



RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE DISNEY PRINCESSES IN THEIR OWN SHINING ARMOR: A POSTMODERN CHARACTERIZATION OF WOMEN IN SELECTED DISNEY ANIMATED FILMS

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ABSTRACT

The study is entitled The Disney Princesses in Their Own Shining Armor: A Postmodern Characterization of Women in Selected Disney Animated Films. It focuses on the postmodernist characterization of women in terms of physical appearance and character traits. Results of the study reveal that the physical appearance of the characters in the animated films differ from the classic societal standards and are characterized with courage, strength, affection, discipline, resourcefulness, responsibility, compassion, athleticism, assertiveness, wisdom, heroism, clumsiness, awkwardness, stubbornness, rebelliousness, and kindness. It is proven that postmodernist characterization of women is revealed in the three Walt Disney animated films: *Mulan*, *Brave*, and *Moana*. It is recommended that women be not constrained by the restrictions of society and that they cultivate a strong sense of freedom individuality, and uniqueness. Respect for women and their ability to do things independently to survive or succeed be taught and cultivated among the young.

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INTRODUCTION

A prominent voice in the industry, Disney affects many facets of society, including how gender roles are defined. For almost a century, younger generations have taken social cues from their favorite animated movies, learning to act like their favorite princes and princesses (Garabedian). Between 1937 and 2016, Disney has released fourteen princess films. The story lines of these films have changed in tandem with societal changes (Bell 121); however, despite the developments, they seem to conform to the same narrative structure in which a woman must negotiate a path for herself within a patriarchal world where ideals of heterosexual romantic love dominate (Tanner et. al. 369). This structure is referred to as the "traditional Disney formula" (Krouwels). This formula takes a form in which Disney portrays "women as superficial images of helpless princesses, subserviently trusting males to carry them off and live happily ever after in a world of post-marital bliss (Brode). While this might have been the idea of the perfect woman in 1937, such a narrative is no longer appealing to or feels relevant for a twenty-first century audience. In a world where people are continuously fighting for gender equality and better opportunities for women, the pressure on filmmakers to produce animated films that diverge from the traditional princess plot is increasing.

Three of the Disney Princess films, *Mulan*, *Brave* and *Moana*, deviate from this traditional Disney structure and are therefore the focus of this research. The recent adaptations of the princess movies show an immense development in all aspects of their existence changing from traditional typecast to more believable interpretations of personalities. They break the barriers of stereotyping the "damsel in distress" notion. They have even progressed in terms of culture, ethnicity, beauty standards, intelligence, and other culturally accurate parameters (Sultan). Anti-authoritarian by nature, postmodernism refuses to recognize the authority of any single style or definition. It describes challenges and changes to established structures and belief systems that took place in Western society and culture from the 1960s onwards. Within the logic of the rationale, this study is conceived of. It analyzes the postmodern characterization of women in three Disney animated films: *Mulan*, *Brave*, and *Moana*. Specifically, it focuses on the postmodernist characterization of women in terms of physical appearance and their character traits. This study reveals relevant information providing insights to parents, teachers, caregivers, and other professionals who intend to imbibe in individuals, especially the young to analyze critically messages on societal constructions coming from animated films which are very popular among children and adults alike. Because of the authority, clout, and impact of Disney and how it reaches the perceptions and beliefs of people all over the world no matter what the age, economic status, gender or sexual preferences, it

is critical that a comprehensive understanding be developed with regard to how women are presented in the postmodern society so that viewers see women in a different light, and hopefully generate more respect for the feminine regardless of size, shape, color, or path that they take in their lives.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The products of media culture require multidimensional close textual readings to analyze their various forms of discourses, ideological positions, narrative strategies, image construction, and effects. This study uses both textual and semiotic analysis to examine the postmodern characterization of women in Disney's most recent animated films: *Mulan*, *Brave*, and *Moana*. Semiotic analysis, a system for investigating the creation of meaning not only in written languages but also in other, nonverbal codes, such as the visual and auditory languages of film and TV is also used. Semiotics analyzes how linguistic and nonlinguistic cultural signs form systems of meanings. Each film was therefore watched and the scripts read to examine how women are characterized in terms physical appearance and character traits.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Physical Appearance*

The classic Disney princesses depict the societal Western standards of beauty such as thin, graceful, young, and attractive to romantic suitors of the opposite sex (Johnson). The idealistic concept of beauty is perpetuated through princesses having "extremely pale skin tones, small waists, delicate limbs, and full breasts," (England *et al.*). This study however reveals that the three animated films deviate from this tradition. *Mulan*, *Merida*, and *Moana* manifest postmodernist characterization of women in terms of physical appearance, which differ from the classic societal standards of beauty such as being pale skinned, blonde, thin, graceful, and super-refined features. Instead, having more realistic body proportions, and comfortable clothing are depicted by these postmodern princesses.

