

People's Democratic Republic of Algeria  
Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research  
Mouloud Mammeri University of Tizi-Ouzou  
Faculty of Letters and Languages  
Department of English



**Domain:** Foreign Languages

**Branch:** English Language

**Speciality:** Literature Approach and Interdisciplinary

**Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of language requirements for  
the degree of Master in English**

**Title:**

## The Portrayal of Women in Selected Walt Disney Animated Movies

**Presented by:**

Ms. LAOUARI Lisa

Ms. ABDERRAHMANI Cylia

**Supervised by:**

Ms. MAHMOUDI Katia

**Board of Examiners:**

**Chair:** Ms. MATMER Dalila, MAA, Mouloud Mameri University of Tizi-Ouzou

**Supervisor:** Ms. MAHMOUDI Katia, MAA, Mouloud Mameri University of Tizi-Ouzou

**Examiner:** Ms. BADJA Fariza, MAA, Mouloud Mameri University of Tizi-Ouzou

**Academic year: 2023-2024**

## **Acknowledgements**

We begin by expressing our sincere gratitude to ALLAH for providing us with the patience and strength to complete the dissertation. We would like to express our sincere gratitude to our supervisor **Ms. Katia MAHMOUDI**, for her encouragement, patience and help throughout this research. We are equally grateful to the panel of examiners : **Ms. MATMER Dalila**, and **Ms. BADJA Fariza** for having accepted to read and examine our work.

## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines the portrayal of women in four Disney animated films, from 1937 to 2020 ; *Snow White (1937)*, *Cinderella (1950)*, *Pocahontas (1995)*, and *Mulan (2020)*. The aim of this research is to analyze how women were depicted in these movies and how they challenged traditional gender roles over time. The study relies on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex (1949)* and bell hooks' *Feminism is for Everybody (2000)*. Disney's depiction of women has evolved from traditional passive roles to more empowered independent characters, reflecting broader societal changes and feminists movements. In the early movies women were often depicted as dependent, relying on male validation and conforming to societal beauty standards. In contrast, more recent heroines like Mulan are empowered figures who actively shape their own destinies, showcasing qualities such as bravery, independence, and resilience.

**Key words :** Animation, beauty standards, disney movies, dependence, empowerment, feminism, independence, male domination.

## **Dedications :**

To my parents to whom I owe my success, as they have always believed in me.

My beloved Farid for being always supportive ; I will always appreciate all what he has done for me.

My brothers.

My dearest mate Cylia and her beloved family.

My friend Kami.

**Lisa LAOUARI.**

My beloved parents.

My brother and sisters.

My friend Lisa and her dear family.

My dear friend Kami.

**Cylia ABDERRAHMANI.**

## Table of contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	<b>I</b>
<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>II</b>
<b>Dedication</b> .....	<b>III</b>
<b>Contents</b> .....	<b>IV</b>
<b>I. General Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
a. Review of the Literature .....	2
b. Issue and working hypotheses .....	4
c. Methodological outline .....	5
<b>Endnotes</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>II. Methods and Materials</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>1. Methods</b> .....	<b>8</b>
a- Simone De Beauvoir’s ‘The Second Sex’ (1949) .....	8
b- Bell hook ‘Feminism is for everybody’ (2000) .....	9
<b>2. Materials</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>A- The Biography of Walt Disney</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>A. Summaries</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>a. The Summary of walt Disney Snow White (1937)</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>b. The Summary of Walt Disney Cinderella (1950)</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>c. The Summary of Walt Disney Mulan (2020)</b> .....	<b>11</b>

<b>d. The Summary of Walt Disney Pocahontas (1995)</b> .....	11
<b>Endnotes</b> .....	13
<b>III. Results</b> .....	14
<b>IV. Discussion</b> .....	15
<b>Chapter One: The portrayal of Women in Disney’s Early Animated Movies</b> .....	15
<b>1- Unrealistic Beauty Standards in Snow White 1937and Cinderella 1950</b> ....	15
<b>a- The Stereotypical Portrayal of Cinderella 1950</b> .....	17
<b>b- The Stereotypical Portrayal of Snow White 1937</b> .....	23
<b>Chapter Two: The Evolving Representation of Female Characters in Disney's Modern Films.</b> .....	29
<b>1.Mulan 2020, From Damsel in Distress to an Empowered Protagonist</b> .....	29
<b>2.Pocahontas 1995, From a Damsel in Distress to an Empowered Protagonist</b> .....	37
<b>Endnotes</b> .....	44
<b>V.General Conclusion</b> .....	47
<b>VI. Bibliography</b> .....	49

**List of figures:**

**Figure01: Cinderella treated like a maid .....18**

**Figure02: Cinderella’s godmother transforming her for the ball ..... 19**

**Figure 03: A sea of similarity ..... 20**

**Figure04: Cinderella’s step-sisters ruining her look .....21**

**Figure01: Snow White wishing and waiting for her prince to come .....24**

**Figure 02: the queen’s obsession with beauty ..... 26**

**Figure 03: The dwarfs working in the mine .....28**

**Figure01: Mulan joining the army. ....30**

**Figure 02: Mulan defying her male friends. .... 31**

**Figure03: Mulan’s journey to self-discovery. .... 33**

**Figure03: the soldiers working together. .... 34**

**Figure 04: the matchmaker’s disappointment. .... 36**

**Figure 01: The role of women in the past society of Pocahontas ..... 38**

**Figure 02: The arrival of the English settlers..... 40**

**Figure03: Pocahontas saving the captain John Smith.....41**

## **I. General Introduction**

Feminism is a movement that has been advocating for gender equality and social justice for over a century. Although some people associate feminism with aggressive activism and an antagonistic view of men, most feminists simply believe in equality of both genders. Feminism aims to challenge gender-based discrimination and oppression and promote equal rights and opportunities for women. <sup>1</sup>

Popular culture, like Disney, has played a significant role in representing feminism, with Disney films facing criticism for perpetuating gender stereotypes and beauty standards that contribute to inequality. In early Disney movies, women were predominantly depicted through traditional and often stereotypical roles.

