

# The Journey of Women in Disney Movies and Their Impact on Shaping Social Perceptions

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## Abstract

Disney movies have long fascinated audiences with their fantastical narratives, lively characters, and imaginative landscapes. However, the representation of women in Disney movies was always through a patriarchal lens. This research investigates the portrayal of women characters in contemporary Disney movies *Moana* (2016) and *Mulan* (2020) and analyses how they differ from the traditional portrayal of women in Disney movies using the theoretical framework of postmodern feminism and patriarchy. The paper analyses how travel empowers these women and what significant changes it brings about in the development of their characters. The paper also explores the psyche of these women characters and how their journey inspires young adults, especially today's women. The paper serves as a lens into society and the influence of media and other popular culture in the perceptions formed about women and how they are supposed to be.

**Keywords:** Disney movies, Disney Princess, gender stereotype, discovery of self, female travel

## 1. Introduction

Disney movies for the longest time have portrayed women in one way. They fit into the stereotypical standards of beauty—they were always lean, white, and had blue eyes and blonde hair and were usually the damsels in distress who required a man to either feel complete or take them out of danger. The unrealistic standard of beauty set by Disney could be dangerous. Young women might think they should look like the Disney princesses to get acceptance in society. Young men might think women should fit in the box described by Disney. This could prove to be disastrous in real life. These impressionable young women might think that to be happy and successful in life they need to look a certain way and will require a man to solve the problems of their life. A love interest would always be present in such Disney movies who take it upon themselves to save the damsel in distress. Also, many movies end with the marriage of the female and male protagonists, usually princes and princesses. This would make young adults think that marriage is the be-all and end-all of life and there is nothing more to it than marriage. No personal pursuits are being chased by the protagonists and marriage is considered to be the biggest achievement of a woman's life. This is true for almost all movies by Disney except a few. The gender stereotype was so blatantly evident in many such movies. But recently Disney has tried to avoid this by being inclusive in their portrayal of heroines in movies like *Moana* (2016), *Mulan* (2020), *Brave* (2012) and a few others.

The earliest Disney movies like *Cinderella* (1950), *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) - all had female protagonists who were the traditional damsels in distress. These portrayals represented the sentiments of the then society in a nutshell. As time evolved, so did the female protagonists of Disney movies. From the 1980s till the early 2000s a new set of Disney princesses came about who were more independent, intelligent and adventurous like Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and Jasmine from *Aladdin* (1992). Even though the women were a lot more intelligent, they all had a romantic plot which had a huge significance throughout their stories. After the 2000s a significant shift came in the perspective towards female characters and power dynamics. Disney focused on representing women who challenged gender stereotypes and patriarchy, who took destiny into their own hands, who didn't require a man to solve their issues and who represented diverse cultures. Whether it is Merida from *Brave* (2011),

Elsa and Anna from *Frozen* (2013), Raya from *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021) are all progressive representations of women who embody female empowerment, cultural diversity, inclusivity and gender equality.

Popular platforms like movies and other media are highly influential, especially to young adults. They have the power to influence their thinking and perceptions. Because of this, they have a social and moral responsibility to be mindful of the portrayal of characters and conceiving of stories. This is how social gender is formed- through such mass media projections on how a woman should look, how she should behave and how she is different from a man. Disney movies are one of the earliest entertainments that are accessible to children and even parents think movies by Disney are safe for viewing for children. However many studies show that the stereotypes portrayed in such movies hugely influence impressionable young adults. Children are The paper attempts to read and analyse the Disney movies *Moana* and *Mulan* using the theoretical framework of postmodern feminism. It emerged as a reaction against the second wave of feminism. The second wave of feminism believed that women were discriminated against because of their biology. The postmodern feminists believe that gender roles are not determined by biology but through culture, society and politics. They were of the opinion that the oppression women have been facing from time immemorial is not due to their biology but rather due to the already established political, social and cultural constructs that view women as inferior to men.