***Mulan as Ethnic Chinese:*** Mulan is a 16-year-old Chinese with slightly slanted dark brown eyes, prominent eyebrows and long straight black hair. When she disguises herself as a male soldier, she cuts her hair into shoulder-length and ties it into a bun, which helps her blend into the army so that the other soldiers do not know that she is actually a girl. Mulan is shown as athletic, with broad shoulders and muscular limbs. She has a clumsy, awkward demeanor; unruly single strand of hair; and choice of everyday attire which usually consists of loose, baggy clothing. She bent traditional gender roles by disguising herself as a man in order to protect her father and to honor her family name. This contradicts the traditional body image of Disney princesses. The way the female form is presented by Disney reflects the socio-cultural assumptions of what the female body should portray. Mulan goes against this by demonstrating that a princess can come from a different race, have squinty eyes instead of huge round ones, have muscular arms and legs, and not wear a ball gown.

***Merida as Ethnic Scottish:*** Merida hails from the highland mountains of Scotland, and is born a princess. Despite her status, she defies the stereotypical ideals of princess beauty through her unruly red curls and having a round face, a less than perfect skin, a normal waistline, height and physique. She possesses realistic body proportions an ordinary girl can identify with. Morrison

(10) describes Merida as having messy hair that is strikingly different from the perfectly styled hair seen on other Disney princesses and goes against stereotypical conceptions of feminine beauty. Even when her mother tries to tuck her hair under a bonnet so she looks dignified in front of the clans, one curl resists and hangs out, and Merida embraces the rebellious curl and pulls it back out whenever it is tucked in. Merida's hair is untamable and mirrors Merida's refusal to obey. Merida also has quirky freckles and does not have the "airbrushed" look of past princesses. While still slender, she has more realistic body proportions than past princesses, with a slightly protruding belly and wider hips, and overall is not hypersexualized. Merida's face is noticeably rounder than her fellow princesses and she does not have the super refined features traditionally recognized as beautiful. Finally, though Merida does wear a dress, she insists that her clothing be comfortable so she can enjoy her active lifestyle. She detests the restrictive lady-like dresses that are more traditional for a princess in her territory, and when she is forced to wear one she purposefully rips the dress to allow a better range of motion to aim her bow and arrow. Overall, Merida looks like a real young woman rather than a male fantasy" (11).

***Moana as Ethnic Polynesian:*** Moana is a young woman of color her hair is curly and unruly, hanging down to her mid-back. She pulls it up in large messy buns, and runs around barefoot. Her eyes are bright brown. She has thick eyebrows, a snub nose, and full lips. Her skin is a deep brown, often darker on her cheeks when it is kissed by the sun. Moana's main look includes a tapa top and a pandanus skirt with a shredded pandanus underskirt suitable for an adventurer. The skirt has a slit in front to allow movement, whether Moana is swimming, running or navigating her canoe. Moana is strong and fast, and she has the physical proportions of someone who is strong and fast. She climbs up trees and masts, climbs out of caves and runs practically everywhere. Her body reflects this: stocky and athletic. Moana has the body of someone who does the things that she does, with legs and feet not entirely too small for her physique, and normal sized waistline of a healthy human being. Moana has a larger body shape, looking more like a regular teenage girl. Unlike the traditional pale skinned, blonde princess with skinny arms and legs who wears a ball gown, Moana breaks stereotypes by showing that a princess can be of different size, shape and color who dresses comfortably to suit a wide range of activities that include running, swimming, navigating, and leading one's people.

### *Character Traits*

***Mulan:*** At the start of the film, Mulan enumerates and tries to memorize several qualities: quiet, demure, graceful, polite, delicate, refined, poised, and punctual – all of which are not her qualities as she is seen as awkward, clumsy, and outspoken. Because of this, her meeting with the matchmaker which is a means for her to "uphold the family honor" results into a disaster. Mulan then goes home ashamed and reflects about who she really is. Her lines "Look at me, I will never pass for a perfect bride or a perfect daughter....now I see, if I ever truly to be myself, I will break my family's heart. Who is that girl I see staring straight back at me? When will my reflection show who I am inside?" illustrate that Mulan is confused about the role that she must play for she does not fit into what her family and the society expect of her. Showing courage and determination, she steals her father's armor and masquerades as a soldier, despite the risk of getting killed