As Disney progressed into the later decades characters like Mulan and Pocahontas, began to show more agency and complexity. However, their stories still often revolved around romantic pursuits with the characters seeking for validation and direction from male figures.

In early Disney movies, the depiction of women often reflected a narrow view of femininity, focusing on beauty and passivity, with characters like Snow White and Cinderella defined by their domestic qualities, with their stories revolving around romance and being rescued by a prince. These portrayals reflected the societal norms of the time, where women were often seen as dependent and primarily valued for their appearance and domestic skills. Over time, however, Disney began to evolve, with more recent films, female characters are portrayed as more complex and empowered with greater complexity and independence. These changes reflect a shift toward more multifaceted representations of women, sparking ongoing discussions about gender roles and representation in media.

### **a. Review of the Literature**

Disney's *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Mulan* (2020), and *Pocahontas* (1995) all show the difficulties faced by women in patriarchal societies, and how they got free by the time. Each of these pieces has been examined and received a lot of critical attention. To begin with, Alex Wood's review '*Analysis of Snow White from a feminist perspective*' published on June 9<sup>th</sup>,2021, in which he states that the protagonist represents the stereotypical standards of a female in a patriarchal society. The article discusses Snow White's beauty, behavior, and role as a woman and how the society suggests that women who conform to the ideal standards will live a secure and comfortable life. <sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, Jami Heptinstall analyzed the Disney movie *Snow White* (1937) in his thesis '*The Feminist Portrayal of Snow White*' published on April 15<sup>th</sup>,2021, the author explores the feminist perspective of Snow White's portrayal. The thesis delves into examining how Snow White, the protagonist embodies stereotypical standards of beauty and behavior in a patriarchal society. It discusses the implications of conforming to these ideal standards and the portrayal of women's roles referring to the degree to which a woman is seen as valuable, successful and worthy of respect by society. Additionally, the thesis likely analyzes the character's agency, the impact of beauty standards, and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes within the story of Snow White. <sup>3</sup>

In the same way, Disney's *Cinderella* (1950) has been the subject of many critics. To start with, Liza Nasir in her article '*Feminist theory: Cinderella*' published on November 8th, 2023, claims that the story is anti-feminist because of the representation of gender inequality through patriarchy and objectification, specifically sexual objectification. In addition, she discusses how the story reinforces the stereotype that women are dependent on men and that their worth is based on their beauty and ability to attract a man. The article also highlights how the story reinforces the idea that women should be submissive and obedient to men. The

author argues that the story of Cinderella perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes and reinforces patriarchal values.

Hazel Grace is another critic who has examined Disney's *Cinderella* (1950). In her article '*Feminist Criticism On Cinderella*', published on October 10th, 2023, she provides a feminist analysis of the Cinderella folktale. The article examines the hidden meanings and lessons in the story that encourage girls to engage in unsociable behaviors and develop negative relationships with their family members. The author also discusses the impact of the misinterpretation and application of the Cinderella character, shedding light on the cultural analyses and historical incursions related to the tale. Hazel Grace in her analysis critiques the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles through the character of Cinderella, emphasizing her passive and compliant behavior as aligning with traditional gender norms and expectations. <sup>4</sup>

Similar to all the other movies, Disney's *Hua Mulan* (2020) has received many critics . To start, we will mention Sophia Weng in her article '*Patriarchy in Disney's live-action Mulan*' published in October 27<sup>th</sup> , 2020. She criticizes Disney's live- action "Mulan" for missed opportunities in representing genuine Chinese culture and Mulan's story of empowerment to a new generation of young women. The cultural and patriarchal missteps of the movie's plot are also discussed, within the article noting that Mulan ultimately defeats Shan Yu by using her fan and intelligence, not her masculine strengths. The article concludes that the live-action '*Mulan*' is problematic for women and Chinese culture, despite its compelling resolution resonating with those who have struggled to fit into their own cultural conventions. <sup>5</sup>

Likewise, we find the review of Disney's '*Mulan*' (2020) from plugged In, it was published on October,10<sup>th</sup>,2023. The review highlights several positive points about the film, including the portrayal of Mulan's empowerment and her ability to defy traditional gender

roles. The inclusion of the song *'Reflection'* from the animated original film is also praised, as well as the film's strong production design and scenic design.

