A post-colonial Critique of Disney’s *Aladdin*

Disney movies are a nearly universal part of childhood. Apparently innocuous, American children have grown up with the fairy tales of *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, celebrating the love stories of *Beauty and the Beast* and *Pocahontas* and wept over the tragedies of *Bambi*. Many children watch these movies hundred of times, memorizing the dialogue and the songs, and internalizing the tales of good versus evil into their own moral code. *Aladdin* is one the most famous Disney movies of all; it was released in 1992 and quickly shot to fame and financial success. It is beloved by parents and children for its love story and Robin William’s hilarious and charming Genie. Unfortunately, underneath this shiny surface, *Aladdin* tells a darker story; its images are not as innocent as they would appear. *Aladdin*’s drawings embrace stereotypes of Arabs in order to tell their story, and send dangerous subconscious messages to impressionable children.

The way that people look in *Aladdin* rely on racist patterns; good characters tend to have small features whereas the evil or low class characters tend to have the most obviously “ethnic” facial structures. Jaffar is the most obvious example of how Disney associates the strong Arab facial features and darker skin with the more evil or dislikable character. One scene in which Jaffar and the kind were talking highlighted how much bigger and more angular Jaffar’s nose was than the kings; this subconsciously suggests that the more non-European a person looks, the more likely they are to not be trustworthy. Similarly, the sellers in the market tended to be larger, have darker skin, and more pronounced noses and lips. Again, this is consistent with the pattern that non-European physical features have a negative connotation. Aladdin and Jasmine, in contrast, has the lightest skin, the smallest noses and the least angular faces. Despite being from the Middle East, they are drawn to look much more like Europeans and with less ethnic variation.

Ultimately, after close examination of the images presented in Aladdin, it is clear that Disney has relied on racially charged images in their telling of this fairy tale.

This racist imagery sends a dangerous message to the millions of children who are raised watching these movies. Although many children may not have the critical thinking skills to notice this pattern, they inevitably internalize the images that they see. When the evil characters are the most likely to have big noses, dark skin, slanted eyes and huge mustaches, kids may begin to project that same stereotype onto real people in the world that they live in. Post-colonial theory argues that the experience of colonialism divided the world into us and them, civilized and uncivilized; post-colonial theorists seek to identify this pattern in literature and to counter the racist historical legacy. Disney movies are guilty of this trend, and it’s important to notice this patterns in order to begin to move past them.

Our generation has grown up watching Disney movies. Twenty years after first watching Aladdin, I still know the lyrics of nearly all the songs. The triumph of love over evil is compelling and heartwarming. Nonetheless, the racist undertones in the faces of the characters must be discussed. Disney is not responsible for racism, but they also should also take responsibility for the subconscious messages that they are putting out in the world and the way their art impacts the minds of the impressionable children who watch their movies.