Postmodern feminism thus advocates for more inclusivity and believes that every woman is an individual and their experiences would be different to one another (Fawcett et al., 2000). Diversity in women's experiences and perspectives is a huge part of postmodern feminism and Disney with movies like *Moana* (2016) and *Mulan* (2020) tries to do exactly that. These young women and their experiences are different from the traditional Disney women. These characters challenge the traditional, stereotypical portrayal of womanhood and prove that gender constructs are part of a social and cultural belief system and destabilising these gender roles is the way forward to a more inclusive and equal society.

## 2. Review of Literature

The article 'Media Portrayal of Women and Social Change' studies the portrayal of Chinese women in media and how much is the portrayal influenced by societal and cultural norms of China. (Yunjuan & Xiaoming, 2007). The research article 'Hegemony, Gender Stereotypes and Disney: A Content Analysis of *Frozen* and *Snow White*' compares and contrasts the Disney movies *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Frozen* to analyse whether the portrayal of characters in Disney has changed over the years. By comparing an old Disney movie with a relatively new one, the paper attempts to find out whether gender stereotypes have been abolished or not. The study concludes that though Disney has done away with a few gender stereotypes, some are still prevalent even though in a disguised form (Arnold et al., 2015). The article 'Pretty as a Princess: Longitudinal Effects of Engagement With Disney Princesses on Gender Stereotypes, Body Esteem, and Prosocial Behavior in Children' studies how continuous consumption of Disney movies can develop gender stereotypes in children. The study takes a sample size of around two hundred children and makes them watch Disney movies and comes to the conclusion that the portrayal of characters in the movies does affect their opinions on gender (Coyne et al., 2016). The paper 'Frozen in Time: How Disney Gender-Stereotypes Its Most Powerful Princess' discusses how the Disney movie *Frozen* portrays its female protagonist Princess Elsa as an epitome of female power substituting romance. Elsa much like any normal woman is expected to control her instincts and she is just another version of the power-hungry female villain in traditional Disney movies (Streiff & Dundes, 2017). The article 'Media Portrayal of Female Characteristics Within Disney Movies Influencing Children's Body Image' uses the social comparison theory to conclude that Disney movies shape gender and social perspectives. A study of over sixty female characters from Disney movies was taken and analysed how they were portrayed before and after the body positivity movement in 2012 and it was concluded that the portrayal of the female characters had significantly changed after the body positivity movement (Blasko et al., 2022). The research article 'The Impact of Disney Movies on Children's Perceptions of Traditional Gender Roles and Sexist Stereotypes' talks about the long-lasting impressions Disney movies can create in the minds of children and how through these types of portrayals they tend to accept the patriarchy in society and consider it normal (Yang, 2023). The article 'Portrayal of Gifted Stereotypes in Disney Channel Media' analyses whether Disney being a popular children's media platform promotes harmony and positive values or disharmony or negative values. The study takes a few Disney programmes as a sample and concludes that such programmes promote positive values and harmony more than negative ones. At the same time, the study also notes that the difference between the portrayal of positive values and negative values is negligible in Disney movies (Chung, 2023).

## 3. Methodology

A qualitative method is used to understand and analyse the primary sources used in this research paper. This paper uses the theoretical framework of postmodern feminism to explore and investigate the Disney movies *Moana* (2016) and *Mulan* (2020). Extensive research has been done in the area of Disney movies and their female protagonists by reviewing various scholarly journals, databases and Disney movies. The criteria used to select the primary sources were based on the relevancy and recency of the movies in the context of female protagonists who are different from the traditional Disney

princesses. Both *Moana* (2016) and *Mulan* (2020) are comparatively recent Disney movies with female protagonists representing diversity. The systematic methodology aims to provide valuable insights into the portrayal of female characters in Disney movies and the impact these movies as a mass media tool have on young adults.