In the same way, Disney's *Pocahontas* (1995) caught a lot of criticism. To start with Cornel's Pewewardy article *'Why One Can't Ignore Pocahontas'* published on November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023. The article criticizes Disney's *'Pocahontas'* for its historical inaccuracies and problematic portrayal of Native American culture. It discusses the use of terms such as savages, heathens, pagans, devils, and primitive in the movie, which reflect a value judgment of white superiority. The article also highlights the subtle justification of the subjugation of Indian tribes by so-called "advanced" cultures in the name of progress. The article also questions the entertainment value of the film and the responsibility of educators in addressing these issues.<sup>6</sup>

Another critic who has analyzed Disney's *Pocahontas* is James Allen in his article *'Does Disney's Pocahontas Do More Harm Than Good?'*; He discusses the portrayal of Pocahontas in Disney's *'Pocahontas'* (1995) from a feminist perspective, acknowledging the film's embrace of an environmentalist message and its portrayal of female agency and empathy. However, it provides a moment of truth by highlighting the real historical context of Pocahontas, including her forced marriage to a much older man and the destruction of her culture. The article examines how Pocahontas is portrayed in the movie and its romanticized story, which reduces the terrible historical facts in favor of a romantic tale. It also acknowledges the criticism of the film for fictionalizing Pocahontas's story and promoting a romanticized and equality-driven narrative that diverges from historical accuracy.

#### **b. Issue and working hypothesis**

From the above review of the literature, it is noticeable that a lot of research has been done on the Walt Disney films *Snow White* 1937, *Cinderella* 1950, *Mulan* 2020, and *Pocahontas* 1995, but none, have attempted to examine and analyze the four films together

from a feminist perspective. The research aims to analyze the depiction of female characters in old and early Disney movies. The main focus is on evaluating whether these characters are portrayed as dependent or independent individuals by analyzing their traits, actions, and storylines to assess their level of agency and self-reliance.

In addition to examining the representation of women in old and early Disney movies, this study delves into the broader issue of women's lives under male dominance and societal oppression. Some female protagonists in these movies frequently face patriarchal societies to achieve independence, reflecting the difficulties that women actually experience in a variety of historical and cultural circumstances. Through an examination of the characteristics and actions of characters in *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Mulan* (2020), and *Pocahontas* (1995), this study seeks to shed light on the manner in which these female characters manage and challenge social norms.

### **c. Methodological outline**

At the methodological level, in the first section we have started with an introduction in which we have stated a general overview of our topic. It is followed by the review of the literature where we have reviewed some literary works in Disney movies. And we have established an issue and working hypothesis that we aim to achieve. The second section is composed of the methods and materials chosen to reach our aim; in the method section we will provide an overview of Simone de Beauvoir's theory *The Second Sex* 1949 and bell hooks theory *Feminism is for Everybody* 2000, in the material section we will deal with a short summary of the movies .

The discussion section is divided into two chapters. In the first chapter, we will analyze how women were represented in early Disney movies such as (*Snow White* 1937 and *Cinderella* 1950). In the second section we delve into the evolution of women in more recent Disney movies such as *Mulan* (2020) and *Pocahontas* (1995). Then at the end we will give

out a general conclusion where we will conclude our research with a summary of the main topics developed in the dissertation.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Edwards, M. (2024, January 6). The feminist view of media: An outline, explanation, and analysis. Easy Sociology. <https://easysociology.com/sociological-perspectives/feminism/the-feminist-view-of-media-an-outline-explanation-and-analysis>
- <sup>2</sup> Wood, A. (2023). Analysis of Snow White from a feminist perspective. GradesFixers. <https://gradesfixer.com/free-essay-examples/analysis-of-snow-white-from-a-feminist-perspective>
- <sup>3</sup> Heptinstall, J. (2021, April 15). Little Snow White from a feminist perspective: Another misleading message towards young girls. Academia.edu. [https://www.academia.edu/30450562/Little\\_Snow\\_White\\_from\\_A\\_Feminist\\_Perspective\\_Another\\_Misleading\\_Message\\_Towards\\_Young\\_Girls](https://www.academia.edu/30450562/Little_Snow_White_from_A_Feminist_Perspective_Another_Misleading_Message_Towards_Young_Girls)
- <sup>4</sup> Vargas, H. G. T. (2023). Feminist criticism on Cinderella. Academia.edu. [https://www.academia.edu/33807874/Feminist\\_Criticism\\_on\\_Cinderella](https://www.academia.edu/33807874/Feminist_Criticism_on_Cinderella)
- <sup>5</sup> Weng, S. (2020, October 27). Patriarchy in Disney's live-action Mulan. Harvard Political Review. <https://harvardpolitics.com/live-action-mulan>
- <sup>6</sup> Pewewardy, C. (2023, November 8). Why one can't ignore Pocahontas. Rethinking Schools. <https://rethinkingschools.org/articles/why-one-can-t-ignore-pocahontas>

## II. Methods and Materials

### 1. Methods

This dissertation discusses the portrayal of women in Disney animated movies *Snow White and the seven dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Mulan* (2020), and *Pocahontas* (1995). To reach our purpose, we have relied on Simone De Beauvoir's theory '*The Second Sex*' theory (1949), and bell hooks '*Feminism is for Everybody*' (2000). These two selected theories have provided the present research with a theoretical framework on which the analysis is based.

#### a- Simone De Beauvoir's '*The Second Sex*' (1949)

Simone de Beauvoir was a French existentialist philosopher, writer, social theorist, and feminist activist. In her work '*The Second Sex*' (1949), De Beauvoir argues that throughout history, women have been classified as the '*Other*', allowing them to remain oppressed. She contends that men have defined women as the inferior side of humanity, unworthy of responsibility, and outlines the difficulties women face in liberating themselves economically, politically, and sexually. <sup>1</sup>

De Beauvoir is a feminist philosophical treatise that explores the treatment of women throughout history, challenging traditional gender roles and critiquing patriarchy. Simone de Beauvoir's '*The Second Sex*' (1949) is a feminist classic that explores the historical and social construction of femininity and the ways in which women are oppressed and marginalized in patriarchal societies.<sup>2</sup>

Simone de Beauvoir's main idea is that men oppress women by considering them as the '*Other*' defined in opposition to men. Men are seen as essential, absolute, and transcendent, while women are viewed as inessential, incomplete, and a loss for the society. According to Beauvoir, men create, act, and invent, while women are confined to immanence,

or inwardness. *'The Second Sex'* provides a comprehensive analysis of the historical and social construction of femininity and how women are oppressed and marginalized in patriarchal societies.

