

Feminism in Hayao Miyazaki's films

Hayao Miyazaki's films showcase feminism in cinema. Using culture codes for love, adolescence, manipulation, framework, and genre, we can compare them to its misogynistic genre.

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"Many of my movies have strong female leads - brave, self-sufficient girls that don't think twice about fighting for what they believe in with all their heart. They'll need a friend, or a supporter, but never a savior. Any woman is just as capable of being a hero as any man

– Hayao Miyazaki"

(www.democraticunderground.com/)

There are certain film directors who stop making movies, and start making art. Art, as we know it, is supposed to push boundaries, create social commentary, and provide avenues of thought and discussion. Hayao Miyazaki is one of those directors. He is hailed as the grandfather of modern animation and a master class storyteller. His films are not just movies, but stories richly filled with themes and motifs that are timeless and beautiful. His films spark discussion amongst critics and fans alike. Not only that, but his works are also largely feminist in general. Hayao Miyazaki's films showcase feminism in cinema. Using culture codes for love, adolescence, manipulation, framework, and genre, we can compare them to its misogynistic genre.

Often referred to as Japan's Walt Disney, his works have inspired hundreds, if not thousands of animators across the world. His stories are often the most unique and diverse that they are considered their own genre and criterion. Hayao Miyazaki was born in Tokyo on January 5, 1941. He ended up working as a manga artist as well as an animator for several animation companies. In 1979 he ended up directing his first film, *Lupin the Third: Castle of Cagliostro*, to great widespread acclaim. Then in 1984 he ended up writing, producing, and writing one of his most popular and beloved works, *Nausicaa: Valley of the Wind*. This film has been hailed as benchmark for feminism in cinema. The film revolves around a strong willed princess of a tribe who struggles to maintain balance between his tribe, invaders, and mutated insects in a post-apocalyptic setting. He then ended up founding his own animation Studio: Studio Ghibli after the success of *Nausicaa*, which has been a household name for any fan of Japanese films and animation. He would go on to direct 11 other movies, all of which are critically acclaimed, including, which won him the first Academy Award for an anime.

Miyazaki films are well known for their well-crafted themes into his story narrative. Many films deal with life and death, love, humanism, the repercussions of violence and war, childhood, and adulthood, however his most reoccurring theme is that of feminism in his films. Out of 13 feature length films, only three of them have male protagonists, the rest are dominated by a strong female lead. Some of these films are *Kiki's Delivery Service*, which is about a 13 year old witch who learns to live alone for the first time in her life. *Howl's Moving Castle* is another classic which presents us with a young woman who is transformed into an old lady by a jealous witch who is envious with the hat-maker's relationship with a wizard who might be able to turn her back. Next we have *Princess Mononoke*, which is about how a Prince and a Princess maintain balance between the forest spirits and humanity in 10th century Japan. Finally, we have *My Neighbor Totoro*, which is about two young sisters who meet forest spirits in their new home.

Miyazaki's ladies in general demonstrate more strength and complex personalities than American heroines tend to have. Characters like Sophie from *Howl's Moving Castle*, Princess Nausicaa and Mononoke all actively fight to defend and reclaim their homelands from invaders. Using their fighting prowess, and charisma and intelligence, they actively meet their goals with success. Whereas we have Chihiro from *Spirited Away*, who uses her kind nature, bravery, intellect, and her intuition to save herself, her friends, and her parents. Her character and storyline is highly regarded in cinema because it's one of the most organic character developments in modern cinema. She starts out as a spoiled, timid 10 year old girl, and through her trials and tribulations during the course of the story, she manages to become mentally and emotionally more mature. All without having to be cute, physically fighting an enemy, or relying on a *deus ex machina*. This film is also highly regarded as the best animated film of all time, as well as winning an Oscar for best animated film.

All these characters can be direct comparisons to most Disney princesses as well. Disney princesses are normally, with few exceptions, are normally damsels in distress and thus, need saving from princes and male heroes. “Even when Miyazaki puts a princess in his films, they tend to be gallant leaders (*Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*) or fierce warriors (*Princess Mononoke*) who bear little resemblance to passive characters like Snow White or Sleeping Beauty, who are more likely to be praised for their tiny-waisted prettiness than for any personality attribute or personal achievement” (McDonnell). Miyazaki’s women more than handle themselves and are often solving others problems as well. It breaks modern story tropes by having female characters save the day and be more heroic and noble than their male counterparts.

Miyazaki’s belief in gender equality and spirituality resonates deeply with not only his audience and fans, but also with his own studio. “Studio Ghibli’s integral way of thinking runs in line with the Shinto philosophy. Shinto sees gods and spirits in everything which results in a deep respect for human harmony with one another and the environment. It does not place people in hierarchy determined by their physical looks or monetary wealth.” (Jones).

