and characters of the screen play, the researcher tends to analyze the features of contemporary feminism using gynocriticism. It allows the readers to understand women's writing from women's perspective. This allows the researcher to perform content analysis of the screen play "Frozen". The story moves around the lives of two sisters, Elsa and Anna. This analysis brings out the art of the author, Jennifer Lee who accomplishes the task of bringing the lives of women into discussion. The movie lacks a hero which is usually of a male gender who finally takes the story to its climax and rescues the heroine but in this story, we do not find a male hero. Elsa and Anna go into the process of self-actualization and self-discovery about themselves and the concept of love. Elsa isolates herself in the room because of the fear of hurting her sister. She does not realize that it is love that forces her to close the doors for her sister to come near her. She is frightened by the power she is gifted with and finds it difficult to embrace them. Elsa has been characterized as strong character that is wise and confident but because of rage she is unable to control her power. She is gifted with the ability to cast snow and ice. Elsa is a character marked with intelligence and courage. The portrayal of her character is done as a strong woman who is unable to embrace her powers because of the fear of the people. She is frightened by the sheer response of

the society towards her ability. She is suffocated and her suffocation and frustration turns into a rage. She punishes herself by keeping her in isolation. In the modern society, we find women having extraordinary abilities but the pressures from the patriarchal society do not allow her to embrace them. Showalter (2003) argues that they are unable to recognize their powers, which are transformational and revolutionary. Elsa tends to reflect the urge of modern women of self-recognition by the society. Elsa's problem and rage is what brings in self-realization. The way of her perception re-shapes her life. She accidentally freezes her sister's heart and is ready to give in herself in treason. Elsa has a free soul. She is not ready to live in the shackles of the society. Her song has gained so much popularity in the early 21st century that it has become the anthem of the female gender.

Kermode (2014) quotes the film's director Jennifer Lee that "the minute we heard the song the first time, I knew that I had to rewrite the story of *'The Snow Queen'*, The Snow Queen was a traditional villain but the lyric completely re-shaped the plot of the story" (Why Frozen's "Let it Go", 2014). The writer of the song, Anderson Lopez said, "I was really excited to write an anthem that said, "Screw fear and shame, be yourself, be powerful" (Kermode, 2014). Robert Lopez also states that, "Whenever, he hears his daughter singing this song, it seems as if someone is calling for help and one day she will fight for her power and of better things (Kermode, 2014). Some critics viewed the song *'Let it Go'* as an irony because as long as she does not realize the damage, her excitement is gleefully ignorant. It is believed that the song, *Let it Go* provides freedom and liberty to young women (Kermode, 2014). Dana Stevens, movie critic argued, "Familiar sense of deflation every time that pulse-racing song culminates in a vision of female self- actualization" (Kermode, 2014).

Wayne Willis (2014) argued that the theme song of the movie can be seen as a strong mantra for adult people to live happier and healthier lives. In the human life there comes a time when we have to let go all the things that has been the cause of all grieves and wounds and you will feel comfortable with the acceptance of living with it (p.358). The writer of the song, Anderson Lopez, continuously makes use of the refrain "Let it Go". This refrain basically reflects upon the behavior of modern women. In the first stanza of the ballad, the authors of the song, Robert Lopez and Kristen Anderson Lopez, highlights the pain and frustration of a woman who has been blessed with power to perform but is being suffocated by the restraints of the society. The authors portray the conversion of that suffocation into a rage through an imagery of the wind and storm. As she says in the song,

The wind is howling like this swirling storm inside
Couldn't keep it in;
Heaven knows I've tried (Lines 5-7)

She herself says that she tried hard to stop that fury against the pain but cannot further keep it in her heart. The authors basically encompass the pain and helplessness of the woman in the era. They want to make a realization that the process of self-actualization has begun and the poets say,

Don't let them in,
 don't let them see
 Be the good girl you always have to be
 Conceal, don't feel,
 don't let them know
 Well now they know (Lines 8-13)

In the second stanza, the poets are much clear that Elsa is woman who is kind but highly frustrated and even though she wants to hide herself and stop to bother her-self but she can't help herself. She is a traditional woman from inside who would be a good girl if she remains in and does not disclose her talent but her conscious does not allow her to embrace such restraints and wants to let go whatever people would think of her. She does not bother about the cold attitude which she will receive from the people. As she says,

Let it go, let it go
 Can't hold it back anymore (Lines 14-15)

The poets make use of this refrain in order to reflect upon the intensity and determination for women in the 21st century. The same idea persists in the next three stanzas and in the sixth stanza, the poet puts the inner desires of the modern woman.