**b- Bell Hooks 'Feminism is for everybody' (2000)**

bell hook is an influential American author, feminist theorist, and social activist known for her groundbreaking work *'Feminism Is for Everybody'*( 2000) In this seminal book, hooks delves into the core principles of feminism, emphasizing that feminism is not a movement exclusive to women but a vital ideology that benefits society as a whole. She argues that feminism is often misunderstood and wrongly associated with man-hating, highlighting the importance of dispelling these misconceptions. Hooks believes that feminism should include everyone and consider how different types of oppression, like those based on race, class, and gender, are connected. She wants to make feminism more accessible and fair for all. By challenging traditional notions of feminism and advocating for a more accessible and inclusive movement, hook calls for a transformative shift towards equality and social justice. <sup>3</sup>

Bell hooks "Feminism Is For Everybody 2000", delves into the global oppression of women, highlighting the various forms of discrimination they face, including sexism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and classism. Hook emphasizes the necessity of gender-based analysis to understand the root causes of women's inequality and advocates for collective action to combat these forms of oppression.

In her concluding chapters, hooks outlines the concept of Visionary Feminism, envisioning a world where all individuals are respected and valued, irrespective of social constructs like race or class. She promotes a feminist movement that seeks to create a society where everyone can thrive and reach their full potential, emphasizing the importance of breaking up patriarchal structures and conditioning. *'Feminism is for Everybody'* 2000 serves

as a compelling call to action for a more equitable and just society, urging readers to embrace feminist principles and work towards a future free from oppression and inequality.

## **2. Materials**

### **2- Materials**

#### **A- The biography of Walt Disney**

Walt Disney was an American animator, film producer, and entrepreneur who were born on December 5th, 1901, in Chicago, Illinois. He was the fourth son of Elias Disney, a carpenter, farmer, and building contractor. When Walt was just a toddler, the family moved to a farm near Marceline, Missouri, which is said to have furnished the inspiration and model for the Main Street, U.S.A., of Disneyland. Disney was an innovative animator and created the cartoon character Mickey Mouse. He won 22 Academy Awards during his lifetime, and was the founder of theme parks Disneyland and Walt Disney World. Disney was a shy and insecure man in private but adopted a warm and outgoing public persona. Although there have been accusations that he was racist or antisemitic, they have been contradicted by many who knew him.<sup>4</sup>

#### **A. Summaries**

##### **a. The Summary of Walt Disney Snow White (1937)**

*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) is a classic animated film that tells the story of snow white, a beautiful princess whose jealous stepmother, the Queen, orders her killed, rescuits a woodsman to kill her. However, the huntsman who is sent to do the deed is unable to execute out his task and tells the young girl to go, and Snow White flees into the forest. There, she discovers a cottage inhabited by seven dwarfs. She befriends them, but the Queen discovers Snow White is still alive and disguises herself to poison her with a cursed apple. After falling into a deep sleep, Snow White is eventually awakened by the kiss of a prince.

### **b. The Summary of Walt Disney Cinderella (1950)**

*'Cinderella'* (1950) is a classic animated film about a kind young girl living with her cruel stepmother and jealous stepsisters. Despite her hardships, she remains hopeful and dreams of a better life. With the help of animal friends and the enchantments of a fairy godmother, Cinderella is magically transformed and able to attend the royal ball, where she captures the heart of the prince. However, she must leave before midnight, losing one of her glass slippers. The prince searches for her, and when he finds Cinderella, they are reunited. The prince and Cinderella exchange wedding vows and become husband and wife.

### **c. The summary of Walt Disney Mulan (2020)**

*'Mulan'* (2020) is a live-action film follows the story of a young Chinese woman who disguises herself as a man to take her ailing father's place in the army. In a time of war against invaders, Mulan proves her bravery and skill while navigating challenges and expectations of honor. As she fights to protect her country, she also learns about her true identity and the importance of being true to oneself. Mulan is intelligent, thoughtful, and imperfect, and she defies the idea that a woman should be seen and not heard. The film gathers greater focus on female empowerment and self-acceptance.

