

International Feminism at the Turn of the Millennium: A Movie List for Teens

By Leah Boulos

The lack of feminism and diversity in Hollywood is a common complaint among current film critics and consumers. It is true that for all feminism has advanced in other media in recent decades, the film industry seems particularly backward in its hesitance to embrace change. Today's films—especially those marketed to teens—remain likely to play out the same tired themes over and over again, all while sticking to rigid gender stereotypes and, of course, speaking almost exclusively from a white American perspective.

When faced with Hollywood's seemingly endless obsession with big-budget comic book hero movie franchises, it can be refreshing to look back on a time when small films with feminist themes were embraced by critics and audiences alike. The 1990s and early 2000s, while certainly not perfect, did bring about a few excellent opportunities for women in movies around the world. The films on the following list are all critically acclaimed, and can be used by librarians as inspiration when suggesting titles to teens who might not be familiar with movies from this time period.

Muriel's Wedding (1994). House, L., Moorhouse, J. (Producers), & Hogan, P.J. (Director, writer). (1994). *Muriel's wedding* [Motion picture]. Australia: Miramax Films.

Muriel isn't afraid to march to the beat of her own quirky drum, but her life is far from perfect. She's absolutely obsessed with having a wedding, and is sure that if she could only get married, she'd be able to escape from her cruel father, depressed mother, overbearing siblings, and judgmental friends. All she needs is to find the right man. After her friends denounce and abandon her while on holiday, Muriel bumps into an old friend named Rhonda, and the two immediately strike up an amazing, Abba-fueled friendship. They move to Sydney, where Muriel finally begins to strike out on her own. When her friendship with Rhonda hits a major obstacle, it will be up to Muriel to find out if the wedding of her dreams is really the answer to all of life's problems.

Why this film? Muriel's self-actualisation process is never quite complete, nor is any woman's in the real world. Her journey demonstrates that it is possible to achieve independence and happiness without the help of a marriage or a man. Muriel and Rhonda's friendship is also a brilliant example of a mutually supportive female relationship.

Now and Then (1995). Moore, D., Todd, S. (Producers), & Glatter, L.L. (Director). (1995). *Now and then* [Motion picture]. United States: New Line Cinema.

In 1970, best friends Sam, Roberta, Chrissy, and Teeny make a pact: they will always be there for each other. In 1991, the four keep their promise, and are reunited for the birth of Chrissy's first child. They haven't seen each other in years, and their reunion immediately triggers a flood of memories from that summer 21 years ago. It was a transitional summer, one where each girl began to grow up and, inevitably, grow apart—still friends, but also individuals. As the friends work together to investigate the story behind a mysterious death, each also confronts their own demons: death, divorce, body image, the hint of first love, and the uncertainty of the future.

Why this film? This movie is appropriate for younger teens. For many—especially young girls—the film's characters might even mirror their own friends. By realistically portraying the nature of young female relationships, *Now and Then* makes it easier for viewers to relate to its various lessons about life. Furthermore, it carries a strong message that girls are capable of working together to solve problems.

Image

Leelah Alcorn: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/5/5d/Leelah_Alcorn.jpg

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Princess Mononoke (1997). Suzuki, T. (Producer), & Miyazaki, H. (Director). (1997). *Princess Mononoke* [Motion picture]. Japan: Studio Ghibli.

There are many interesting characters in this artistically astounding offering from the brilliant Hayao Miyazaki. Ashitaka, the last Emashi prince, has inherited a demon curse from an injured boar god, and embarks on a quest to find the cure. He encounters Lady Eboshi, who has bucked tradition by becoming the leader of Irontown. Her firearm-producing stronghold destroys the environment, but also provides legitimate work for social outcasts such as lepers and former prostitutes. And finally, there is San, known in Irontown as Princess Mononoke. San was raised by wolves from infancy, and has learned to hate all humans. The environment pays the price as the war between humans and wolves escalates, and Ashitaka and San must work together to save the Forest Spirit.

Why this film? It is always interesting to witness examples of feminism from other cultures. *Princess Mononoke* portrays two very different female characters, each working to assert her independence and power in a hostile world. While Lady Eboshi fights to overcome traditional female roles, San also works against the patriarchal values (e.g. capitalism and violence) that are destroying her environment.

Bend It Like Beckham (2002). Chadha, G. (Producer, director, writer), & Nayare, D. (Producer). (2002). *Bend it like Beckham* [Motion picture]. United Kingdom & India: Redbus Film Distribution, Fox Searchlight Pictures, iDream Productions.

Jesminder Bhamra loves everything to do with football, including star player David Beckham, who is known for “bending” the ball into the goal. Despite her talent for the sport, her traditional Punjabi Sikh parents have now forbidden her from playing, hoping that she will grow into a respectable young woman—attractive to prospective husbands. A fellow footballer named Jules spots Jess playing in the park one day, and invites her to join the local women’s team, led by an attractive coach named Joe. Keeping it a secret from her family, Jess continues to pursue her dream, learning to bend the football just as she bends her family’s traditional values.

Why this film? Movies featuring diverse casts are few and far between in Hollywood these days, so *Bend It Like Beckham* is a welcome addition. It also offers an opportunity for a girl to overcome gender roles in a very strict cultural tradition. One small caveat: the film’s rather flippant language when referring to lesbian relationships warrants discussion. As with any artistic creation, it is important to maintain a critical eye even while celebrating positive attributes.

Whale Rider (2002). Barnett, J., Hübner, F., Sanders, T. (Producers), & Caro, N. (Director, writer). (2002). *Whale rider* [Motion picture]. New Zealand & Germany: Pandora Film, Newmarket Films.

Paikea Apirana is a twelve-year-old Māori girl living in the small community of Wharanga, New Zealand. According to legend, her tribe’s original chief—Pai’s direct ancestor—was a masterful Whale Rider. Pai knows in her heart that she is meant to follow in his footsteps and become a leader, but is met with harsh refusal from her grandfather, Koro.

Although Koro loves his granddaughter dearly, he believes adamantly that the chief must be male.

As a girl, Pai is shut out of Koro’s attempts to find the true leader, even while she secretly succeeds at activities normally reserved for the male members of the tribe. In a moment of crisis, dozens of right whales beach themselves near the community, and it is up to Pai to take her place as the Whale Rider in order to save them.

Why this film? The community featured in this story (based on an award-winning novel) mirrors patriarchal societies that exist around the world in all cultures. It is thus an important and poignant critique of male leadership. Additionally, unlike her ancestor who used his whale riding to save his own life, Pai uses her spiritual connection to save the lives of the whales. ☐

Images

Laverne Cox: http://thetrans100.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Cox_Laverne_03_xret.jpg

Viktoria Modesta: <http://static.boredpanda.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/prototype-leg-prosthetics-viktoria-modesta-3.jpg>

Chantelle Winnie:

<http://vrfoundation.org/system/images/BAhbB1sHOgZmSSlzMjAxNC8wMi8vNy8xMi8wNF81O-V84NjBfdG9wX21wZGV5X3ZpdGlsaWdvLmpwZyY6BkVUWwg6BnA6CnRodWwSSINNDUweDQ1MD4G0wZU/top-model-vitiligo.jpg>