His films are often in direct contrast to most anime media. Most of the modern genre in animation deals with immense power, unrealistic characters and development, merchandising, and most of all; over-sexualization of women. Most women in modern animation are often drawn or represented as overtly sexual, damsels in distress, and very kawaii (over realistically cute). Many are depicted as wearing very revealing outfits that highlights their sexuality, which in many cases, only markets their usefulness as eye candy to the male leads. These power levels and misogyny are not included, nor respected by Miyazaki, in which he has a particular distaste for what modern Japanese animation has become. The unrealistic standards of power and

attractiveness have created an aura of distaste and uneasiness towards people unfamiliar with the genre. Which is why it is usually made fun or even considered a social stigma to watch them. However, Miyazaki subverts the norms of the genre by creating realistic characters. Characters that we can relate to and are almost exclusively human. They have flaws, they have problems, and they have issues that can't be beaten by fighting. These issues are usually resolved with the protagonists coming to terms with who they are and reflecting that change upon their world. It's about looking inside yourself and becoming who you want to be, which is an organic plot device, unlike what most modern animated shows have.

Most modern animated productions include the concept of similes, "which is a literary device that involves a direct comparison between two things" (Silverblatt 318). Similes in modern animation are usually exemplified by the protagonist and the antagonist. It boils down to the way they dress, act, and look. It's supposed to be contrasted and not much else. Earlier animated shows used to have in-depth and philosophical similes, which is what Miyazaki uses extensively in his films. Examples would happen between different character ideologies, cultures, themes, scenery, and consequences made. Examples of this would be in *Howl's Moving Castle*, where the main character, Sophie, is stubborn, individualistic, brave, compassionate, and observant. Whereas the witch who turned her into an elderly lady is petty, envious, spiteful, greedy, and ignorant. These characteristics are shown throughout the film and help stress the fact that Sophie has no desire to be married early in life. She wants to be free and independent which creates the wizard Howl's romantic feelings for her, whereas the witch wants to be married and tied down due to her lust for Howl, which only makes him pity her. It's an ideological simile, unlike that of power, which is often shown in modern animation.

However, there are several shows that have garnered not only critical acclaim for their realistic representation of women, but also were inspired by Miyazaki's work. Shows like *Cowboy Bebop*, *Full Metal Alchemist*, and the *Avatar the Last Airbender/Legend of Korra* series have broken the often ridiculous mold of the animation world and ushered in a new path. The latter of which has received widespread acclaim for its depiction of same-sex relationships, especially for its younger viewer audience.

The contrast between Miyazaki's works and that of typical animated programs also stems through their difference between their concepts of love. Clotaire Rapaille describes the Japanese concept of love as fading, it diminishes, and therefore it turns more into a partnership. They claim "Love is a temporary disease" (Rapaille 40). Mutual affection is temporary and therefore isn't as stressed in their culture. Many animated programs from Japan also reflect this. It's more about various forms of lust and brief attraction. It can be considered a harsh and stark reality to those outside that culture. Miyazaki, on the other hand, enjoys romance, and has broken the trope of this notion of temporary love in his films. Love is an important factor for many of his characters motivations. However, it's not the most important detail in the films. To have a female protagonist worry only about finding a love interest would only contradict his beliefs. It's a secondary and maybe even tertiary plot point. *Princess Mononoke* and *Howl's Moving Castle* depict love in a more humanistic and pure way. However, *Castle in the Sky* breaks his mold where his main plot device is to have the two titular characters love for one another the focus of the film. The notion of love isn't temporary in his films, its permanent and we can feel and experience it as we watch. Especially that it's an organic process that allows his female protagonists to complete their own goals and agendas, before even considering following through with a romantic partner. They choose, their male compatriots don't.

The role of adolescent, particularly Rapaille's cultural code for adolescence, is a major theme in most Miyazaki films. The need to challenge authority is a reoccurring theme prevalent in his films. Characters like Kiki, Sophie, and Mononoke are characterized by their stubbornness and anti-authority personalities. They are all in the throes of adolescence and teenage angst, which gives them more complexity and dimension to their characters and their decisions. However, just like the concept of adolescence, they go through tremendous changes throughout the story. They change who they are. They recognize authority, respecting those who came before, and understanding their youth in a world they place experience and knowledge above all. Whereas adolescence in animation is typically cutesy, sexual, and shallow. It's meant to be a plot device and nothing else. It's to pander to various fan bases of animation, who give the medium the bad name it has.

Miyazaki's films aren't just films, but are considered an art. Just to view one of his films is to be considered an experience and I encourage everyone to view them. They are some of the most humanistic and feminist films to ever have been created. The realism of his characters and narratives further impact his role on gender equality in not only animation, but in cinema. His films make numerous statements, of those, the equal representation of women in story telling needs to be a staple in cinema. So do yourself a favor, go to your nearest movie store and pick yourself up some of his movies, because you won't regret it.

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