### **d. The Summary of Walt Disney Pocahontas (1995)**

*'Pocahontas'* (1995) tells the story of a Native American woman who falls in love with John Smith, an English settler. Set in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the film explores the conflict between Native Americans and European colonizers. Pocahontas seeks to bridge the gap between her people and the newcomers, advocating for peace and understanding. Through her connection with nature and her wise grandmother, she learns about love and her role in her community. The film romanticizes Pocahontas's encounter with John Smith and her legendary saving of his life. The film's message is that arriving settlers despoiled the forests and imposed their own version of civilization, whether or not it was wanted. Governor Ratcliffe,

the blustering leader of the Virginia Company, is shown gleefully using cannons to level forests. And when the settlers open fire on the Indians, they retaliate by capturing John Smith and then prepare to execute him. Only Pocahontas, who can empathize with both sides, can save him.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Johns Hopkins University Press. (2012). Theory & Event, 15(2).  
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/478362>
- <sup>2</sup> Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (2004, August 17). Simone de Beauvoir.  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/beauvoir>
- <sup>3</sup> Biana, H. T. (2020, February). Extending bell hooks' feminist theory. Bridgewater State University. <https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2207&context=jiws>
- <sup>4</sup> Pluto Books. Feminism is for Everybody by bell hooks.  
<https://www.plutobooks.com/blog/feminism-is-for-everybody-bell-hooks>
- <sup>5</sup> Wikipedia. Walt Disney. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt\\_Disney](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt_Disney)

### III. Results

Our dissertation attempts to analyze *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Mulan* (2020), and *Pocahontas* (1995), through a feminist perspective. Our research has been based on the representation of women in both early and recent Disney movies. Thus, to complete this study, we have used two theories, Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and bell hook's '*Feminism is For Everybody*' (2000) which explores the historical and social construction of femininity and the ways in which women are oppressed and marginalized in patriarchal societies.

In the first chapter of our dissertation, we noticed that the portrayal of women in early Disney movies often revolves around traditional gender roles and idealized characteristics such as beauty, passivity and virtue. These traits are most prominently seen in characters like Cinderella and Snow White, who exemplify these standards through their stories. These two heroines share notable similarities in their depictions as passive, idealized figures whose primary virtues are beauty and kindness. Both characters enduring hardship and mistreatment from their stepfamily or evil forces without actively fighting back. They were two characters waited for rescue or change rather than seeking their own agency.

In the second chapter of our work, we have tried to present the changing portrayal of female characters from early Disney movies to the recent one. *Mulan* and *Pocahontas* present a different kind of heroines, one who embodies strength, agency, empowerment, and defiance of traditional gender roles. These two characters challenge the expectations of women in their respective cultures, and their stories reflect themes of independence and leadership rather than relying on external intervention.

Recent Disney films have shown a shift in the portrayal of female characters, offering young girls more than just castles and handsome men. Considering our research, we have noticed that, Simone de Beauvoir and bell hooks share similarities in their feminist perspectives.

#### **IV. Discussion**

At this level of our dissertation, we will study the unrealistic beauty standards, and the stereotypical portrayal of women in Disney's early movies by relying on Simone de Beauvoir's theory 'The Second Sex' (1949). This chapter intends to explore the misrepresentation of female characters in Disney films such as "Snow White" and "Cinderella", highlighting how these narratives not only reinforces traditional gender roles but also shape societal perceptions of femininity and self-worth, ultimately contributing to a legacy of unrealistic expectations for women.

##### **Chapter One: The Portrayal of Women in Disney's Early Animated Movies**

###### **1- Unrealistic beauty standards in "Snow white" 1937 and "Cinderella" 1950**

Disney's *Snow White* (1937), and *Cinderella* (1950) are the best examples to analyze how women are described as weak and passive in early Disney movies. The main aspects of these concepts are being pretty to be seen, male dominance and women's inferiority. Indeed, Disney *Snow White* and *Cinderella* demonstrate men's superiority and dominance over women. In regard to Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, it is crucial to show that Disney's early animated films reinforced the notion of women as *The Second Sex*, where they are defined in relation to men and are seen as inferior, subordinate, and dependent on male authority.

In "Snow White", the princess is shown as a damsel-in-distress, requiring the prince to save her from the Evil Queen. Similarly, Cinderella is depicted as a domestic servant who needs the prince to rescue her from her stepmother and stepsisters. These portrayals reinforce the notion that women are inferior and subordinate to men, relying on male authority for protection and rescue. These early Disney films set the stage for the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, where women are expected to be beautiful, passive, and dependent on men. The

beauty standards depicted in these films, such as the emphasis on physical appearance and the need for male validation, are unrealistic and contribute to societal expectations of women's roles. <sup>1</sup>

De Beauvoir's theory is supported by the depiction of the early Disney princesses as confined to the stereotype of homemaker, with their primary roles being cleaning, cooking, and caring for children. Their physical appearance and beauty are emphasized as their most valuable assets, and women who do not fit this ideal are often portrayed as "ugly, unpleasant, old, overweight, or obese". This reinforces the idea that a woman's worth is tied to her physical attractiveness and ability to attract a male partner. In contrast, the male characters are depicted as the heroes who save the female protagonists, while the female characters are relegated to passive, domestic roles. The "evil" female characters, like the Queen in *Snow White* and the stepmother in *Cinderella*, are portrayed as intelligent, ambitious, and independent, but are ultimately punished and ridiculed for not conforming to traditional gender norms. <sup>2</sup>

The portrayal of women in early Disney films, such as *Snow White* (1937) and *Cinderella* (1950), reflects the gender norms and stereotypes of the time. These films depict female characters as passive, helpless, and in constant need of protection and rescue by male characters. *Snow White* is described as a "naïve princess who depends on her seven male friends and a prince for survival", while *Cinderella* and *Aurora* from *Sleeping Beauty* "require the heroism of the male prince other than the potential heroine." <sup>3</sup>

Which means the narratives centers around the male prince's role as the hero, which reflects traditional gender roles in fairy tales. The positions the prince as the one who must rescue them, emphasizing the idea that female characters often need saving. This dynamic can be seen as a commentary on the societal expectations of men as protectors and women as passive figures. <sup>4</sup>