Postmodern feminism and its various concepts are thoroughly examined to understand the representation of women in the selected movies. Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity is used to understand the roles society assigns to men and women and how gender identity is formed. She argues that gender is an act or performance which is repeated over time under the pressures of the heterosexual society that has assigned specific roles to men and women. Gender is not stable according to her and the repetition due to societal pressures gives it an illusion of stability. She advocates the abolition and subversion of traditional gender roles that are the result of the power dynamics of the patriarchal society (Butler, 1990). Donna Haraway's concept of anti-essentialism is understood to read the primary texts from the point of how essentialist ideals are used to weigh down women by assigning biological gender roles to them that are fixed. She argues against the idea of clubbing together the experiences of all women. It cannot be universal (Haraway, 2006). Luce Irigaray talks about the well-established and ingrained ideas of gender biases that are prevalent in society, encourages breaking those shackles and advocates the need to identify female subjectivity which can often be marginalised (Irigaray, 2010). These varied concepts in postmodern feminist theory are used to examine the gender biases with which females are portrayed in the select primary texts, how marginalised female voices are represented, whether diversity and inclusivity can be seen in the texts and whether the texts encourage the representation and inclusivity of varied female voices in popular media.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 *Moana*

In the Disney movie *Moana* (2016), directed by Mark Andrews and Brenda Chapman, the titular character Moana is the daughter of the chief of Motunui, a Polynesian island, who sets out on a journey seeking her true calling. Moana is different from the typical Disney movie female protagonists. She is not the usual Disney princess who requires saving. She takes it upon herself to find solutions to her problems. It could be visible in the movie that Disney has made conscious decisions to break free from the image of a typical Disney movie. First of all, Moana is a female protagonist of colour. Her ethnicity is different from the other white princesses of Disney. She is independent, and courageous, knows exactly what she wants and does what her heart tells her. As the daughter of the village chief Moana is expected to lead the village after him and she is being groomed by her father for the same. But Moana always had an affinity and connection to the ocean much to the displeasure of her father. Her father forbids her to come in close contact with the sea. She always had a feeling that her purpose was something more than leading the villagers and she was meant for something big rather than confining to the small island. The only person on the island who shares her feelings and understands her is her grandmother. Through her grandmother, she understands the history of her island and the fact that as a community they were voyagers—that travel is in her blood. Moana realises this is the reason why she always wanted to know what was there beyond the island even when her father didn't allow her to travel beyond the reef. Her grandmother narrates the story of the goddess of Nature Te Fiti, who gave life to the ocean and is deprived of her powers because her heart was stolen by a demigod of wind and sea named Maui. While taking the heart of Te Fiti, which was the source of her power, Maui is attacked by Te Ka who is a demon of earth and fire and in that process he loses Te Fiti's heart and his magical fish hook to the sea. Because of the loss of the heart darkness began spreading on the island and the ocean. As Moana grows up she realises that her island is dying slowly. Fish and other life forms in the ocean and the island is getting affected and is causing life to stop for the villagers. According to Moana's grandmother, the ocean after all these years has chosen Moana to find Maui and restore the heart of Te Fiti and save Motunui. This was the purpose Moana was missing all her life. She understood that she needed to take reigns into her own hands and travel beyond the confinements of her island. Moana is the journey a brave young woman takes to find answers to her problems without waiting for someone to come and help her. She discovers herself and how strong she can be on the journey. She not only found Maui but herself in the journey. Many gender stereotypes are broken in this movie.

Unlike timid princesses, Moana always expressed what she felt, even to her chieftain father. When the whole village was discussing how to deal with the dire situation of the fish dying and wildlife on the island getting affected, Moana was confident that she would find a solution to this and believed they needed to think beyond the reef. "What if we fish beyond the reef...If there are no fish in the lagoon...there's a whole ocean" (Shurer et al., 2016, 01:32). Her father vehemently opposes that the sea is dangerous for a woman and she is not supposed to travel beyond the reef. Both literally and figuratively she is discouraged from journeying due to her gender. Moana however believes in herself and with the encouragement of her grandmother, musters enough courage to take on the trip to find Maui and restore the heart of Te Fiti and in the process hope to save her village. By setting out for the voyage alone, she breaks the gender stereotype that women are not supposed to travel alone and they should be within confinements. Moana didn't want to be escorted and didn't wait for a prince charming to come and protect her and accompany her. She wanted to control her own destiny and make her own decisions instead of someone else taking it for her. Instead of waiting for somebody else to take a call like

the stereotypical Disney female protagonists, Moana had clear-cut plans. In the council of her chieftan father when the men were wondering about solutions to save their island, Moana boldly comes up with her idea. “We can stop the darkness. Save our island. There’s a cavern of boats. Huge canoes. We can take them, find Maui, make him restore the heart. We were voyagers. We can voyage again.” (Shurer et al., 2016, 01:19).



