Disney and religion

Religion

Disney and Religion: how Mulan and Aladdin differ in the portrayals of non-Western religions by Ada Tadmor Since the 1937 release of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, the first ever animated feature film, the Walt Disney Company has led the motion picture industry in the field of animation. While these films generally pivot on tales of adventure, love, friendship, family, or coming of age, religion and spirituality, oftentimes of non-Western origins, are omnipresent in numerous Disney narratives. 1998’s Mulan, and 1992’s Aladdin are no exception to this.

Both films introduce non-Christian religions and forms of spirituality in a highly integrated and pervasive manner. Set in ancient China, Mulan is the retelling of a Chinese folktale regarding a young woman named Fa Mulan who struggles to construct her identity amidst the confines of a highly traditional family and culture. When the Huns from Mongolia invade China, one man from every family is called to serve in the Imperial Army. Fearful that her father, still wounded from prior battle, would not survive another wartime, Mulan poses as a man to take his place in military service.

With the help of the dragon Mushu, a once sacred guardian inadvertently sent by Mulan’s ancestors to bring her home, Mulan ultimately not only saves the life of her father but all of China as well. Though mostly a heroine’s tale of bravery and perseverance, Mulan is entwined with references towards religion and spirituality. Notwithstanding that a particular religion is never identified in Mulan, the film is littered with many of the traditions, practices, and values of East Asian religions.

One such ubiquitous religious theme in the movie involves recurring prayer to, and mention of, the Fa family’s great ancestors. The ancestors

themselves even come to life, taking on a mystical ghost-like appearance to discuss how best to guide Mulan in her quest. Within the first eight minutes of the film viewers see Mulan, her father, and her mother, all either directly praying, or referring to praying, to their ancestors on at least one occasion.

Such appeals to the divine ancestors ensue from these characters and others as the film progresses. Other rather unambiguous illustrations of religion and spirituality include seeing the characters Yao and Chien-Po, eventual friends of Mulan, practicing religious meditation and chanting for relaxation. Apart from these explicit depictions of spirituality and sacred beings, many of the fundamental values and principles of Chinese religions of which I am familiar are paramount in the film.

Mulan for instance reflects the highly communalistic nature of Chinese religion and culture in the overriding emphasis on " upholding the family honor". This is a phrase used substantially, and there is even a song in the film entitled " Honor to us all". Similarly, it is to uphold family honor that Fa Zhou, Mulan's father, is steadfast about serving and protecting his country, even if this means he will die. More specifically, Mulan illustrates the particular principles of filial piety and compassion that are fundamental to Confucianism and Buddhism.

Apart from the frequent presence of the ancestors themselves, in having Mulan risk her life to protect that of her father's, the film exemplifies the principle of filial piety, or profound respect towards one's parents, elders, and ancestors, and the tenet that is so central to Confucian ethics that the family is the central social unit. The film similarly demonstrates the Buddhist virtue of compassion, in the scene where Shang, commander of the troops,

spares the life of Mulan once it has been revealed that she is in fact a woman.

Because she had saved his life in a prior scene, he overrides what he is legally obliged to do in such a situation, namely, kill her. Though the film undoubtedly departs from certain authentic aspects of Chinese religion, I would argue that Mulan successfully sheds a positive light on a form of spirituality that is less prevalent in the mainstream American film industry. Aladdin is the story of the orphaned young male protagonist Aladdin, and his monkey friend Abu, attempting to endure the limitations of low-social status and an accompanying meager lifestyle in the fictional Arabian city of Agrabah.

When he finds himself in the possession of a magic lamp, and thus the master of the Genie, Aladdin feels that his three wishes will be the key to salvation from his unsatisfactory existence. Hoping to impress and gain the affection of Jasmine, the daughter of the Sultan and Princess of Agrabah, whom he fell in love with in a happenstance meeting at the marketplace after she had just run away from the palace seeking to escape the constraints and expectations of royal life, Aladdin utilizes his wishes to employ the persona of Prince Ali.