### a- The Stereotypical Portrayal of Cinderella (1950)

The Disney animated film *Cinderella* (1950) provides a prime example of the type of female character dependence that Simone de Beauvoir critiques in her influential work “*The Second Sex*”, Cinderella, the protagonist, is depicted as entirely reliant on and subordinate to the male characters around her. From the outset, Cinderella is established as an orphan, entirely at the mercy of her cruel stepmother and stepsisters. Without any parental or familial support, Cinderella is forced into a position of servitude, relegated to domestic duties and denied any real agency or independence. Her worth is judged solely by her physical beauty and ability to attract a male suitor, rather than her own merits or capabilities.<sup>6</sup>

Simone de Beauvoir's idea that women are considered “the second sex” because they are defined in relation to and subordinate to men is evident in Cinderella's story. Cinderella relies entirely on the prince to save her from her difficult situation, and her hopes for a better life depends on his recognition and acceptance of her.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, the film's depiction of Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters as "evil" female characters who defy traditional gender norms suggests a punitive attitude towards women who do not conform to patriarchal expectations.<sup>8</sup> To summarize, Disney's *Cinderella* (1950) presents a traditional and patriarchal portrayal of gender roles, criticizing the stepmother and stepsisters for their strength. This narrative suggests that these positive qualities are actually undesirable and should be suppressed. The film reinforces a patriarchal view that women should conform to societal expectations and be punished if they do not comply.

The film perpetuates the idea that women are the *Other* and are marginalized in society, which means that women are seen as different or inferior to men and are treated as

such in society. In the movie, Cinderella is treated differently from her step-sisters because of her social status as a servant in her own home, she occupies a lower social position which makes her vulnerable to mistreatment. She is forced to work hard and is isolated from the world, which shows how she is marginalized in her stepfamily.



**Figure01: Cinderella treated like a maid (00:26:53).**

In this scene, we see Cinderella engaged in various domestic tasks, she is cleaning. This portrayal emphasizes her role as a servant in her own home, highlighting her lack of freedom. The contrast between her hard work and her stepfamily's carefree undercores the unfairness of her situation. As we can see when her stepmother was ordering her, saying:

There is the large carpet in the main hall, clean it, and the windows upstairs and down, wash them, oh yes and tapestries and the draperies, do them again, and don't forget the garden, then scrub the terrace, sweep the halls and the stairs, clean the chimneys, and of course there is the mending and the sewing and the laundry. Oh yes, and one more thing, see that Lucifer gets his bath. (Cinderella, 22min52).

In her book, Simone De Beauvoir explains that women are often seen as the "Other" because they are not viewed as individuals but as a group, leading to their marginalization and unequal treatment compared to men.<sup>9</sup> In the movie *Cinderella* (1950), the prince rescues Cinderella from her difficult life, reinforcing the idea that women need men to save them and cannot be independent. The film also reinforces traditional gender roles and stereotypes,

reflecting societal expectations of women in a male-dominated world. Women may relate to Cinderella and be influenced by the idea of depending on men for care and protection. <sup>10</sup>

Analyzing Disney's *Cinderella* (1950) requires a close examination of its themes and symbols to understand the underlying messages about gender roles and societal norms. The motifs in the film highlight patriarchal expectations of women and the power dynamics within a male-dominated society, where those deemed as "Other" are subject to the authority of those above them in the hierarchy. <sup>11</sup>

As it figures on the shot below, Cinderella's fairy godmother assists her in physically transforming from rags to a stunning ballgown, emphasizing how society values a woman's appearance and attractiveness. This transformation highlights the notion that a woman's value is primarily associated with her physical beauty, as her new look is the only factor that increases her value, as shown in shot 02 (00 :47 :24).



**Figure02: Cinderella's godmother preparing her for the ball (00:47:24).**

The film's focus on Cinderella's physical transformation also underscores cultural expectations that a woman's acceptance and success are tied to her physical attractiveness,

rather than her individuality or unique qualities. Furthermore, the comparison between Cinderella and her stepsisters, who are represented as less worthy or desirable due to their lack of conventional beauty, reinforces the objectification of women who do not meet society's ideals of beauty and perpetuates the narrative that evaluates women based on these standards. Finally, the ball scene demonstrates how similar women are perceived as fashionable dolls in the eyes of the public, rather than as individuals with originality or special traits, emphasizing beauty standards in the film, as we can see in shot 03 ( 00:51:27)



**Figure 03: A sea of similarity.**

This scene highlights how the ball setting perpetuates a uniform, unchanging ideal of femininity that all the women are expected to embody. Their appearance reinforces patriarchal beauty standards and the notion that a woman's worth is tied to her physical attractiveness. As we can easily notice when the fairy godmother was transforming Cinderella, she was giving importance only to the physical appearance and the coach, only on the things that will attract, saying:

You can't go to the ball looking like that, let's see Hmm, I say the first thing you need is that a pumpkin to transform to an elegant coach, now with an elegant coach like that of course we'll simply have to coaching four, and yes, you can't go to the ball without um, a horse, but instead of a horse you'll have the coachman of course, well that

does it I guess, except, Oh yes the finishing touch and yes the footman. Oh child you can't go in that dress, let's see dear your size and the shade of your eyes, something simple but daring too. (Cinderella,44 min 08).

Cinderella's interaction with her stepsisters and stepmother highlight the complicated dynamics of female relationships, exposing a lack of solidarity among the ladies in the story as well as competitiveness. The stepsisters, who compete with one another for the prince's attention, and the stepmother who is frequently depicted as the one who planned Cinderella's abuse ,represent a competitive dynamic that has its roots in society norms, as shown in figure 04 (00 :41 :33).