(pinterest, 2023)

On her voyage, Moana encounters a lot of adventures and is enriched with experiences that she would not have gotten had she not left the island. She grows as a person more determined and more courageous as she journeys through the rough waters and comes face to face with various dangers and monsters. She handles the problems she faces with courage, grace and maturity. In fact, she behaves more maturely and is more sensible than Maui whom she convinces to travel with her to restore the heart of Te Fiti. Maui initially tries to steal Moana’s boat and abandons her in the cave where he lives. However, he allows her in the boat when he understands the determination of Moana and that she is not ready to give up without a fight. Initially, he tries to talk her out of her mission stating that it is not feasible as he lost his shape-shifting fishhook to a monster crab called Tamatoa who resides in Lalotai and it will be difficult to defeat Te Ka without the fishhook. She encourages him to confront Tamatoa and acquire the fishhook and then travel with her to Montunui to restore the heart of Te Fiti. While dealing with Tamatoa it is Moana who distracts him thus helping Maui to retrieve his magical fish hook. Her timely thinking saves both of them. Maui, despite being a huge and powerful demi-god couldn't do much compared to what Moana does. This depiction of a strong female character is again synonymous with breaking the glass ceiling by women and reaching places with sheer willpower and intelligence. This portrayal shows that women are capable of tackling any situation and are more calm and composed in tricky situations compared to men. Till Moana’s act of valour in rescuing herself and Maui, he underestimates her as a mere mortal woman. After understanding and witnessing her true potential and courageous nature Maui begins respecting her and they two get closer and form a bond. This often happens with women even in today's society as well. Women need to constantly prove themselves and fight for their spot to gain opportunities and respect in a patriarchal world. They will always start as secondary unless and until they fight tooth and nail to command their place. This is the cultural and social discrimination against women that postmodern feminism talks about.

Moana and Maui reach where Te Ka is, once they retrieve Maui’s fishhook. Te Ka attacks them and Maui’s fishhook is slightly damaged. Since he doesn’t want to take the risk of permanently damaging his hook he decides to drop the idea of restoring the heart and persuades Moana for the same. This is when the real strength of Moana is shown. Despite setbacks, she refuses to listen to the so-called powerful male demi-god who is unwilling to risk anything to save the world. Maui even taunts Moana in an attempt to discourage her. “...the ocean told you you’re special and you believed it...I am not killing myself so you can prove you’re something you’re not (Shurer et al., 2016, 29:57). Even though Moana is briefly affected by his words and tries to return the heart to the ocean, the spirit of her grandmother visits her and encourages her to complete the mission. She understands the need of the hour and courageously sets out to restore the heart. Her extreme belief in herself and determination to do something people believed she was incapable of makes Moana a stand-out Disney princess and a true postmodern feminist.

*Moana* (2016) draws a lot of inspiration from Polynesian legends, myths and their culture. The character Moana can be analysed using the hero archetype described in the book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. The narrative pattern portrays a hero's journey in mythical traditions. The Hero is often born into an ordinary setting. He would then be faced with a

challenge for which he initially hesitates but eventually with the help of a guide would decide to face the challenge. The journey the hero then takes is filled with adventures and fantastical events, conquering enemies, overcoming challenges and in the end receiving a boon which can be used for the greater good of the world (Campbell, 1968). Moana can be considered the female equivalent of the hero archetype described by Joseph Campbell. She is a hero in her own right and inspires millions of young women to be the hero of their own lives.

#### 4.2 *Mulan*

*Mulan* (2020) directed by Niki Caro is a Disney movie adapted from Disney's own animated movie released in 1998 with the same name. The story is based on a Chinese ballad and is thus taking place in China nearly two thousand years ago. *Mulan* is different from other Disney princesses from the word go. She is the first Disney female protagonist who is not a princess either by birth or through marriage. She is not the epitome of grace and perfection that is usually expected out of Disney heroines. She is clumsy, is not afraid to speak her mind and is imperfect. Her imperfections make her unique and stand out among the other Disney princesses.