While simultaneously combating the malicious efforts of the evil vizier to the Sultan, Jafar, who wishes to steal the magic lamp from Aladdin, Aladdin must in the end learn that it is being true to oneself and maintaining one’s sense of morality that yields the greatest happiness in life. Just as Mulan is able to incorporate religious customs and morals into its storyline, Disney’s Aladdin

visibly integrates aspects of the Islamic faith. The film most notably does so in its direct and repeated mentions of Allah by a multitude of characters.

The Sultan, for instance, makes such statements as “ Allah forbid you should have any daughters” (Aladdin 1992) in a scene where he is frustrated with Jasmine’s unwavering conviction that she will only marry for love. The film clearly aims to depict Islam in its further mention of the prayers occurring at different times of the day that are customary to the religion, and depictions of women in Hijabs. Additionally, Aladdin more subtly incorporates the general principles of beneficence and compassion that are present throughout Islamic ethics.

Although they must engage in precarious thievery in order to obtain food, Aladdin and Abu observe the third of the pillars of Islam, zakat, or charity, when they give away their only rations to two young orphaned children. Despite his minimal means, the attitudes and endeavors of Aladdin are characterized by an overall sentiment of charity. Contrary to the depiction of religion in Mulan, however, the end product of Aladdin does not manage to introduce Islam in an entirely genuine or constructive manner. In particular, Aladdin displays particular deviations from the traditions of Islam in order to appeal to a Western audience.

Jasmine for instance defies her father, not as Mulan does to protect her family’s honor, but rather to find love and achieve freedom. Because this rebellious act is never articulated as dishonorable in violating traditional Islamic family roles, Jasmine displays highly individualistic tendencies and diverges from appropriated Muslim values and conduct. Yet what is most noteworthy to me is the way in which the movie does what Elliot expresses

in her article “ Terrorists We Like and Terrorists We Don’t Like”, of using the media and a biased Western perspective to perpetuate negative stereotypes about Muslims and Arabs.

For the duration of Aladdin there is an unremitting distinction made between whom the film wants viewers to see as the good guys and those it wants us to see as the bad guys, or the ‘ us’ and ‘ them’. While Jasmine and Aladdin are both Anglicized in their accents, light skin, and facial features, the villains in the film are illustrated with highly exaggerated Arabic accents, darker skin, and “ grotesque facial features” (Wingfield and Karaman 1995).

Likewise, Jasmine is dressed rather provocatively in nothing more than pants and a brassiere, sharply contrasting those women depicted in Hijabs. In the same way that Elliot argues the U. S. government pushes a link between aspects of Middle Eastern or Islamic culture and terrorism (Elliot 2003), Aladdin promotes the association of a particular appearance or dress with the ‘ other’, and even evil and mal intention.

Finally there seems to be great emphasis in the movie on displaying Muslims and the Arab world alike as uncivilized. A scene in the marketplace shows an ill-framed man tending a fruit and vegetable stand threatening to cut off Jasmine’s hand after she gives an apple to a hungry child without paying for it. Similarly, in the song “ Arabian Nights” there is even a line which quite explicitly refers to the land as “ barbaric, but hey, it’s home” (Aladdin 1992).

Though the preceding line of the lyrics read, “ Where they cut off your nose if they don’t like your face” in the original release of the film, the present version still has highly negative implications for perceptions of Islam

(Wingfield and Karaman 1995). At $36 billion dollars as of February of 2009, the Walt Disney Company is the “ world's largest media conglomerate by market value” (Siklos 2009). Given the undisputed magnitude of the Disney empire, the company stands to become the leading authority for children on the content of its films.

This notion is corroborated by thinkers such as Stig Hjarvard who discuss the implications that the enveloping nature of media has on religion. Though the chief aims of films like Mulan and Aladdin are not directly religiously affiliated, both of them undeniably engage non-Western religions to familiarize the films’ audiences with them. It is therefore through the religious subtext in these two films that producers of media such as Walt Disney Productions have the capability to shape the way that people come to understand and identify with religion.