**Figure03: Cinderella's step-sister ruining her look (00:41 :33)**

This scene highlights Cinderella's stepsister Drizella jealousy, as she try to ruin her appearance to prevent her from attending the ball. The stepsister action is resulted by her own insecurity, as she is aware that Cinderella's beauty and charm make her a more attractive for the prince. We can quickly detect their envy when saying:

Oh no, please mother she can't come, please don't let her come mother, I think she is, Oh no you're a thief, they are my beans give that here, Oh that's my sash wearing my sash take that back, you stupid ninny, you ungrateful little thief (Cinderella, 41min05).

The widespread impact of patriarchal norms, which set women against one another in an attempt to achieve social validation, is reflected in Cinderella's female relatives' competition for male acceptance. Cinderella's stepsisters, shaped by social conventions, unconsciously become agents of societal expectations by sticking to established gender norms, thus maintaining the restrictions placed on women and the lack of unity among female characters.<sup>12</sup>

The competitive and unsupportive interactions portrayed in Cinderella's home sphere resonate with De Beauvoir's views concerning how women may unintentionally contribute to their own oppression, illuminating the complex ways in which societal expectations can define and constrain female solidarity, which exactly aligns with De Beauvoir in his theory *The Second Sex* saying that "*But women do not say 'We', except at some congress of feminists or similar formal demonstration; men say 'women', and women use the same word in referring to themselves. This is the first and most fundamental fact about the situation of women.*"(De Beauvoir 1949. p.15)<sup>13</sup>

In "Cinderella" de Beauvoir's observation about women's lack of a collective identity is reflected in Cinderella's passive role, where her identity is largely defined by her relationships with men; her stepmother, her fairy godmother, and the prince. Throughout the story, Cinderella does not express a sense of "we" or solidarity with other women. This portrayed women as isolated in their struggles and lacking agency.

De Beauvoir in her theory argues that women are often objectified and dependent on men in society. Cinderella's dependence on her fairy godmother and the prince for her transformation and happiness reinforces this idea. The story also highlights the importance of beauty and wealth for women's acceptance and success, which limits their opportunities for self-expression and intellectual fulfillment. Cinderella's passive and obedient behavior, as well as her comparison with her less conventionally attractive stepsisters, further perpetuates

gender stereotypes and objectification. Overall, Cinderella's story reflects the patriarchal ideologies and gender-related behavior that Beauvoir criticizes in her theory.<sup>14</sup>

#### **b- The Stereotypical Portrayal of Snow White (1937)**

The representation of women in *Snow White* (1937) conforms to and reinforces societal expectations of female dependency and obedience is made easier with the help of De Beauvoir's work. According to traditional gender norms, Snow White is frequently portrayed as naive, submissive, and innocent. This image aligns with De Beauvoir's explanation of how society views women as less than men and mysterious. Considering that Snow White is a perfect princess, devoid of self awareness or personal history reduces her to a passive symbol of idealized femininity, reinforcing stereotypes and lacking meaningful exploration of autonomy or identity. It is possible to interpret her as a mirror of gender stereotypes and other social injustices. This analysis sheds light on the ways in which "Snow White" exemplifies the themes of dependence and submission that De Beauvoir discusses in her work.<sup>15</sup>

De Beauvoir criticizes the portrayal of women as passive and dependent in society, particularly in fairy tales like "*Snow White and the seven Dwarfs*" 1937. She argues that these representations reinforce traditional gender roles, limiting women's agency and reinforcing deeply ingrained stereotypes.

Dependence on Male Figures in the movie "*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*" 1937 is a major theme, Snow White's character embodies a dual manifestation of societal expectations placed upon women, as she is dependent on male figures for protection and salvation while also adhering to traditional gender roles. Snow White's reliance on male figures is evident in her initial flight from her stepmother's envy, seeking refuge with the dwarfs and later with the Prince, it is demonstrated when she was singing, saying:

We are standing by a wishing well, make a wish to the well, that's all

what you have to do, and if you hear it enchoing, your wish will soon come true. I'am wishing for the one I love to find me today, I'am hoping and I'am dreaming of the nice things he'll say. (Snow White, 4min43).

As we can see it through the following shot figure 01 (00:04:43).



**Figure01: Snow White wishing and waiting for her prince to come (00:04 :43).**

The scene shows Snow White's seeking for love, and thinking that only her prince can make her happy. Snow White's desire for love and belief that only her prince can make her happy show how stories often suggest that a woman needs a romantic partner to be truly happy, reinforcing traditional gender norms.

This dependency aligns with Simone de Beauvoir's critique of women being defined in relation to men, reinforcing the idea that women's narratives are often shaped by their connections to male characters.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, within the dwarfs' cottage, Snow White's activities lead heavily towards traditional gender roles, such as cleaning and cooking, effectively reinforcing the stereotypical view of women as homemakers, for example upon her arrival to their house she was saying:

Oh! What a cute little chair! Why there is seven little chairs! Must be

seven little children. And from the look of this table, seven untidy little children; a pickaxe, a stocking, and a shoe! And just look at that fireplace, it is covered with dust, and look! Cobwebs everywhere! My, my, my! What a pile of dirty dishes! And just look at that broom! Why they have never swept this room, maybe they have no mother, then they are orphans, that's too bad. I know! We will clean the house and surprise them, then, maybe they will let me stay.(Snow White, 16min19)

This duality in Snow White's character underscores the societal expectations that limit women to roles of dependence on male figures and adherence to traditional domestic duties.