All the females in *Mulan*'s household and her neighbourhood behave as they are expected to by society except *Mulan*. She refuses to conform to the rules society has set upon women. She constantly challenges these norms from her childhood much to the dismay of her mother who complains to her father that no respectable man would ask for *Mulan*'s hand in marriage if she continues to be a tomboy and challenges the patriarchy. Her mother even compares *Mulan* with her younger sister *Xiu*, who she thinks would have no trouble in finding a husband due to her submissive nature. "A daughter brings honor through marriage...What man will want to marry a girl who flits around rooftops, chasing chickens? *Xiu* gives me no trouble. The matchmaker will find a good husband for her. It is *Mulan* I worry about" (Bender et al., 2020, 01:51). The whole life of a woman is reduced to being agreeable to marrying a man. According to her mother, the females bring honour to their families through marriage, not through education or any other personal achievement. The individual identity of a woman or her desires and ambitions have little to no value in a patriarchal society like the one *Mulan* is born into. They are only expected to cook, clean, marry, give birth to children and take care of the family. Nothing more, nothing less. When *Mulan* is sent to a matchmaker to try and find a suitable match for her, she is asked by the matchmaker to be calm and obedient to find a good husband. "Quiet. Composed. Graceful. Eloquent. Poised. Polite. These are the qualities we see in a good wife. When a wife serves her husband she must be silent. She must be invisible..." (Bender et al., 2020, 01:38). But *Mulan* is portrayed differently by Disney. They portray her as the rebel who chases chickens, who is athletic and adventurous, who is not docile like other females around her and who is not afraid to speak her mind.

*Mulan*'s father is the only person around her who understands her and accepts her as she is. Even he is pressurised against his wish by society to convince *Mulan* to change her ways and mellow down. He asks her to hide her *Qi*. He tells her that she has a strong ability and zest for life. "Your *chi* is strong, *Mulan*. But *chi* is for warriors...not daughters. Soon, you'll be a young woman and it is time for you...to hide your gift away to silence its voice" (Bender et al., 2020, 01:49). When war broke out in the Chinese empire, the Emperor of China ordered every family to contribute one soldier each for the cause of the war. Since *Mulan*'s father had only two daughters he had no other way but to enlist himself in the war. *Mulan* understands that her ailing father is not fit to fight a war and might not return if he goes to the border. This pushes her to disguise herself as a man and join the army in place of her father.

Travelling afar to join the army was a life-changing experience for *Mulan*. She realises that patriarchy is not restricted to homes alone, it is very prevalent in the army as well. Her fellow soldiers dream of marrying a woman paler than the moon and who knows how to cook well. That is all the expectation men have of women- Be beautiful and be able to do all the household chores. They do not want educated, accomplished or intelligent women. *Mulan* confronts them and asks why wouldn't they fancy a woman who speaks her mind and who has a brain. The soldiers were not excited about the idea of women having a voice or forming an opinion by themselves. Even though she initially finds it difficult to cope with the physical activities in the army, she slowly learns and never gives up. She puts her intelligence to good use in the army thus earning the respect of others in the camp. Through sheer hard work, determination and perseverance she makes quick progress in the army and becomes one of the most skilled soldiers in her unit. In the end, the Emperor of China acknowledges her valiant efforts and sacrifices for the country and recognition from him forces the others in the army to acknowledge her who had earlier refused to call her a hero citing that she is unworthy of being called anything. This proves that through courage, effort and determination women can achieve anything and can create a place for themselves in the male-dominated society and command respect from others. The book *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* (1999) talks about women warriors in popular culture. It says that women are capable of doing activities that are traditionally considered the jobs of men like serving in the army. Female warriors redefine heroism by incorporating physical and mental strength as they challenge traditional gender roles and portray empowerment (Inness, 1999). *Mulan* perfectly fits into the description of the female warrior as described by Sherrie A. Inness who challenges the age-old societal norms related to women and who strives to change the traditional perceptions and can be considered an archetype of a female warrior with strength, compassion and intelligence.