when found out that she is a woman. While training for battle, Mulan demonstrates positive aspects of persistence. She is initially shown unable to catch up with men soldiers in terms of strength. One particular scene shows Captain Shang taking her load from her and sending her to pack up and go home. Undaunted, she retrieved the arrow that no one else in the camp has ever reached with metallic weights in each of her arms. These weights represent the strength and discipline needed to reach the arrow. Mulan is not only strong and disciplined. Being smart, she is able to figure out a strategy how to use these two to her advantage and reach the top. Mulan's most defining characteristic is that she is quick witted and clever. At the time when the Huns outnumber Mulan's troops, she is able to quickly think of using the last cannon to cause an avalanche on the entire Hun army, quite literally stopping them cold. She demonstrates how good ideas can be much more powerful than brute strength. Instead of breaking down the doors, she leads her friends to climb the columns, getting to the emperor on time to rescue him. Several scenes demonstrate her being quick-witted. While being chased by Shan Yu, Mushu asks Mulan, "*What's the plan? You don't have a plan?*" to which Mulan replies "*Hey, I'm making this up as I go.*" Then on top of the roof Shan Yu catches her unarmed and tells her, "*It looks like you're out of ideas*" and again, Mulan quickly answers, "*not quite*". Mulan then disarms Shan Yu by using her fan and pins him to the roof by using his own sword so that Mushu can fire at him with a firecracker rocket. Mulan is a feisty young go-getter who rises above the male dominated world in which she lives, and she is the true hero of her own story. Mulan portrays a girl who refuses to fit into a stereotypical female role. She proves to be a sturdy soldier and a trustworthy companion. In fact, she is primarily responsible for ending the war. Although she is initially disparaged when her true gender is revealed, her country eventually celebrates her. In one powerful scene, a large crowd bows down before her in gratitude and respect (Towbin *et al.*). At the beginning of the film, Mulan's father compared her to a cherry blossom that has not bloomed yet, but at the end the emperor says about Mulan, "*the flower that blooms in adversity is the most beautiful and rare of all*".

**Merida's Character Traits:** Merida demonstrates qualities typical of a postmodern teenager: independence, stubbornness and a propensity to challenge authority. She argues with her mother and enjoys her freedom. She exhibits a nurturing and caring personality towards her parents and her brothers. Merida is a brave, stubborn, and headstrong girl who does not fit the stereotypical princess role. Rather than being a damsel in distress who is subservient to the customs, traditions, and social restrictions her society places on her and expects her to follow, Merida openly rebels and defies her heritage as a princess and would like for nothing more than to be a normal girl. She is very athletic and enjoys nothing more than riding her horse Angus and practicing her archery, of which she is the best in the kingdom (The Disney Wiki Website). Merida has a strong personality that goes against the patriarchal idea of a weak, submissive young woman. Merida does not partake in the "womanly" domestic activities championed by patriarchy and often performed by past Disney princesses. Princesses like Snow White and Cinderella are often shown cleaning, cooking, or sewing, but Merida enjoys physical activities such as horseback riding, rock climbing, and archery. She loves her prized bow, despite her mother's belief that weapons are not appropriate for a lady (Morrison 12). She is confident and does not hesitate to take control when she ought to, such as coming

up with a plan to sneak Elinor in bear form out of the castle or procuring food when she and her mother are in the woods. She insists on thinking for herself, which is a model embodiment of the feminist principle of self-determination (12). Though her decisions may not always turn out the way she intends, she is strong enough to make her own choices instead of just doing what her mother or father tells her to do. When told she must marry one of the three lords' sons, Merida asserts her position that she is not ready and insists that her parents respect her wishes. "*I suppose a princess just does what she's told?*" she asks defiantly when told she must marry. She does not show a subservient reaction and comply with the demand; she respects herself enough to fight for what she believes is right by going to the old witch in an attempt to change her fate. She insists that her thoughts and opinions have value and does not passively give up when others dismiss her opinions. Merida's personality defies the stereotypical princess persona and the patriarchal notion of women as submissive (12). Merida is not obedient nor submissive, but in fact extremely rebellious and sometimes even rude to her mother. Queen Elinor tells her, "*A princess does not raise her voice. Merida, this is what you've been preparing for your whole life*", to which Merida responds, "*No! It's what you've been preparing me for my whole life! I won't go through with it! You can't make me!*"