It's time to see what I can do
 To test the limits and break through
 No right, no wrong, no rules for me,
 I'm free!(Lines 26-29)

The song is in simple diction and is pregnant with the inner desires and aims of the modern women. The poets use Elsa, the Snow Queen as mouth piece to say that now this is the time to show your hidden talent without any fear and break through the restraints which this patriarchal society lays on the women and she motivates women to use all means to bring their talents in-front of the world. The real freedom of a woman comes from within her own self. The women will have to change the way they perceive themselves. They have to modify their thinking. And then she says,

My power flurries through the air into the ground
My soul is spiraling in frozen fractals all around
And one thought crystallizes like an icy blast
I'm never going back, the past is in the past (Lines 37-40)

The poets show the reaffirmation of Elsa's determination of exposing her powers and as she believes that her powers are getting stronger and stronger because of the idea of subjugation. She will never go back because time has changed and she has entered into a phase of self-discovery which is beautiful and comforting. Now she is ready to embrace what she has without tears in her eyes and be firm and strong. She will let go all the pains and grieves and will rise like the sun after the long night. It is a new day for her and "Perfect girl is gone". The poets tend to criticize the set norms of the society which keeps her in subjugation. And believes that Just like Elsa the women have realized about their identity and she is ready to bear the 'cold' behavior of society. As it said in the last stanza of the poem,

Let it go, let it go
And I'll rise like the break of dawn
Let it go, let it go
That perfect girl is gone
Here I stand
In the light of day
Let the storm rage on (Lines 41-47)

The writer stresses upon the freedom of women through characterization Elsa. Elsa is embodiment of women in 21st century who is confident, wise, conscious, authoritative and well aware of her abilities. She is not mean or hostile to human values and feelings yet she is provoked to do so. She keeps herself on the forum of self-actualization. She is the hero of her life. Her traditional role as a woman has changed from weak, hostile and domestic worker to strong, competent and majestic contributor to human relations. Some critics believe that the screenplay lacks the role of a true hero. The role basically has been modified because of the shift in the gender role. Elsa is both villain and hero of the story. Both Elsa and Anna perform the role of the hero but it does not have any male character who may serve as a rescuer. In the end of the story, Elsa finds the solution to her rage that is true act of love can bring life to normal and beautification of human relations. Anna seems to be an innocent and immature female character that is totally fantasized by the idea of love in the beginning of the story and decides to marry Prince Hans at their first meeting. But the same power of love brings her closer to her sister and frees them from their problems. Anna also goes through the process of self-actualization through the circumstances

and speech of the character of the snowman, Olaf on the analysis of the true situation. She gets hurt by her own sister's rage but she does not stop herself from rescuing her. She understands the meaning of true love when she listens to her heart and tries to save Elsa from Prince Hans attack. She becomes wise in not just saving her relation but her kingdom of Arendelle as well.

CONCLUSION

After critically analyzing the plot of the screen play, I have brought out the features of early 21st century feminist ideals about women. Firstly, Women are determined to enter in the new phase in this era. They have firmly decided to bring change by themselves in their lives. They are not going to wait for any godot and will work for their own self. Secondly, they have decided not to conceal themselves behind the walls of their own 'kingdoms' and let everyone know what capabilities do they hold and they are keen in making space for themselves in the world. Thirdly, this study asserts the modification of the gender roles performed by women. Through the analysis of the plot, it is asserted that Jennifer Lee, the writer of the story, brings in a role models for women in the form of the character, Elsa and Anna. Elsa, the Snow Queen, is sharp, talented and responsible whereas, Anna is a sweet, kind and generous. The writer has brought forth various aspects of a female personality through these characters. This study emphasizes on the fact that the new woman is not idealized and she is not deceptive about her 'self'. She has acquired the magic that lies in their individual subjectivities. It also revives the idea of 'sisterhood' during the second wave feminism. That is, women working together to benefit each other reflecting upon the relationship between Anna and Elsa. Fourthly, it relinquishes the ideals about the traditional women. It has shattered the ideals of a good girl or the 'perfect girl' according to the society. It reaffirms the fact that women have their own criteria for measuring the sense of being perfect in the twenty-first century. They are not ready to live in the shackles of the society that are biased against women. The roles of the women have been revised from inferiority to superiority, immature to mature and wise, weak to strong and suppressed to authoritative. The plot of the movie reveals all the above mentioned features which are highly transformational and revolutionary and are touching the heart of millions around the world through cinematic media. A similar kind of study can also be conducted in future to see the effects of the movie on Pakistani audience, especially Pakistani women.

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