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Entrepreneurial Project
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Am I Relevant for a Disney Movie Yet?

At 19, I fell in love with *Disney* again when *Raya and the Last Dragon* was released and felt seen, but why did it take so long?

Dear Disney, you were the epitome of most childhoods. You taught us to believe in power, love, magic, and ourselves. Sometimes, all it takes is a little pixie dust, a flick of a wand, or sometimes a little push to make us be the best versions of ourselves and get that happily ever after. After years of watching and re-watching Disney princess movies being released, I waited for a princess who looked like me until I finally gave up. The six-year-old me started to believe that to be a princess or the main character of a story, I had to fit a specific mould or take whatever was close enough. Then at 19, when *Raya and the Last Dragon* was released, I could not describe the exhilaration I had while watching it. But why did it take so long to feel represented, and can it make up for the six-year-old girl that gave up seeing a Southeast Asian princess?

Let me explain. I still remember when I was six. I'd watch every Disney Princess movie in one go. While watching these movies, I had the habit of imagining those characters with my face on them. As I grew older, I realized that I was reimagining my face on Cinderella to Aurora and more because there wasn't a princess that catered to me and my identity. Sure, Mulan, a Chinese princess, was the closest act of representation I had, but if you took out the cricket, talking dragon, her petite figure, and fair skin, I still sort of looked like her. She ate congee, and I ate another version of congee; we have those similarities. But ultimately, I had no choice but to force a connection with her because she was close enough.

Sometimes I reminisce about the night my big sister, Heidi, half-Ethiopian and a self-proclaimed "second biggest Disney fan," watched Disney's *Princess and the Frog* together when it came out in 2009. In my seven-year-old brain, I believed my sister could've done anything after seeing Princess Tiana for the first time. She had someone who looked like her and was the heroine of her own story, not some side character used for comedic relief or the token person of colour. Only years later, I learned that I was more excited than her.

"I don't think I related to them on any scale, not because of their complexion or ethnicity. That is something more coming to realization. [as I grew older and started to be more aware of representation]."

I understood where my sister came from, but I second-guessed my feelings about Disney and their representations of different cultures and races. However, the six-year-old in me is still disappointed that I never grew up with a princess who looked like me and represented my background. Years later, on the cusp of my adolescence, I finally got my princess who made that little child in me feel seen and heard after giving up.

Disney released *Raya and the Last Dragon*. I could picture myself as Raya, and I didn't need to copy and paste my face on her this time. The tan skin, less-than-perfect straight hair, and her traditional Filipino arnis sticks used for combat brought back the excited six-year-old in me. Although Kumandra is a fictional place, the animation of the settings was enough to remind me of my trips to the Philippines. I could finally connect with a character representing me as a Southeast Asian woman.

But why did it take so long? Maybe it was the surge of significant breakthroughs of Asians in entertainment. *Crazy Rich Asians* were like the green light for many Asian stories and storytellers to have a voice in media. Now that the topic of inclusivity and representation is, do we only get Disney films that target a more diverse audience? Although I am more than glad I got to have Raya as a role model for other Southeast Asian girls, the envy of not having her when I was younger is still apparent.

So tell me, Disney, did I have to wait for the discussion of diversity in entertainment and media to be included in your franchise? I hope this trend of including more culture in your films continues and not to be fit for relevancy and becomes second nature. If you do, the young audience you will continue growing doesn't have to long for a character to look like them and tell their story through their culture.

Source List

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