(pinterest, 2020)

The movie portrays Mulan as a brave, intelligent woman who takes it upon herself to save her father and her country by fighting the war, even if it means she has to disguise herself as a man. She finally understands that she needs to be proud of who she is and need not be afraid to show her true identity. In the final battle, she fights the enemy in her real identity as a woman and she overpowers with her intelligence. She proudly acknowledges and embraces her being a woman and sets up an example for young adults that women are capable of doing anything if they put their heart and soul into it. They can also fight a battle as good as a man, if not better. Mulan like Moana is one of the few Disney female protagonists who doesn't seek a male partner. Mulan's journey is one of empowerment and bravery. She discovers her true worth and potential as a woman towards the end. While growing up she was always the tomboy and was told by society that she possessed no feminine characteristics. Her journey from that to the brave warrior embracing her femininity is commendable. Her journey is not only physical, it is an inner journey that she takes to understand herself. The war was not with just the enemy, but it was with herself and her identity. Her struggles to find herself in a male-dominated world are portrayed convincingly by Disney. Her story is inspirational to young women who often struggle to fit into the traditional model of how a woman should be. Mulan would inspire them to break away from those boxes, let go of any inhibitions of the self and embrace one's true identity. As popular media platforms like Disney have a profound influence on people's thinking and society in general, *Mulan* has the potential to break gender and societal stereotypes and provoke a change in society and hopefully, it paves the way to create fair and equal opportunities for women and help them in realising their inner self and true potential.

## 5. Conclusion

Disney movies like any other popular media have significant power and authority in shaping opinions and influencing ideas and thoughts. Therefore it is essential to understand and analyse the latent messages that the Disney movies emanate and not only the surface-level messages given out by them. All kinds of media- whether it is print media like newspapers, books, magazines, or digital media, or broadcasting media- are accessible to children and everything influences them. Today's children are born in the age of digital media and therefore it is important to monitor and segregate what they view because the opinions and perceptions formed at a young age can develop well into their characters that will stay lifelong. With this view in regard, it becomes necessary to scrutinise the portrayal of female characters in Disney movies and check whether the gender stereotypes prevalent in our society and culture are also reflected in them. It also becomes necessary to find out whether Disney makers have attempted to bring about a change in their portrayal of the Disney princesses as society has evolved and there is strong opposition to showcasing gender stereotypes in popular culture and media.

Disney movies have long portrayed women as the pretty little thing who desperately wishes to find a husband or a love. They were often the ones who required the help of a man to get them out of trouble. Another problem with Disney princesses was that most of them were white. Diversity was not one of the strong suits of Disney. Over the years Disney has tried to rectify this situation by portraying strong, opinionated and intelligent princesses from different races. Whether



it is Tiana from *Princess and the Frog* (2009), who is the first black princess of Disney, Jasmine from *Aladdin* (1992) or Pocahontas from *Pocahontas* (1995) are all non-white princesses. Along with being from different races, Disney has also made great strides in portraying female protagonists with an independent mind of their own who don't succumb to the gender stereotypes afflicted by society. Disney princesses like Merida from *Brave* (2012), Elsa from *Frozen* (2013), and Raya from *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021) are all independent princesses who follow their hearts and are not in search of a husband and a happily ever after with them. This paper has chosen two Disney princesses who fit into both categories- Moana and Mulan- they represent female protagonists who showcase cultural diversity and are intelligent, courageous, opinionated young women who don't require the services of a prince charming and whose end goal is not marriage.

Travel is a major motif in both *Moana* (2016) and *Mulan* (2020). Both the female protagonists become more mature, established women after they have undertaken their respective journeys. Their growth as individuals is visible throughout their solo journey. They challenge the gender stereotype that it is dangerous for women to travel alone. Their journey is as much internal as it is external. They prove to others that they are capable and prove to themselves. Travelling alone, making decisions by themselves, navigating troubles during the journey and finding solutions on their own empowers them. The courage and determination that both Mulan and Moana show in achieving their goals is a refreshing deviance from the traditional portrayal of female characters in popular media.

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