Though going to the witch ends up being a mistake, it shows bravery and determination that Merida actively tries to better her life, and also shows more strength of character when Merida later admits she made a mistake and takes responsibility for it. She tells the clans "*Yours was an alliance forged in bravery and friendship and it lives to this day. I've been selfish. I tore a great rift in our kingdom. There's no one to blame but me, and I know now that I need to amend my mistake and mend our bond.*" Merida shows wisdom and courage beyond her years when in the midst of the clans hurling weapons against each other in the great hall, she walks calmly and tells the story of a selfish prince. She tells them "*Legends are lessons. They ring with truths. Our kingdom is young; our stories are not yet legends, but in them, our bond was struck. Our clans were once enemies. But when we were threatened from the north, you joined together to defend our lands. You fought for each other. You risked everything for each other.*" Merida continued to explain that she has decided to do what's right and break tradition by asking the lords to allow the young ones to be free to write their own story. She pleads that they be permitted to "*follow their hearts and find love in their own time*". Finally, independence, courage and wisdom are shown by Merida when she says these last words at the close of the film "*There are those who say fate is beyond our command, that destiny is not our own, but I know better. Our fate lives within us. You only have to be brave to see it.*"

**Moana's Character Traits:** Moana is first shown in the film as a toddler listening to the story of her grandmother about the legends of their island. While other children were crying because of fear of the monsters, Moana remained fearless and fascinated by the tale. The same characteristic is shown by the woman character all throughout the film. She goes on a quest to find Maui so that he can restore the heart of TeFiti, which the demigod had stolen. Moana goes on her adventure despite being forbidden by her father. Aside from the sense of responsibility to make the lives of her people better, Moana ventures out beyond the reef as an answer to the call of the sea where she has always been drawn to as a child. In her quest, she refuses to be defeated by circumstances and shows a strong

will to accomplish her tasks. Despite being turned down by Maui many times, she persisted until she succeeded. When she is imprisoned by the demigod in the cave, she is easily able to escape, manifesting resourcefulness and cleverness. She showed cunning and strength that helped her become victorious in her quest. Unlike the many princesses that came before her, Moana demonstrates that women can be physically strong, fearless, responsible, and even heroic. She manifests the love and compassion for her people by acting on the problem, going out to the sea, and saves her island. She is never passive nor weak and did not need saving by a prince. Surrounded by a loving family and a supportive community, Moana cares a great deal for her people, and the village in which she was born and raised. The very reason that she went on a voyage to find Maui and restore the heart of TeFiti is to lift the darkness that has been affecting her island ever since Maui took the heart from the goddess. Despite moments of loss and defeat, she showed enormous persistence and sense of responsibility. She says to Maui, "You wanna tell me I don't know what I'm doing? I know, I don't. I have no idea why the ocean chose me. You're right, but my island is dying so I am here." She presents herself as an imposing force despite her size and has bested the most fearsome beasts and impossible obstacles across the seas of Oceania while relying solely on her own intelligence. She scales the peaks of Lalotai, realm of hideous monsters even when Maui calls her a chicken. She also overtakes him during the climb and reaches the top first. She even rescues him when he cannot seem to take control of his powerful hook. Moana is extremely sympathetic and caring, which drives her to perform life-threatening stunts for what she genuinely believes to be the greater good, but her compassion is seen early in the film when she protects a small sea turtle from birds trying to prey on it until it reaches the water. As she grows in her adventure, Moana discovers more about herself. She realizes that no one else can define a person except that person herself. As such, she is able to bring her own passion and her responsibility together, ultimately recreating and honoring what comes before her: a unity between her people and the sea. Moana is a true example of a postmodern girl who comes in the form of a fearless sixteen-year-old, who hates being called a princess and defies her father who forbids her from venturing into the vast ocean to save her island from ruin. The self-reliant daughter-of-the-chief, along with her people, her grandma and Maui is breaking all the stereotypes that are always accepted by the world. Moana provides viewers the opportunity to redo and rethink the established notion of beauty, heroism and femininity. A sixteen year old girl beating the pirates and the giant crab Tamatao, when even the demigod was scared of is commendable. She is beautiful in all possible ways. There is beauty in her courage. There is beauty in each and every dialogue she delivers. There is beauty in her victory. She is the real hero. She is the perfect definition of femininity (Dilara).

## Conclusion

Based on the findings, it is proven that postmodernist characterization of women is revealed in the three Walt Disney animated films: *Mulan*, *Brave*, and *Moana*. The three films go against convention. Rather than being subservient to the customs, traditions, and social restrictions society places on women and expects them to follow, the postmodern women are characterized with courage, strength, affection, discipline, resourcefulness, responsibility, compassion, athleticism,

assertiveness, wisdom, heroism, clumsiness, awkwardness, stubbornness, rebelliousness, and kindness.

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