The 1937 Disney film '*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*' perpetuates the notion that a woman's worth is primarily determined by her physical appearance. The film places a strong emphasis on Snow White's exceptional beauty, which is a key factor in her relationships with the prince and the dwarfs. <sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, the stepmother's envy of Snow White's beauty is a central driver of the plot, underscoring the idea that a woman's worth is intrinsically tied to her appearance and that she poses a threat to others who lack her level of physical beauty. Snow White's passive and dependent nature, as well as her ultimate rescue by the prince, reinforces the notion that a woman's value lies in her beauty and her ability to attract a male suitor, rather than in her own agency or capabilities, reflecting the patriarchal ideologies critiqued by Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal work, '*The Second Sex*.' <sup>18</sup>



**Figure 02: the queen's obsession with beauty (00 :02 :32).**

This scene captures , we see the fact that beauty is the only thing that matters for the queen, asking her mirror who's the prettier, to make sure that no one is prettier than her, saying:

Slave in the magic mirror, come from the farthest space. Through wind and darkness, I summon thee. Speak! Let me see thy face. Magic mirror on the wall, who is the fairest one of all? Alas for her! Reveal her name. (Snow White, 02min32)

The queen's obsession with her own beauty and her fear of losing her status as the fairest in the land drives her to attempt to kill Snow White, we see it when she was talking to the huntsman, saying:

Take her far into the forest, find some secluded glade where she can pick Her wildflowers, and there my faithful Huntsman, you will kill her, but to make Doubly sure you do not fail, bring back Her heart. (Snow White, 7min07)

This reflects the idea that women are in competition with each other for male attention, particularly through the relationship between the Evil Queen. The Queen's jealousy over Snow's beauty drives her to eliminate her rival, highlighting the idea that women's worth is often tied to her appearance and the approval of men, and that beauty is a limited resource that must be guarded and protected.

The prince's love for Snow White is primarily based on her beauty, and the dwarfs are enchanted by her. Additionally, Snow White's reliance on her beauty to gain protection and attention, as well as the reinforcement of traditional gender roles, further emphasize the idea that a woman's worth is tied to her physical appearance. This perpetuation of beauty as a measure of a woman's worth reflects societal norms and expectations, reinforcing gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles.<sup>19</sup>

In the Disney animated film "*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*," Snow White, the main character, exhibits typical female traits like kindness and domesticity, and her primary focus is on finding love, we can notice it when she was singing the iconic song:

He was so romantic, I could not resist. Some day my prince will come, some day we will meet again, and away from his castle we will go to be happy forever, I know. Some day when spring is here, we will find our love anew, and the birds will sing, and wedding bells will ring. Some day, when my dreams will come true. (Snow White, 57min49)

Snow White expresses her longing for love and a romantic partner. This recurring theme throughout the movie underlines the traditional notion that a woman's ultimate happiness is tied to finding a prince charming. She believes that her happiness depends on a romantic partner, which is a common belief in her time. This feeling is reinforced by her relation with the Prince, where she sings about her desire to be found by him and eventually falls in love with him. Her ultimate dream is to be rescued by the Prince and live happily ever after with him, which is a classic idea in society that emphasizes the importance of romantic love in a woman's life.



The dwarfs in Snow White were depicted as hardworking and following traditional gender norms. They were shown to be industrious and dedicated to their work, which was a common expectation of men in society at the time. This portrayal reinforced the societal norms that men should be strong, capable, and competent, and that they should work hard to provide for their families.

## **Chapter Two: The Evolving Representation of Female Characters in Disney's Modern Films.**

### **1- From Damsel in Distress *Mulan* 2020, to an Empowered Protagonist**

Disney film *Mulan* 2020 is one of the best examples of women's independence. *Hua Mulan* has captured audiences' attention with its stirring portrayal of a young woman defying gender expectations and societal norms. Mulan rejects the gender roles that are prevalent in her patriarchal society. Her decision to pose as a male soldier is highlighted in the movie, challenging the idea that women are weaker or less capable than men.

The film's empowerment and equality-focused feminist message is illustrated by this act of defiance against social norms. Mulan's tenacity and talent cast doubt on the notion that a person's abilities or aspirations should be determined by their gender.<sup>14</sup> In this analysis, we will examine how the movie represents feminism using bell hook's theory '*Feminism is for*

*everybody (2000)*', Her work has had a significant influence on contemporary feminist thought, and her aims for feminism reflect a commitment to social justice, equity, and liberation for all.<sup>20</sup>

Mulan's experiences highlights how she faces gender and culture. She not only faces sexism but also grapples with cultural expectations placed on women by disguising herself as a man to take her ailing father's place in the army. Mulan challenges the notion that women should be passive and reliant on men. She grapples with the tension between individual desires and the cultural value of family honor, seeking to prove her worth beyond traditional feminine roles. Her journey demonstrates resilience and courage as she navigates these complexities, ultimately breaking free from restrictive societal norms while honoring her cultural heritage and contributing to her family's honor and the broader narrative of heroism. The film portrays the traditional role of obedient daughters, which Mulan defies. By examining Mulan's journey through a feminist side, we gain a deeper understanding of the unique challenges she confronts, driven by both her gender and cultural background.

In *Hua Mulan 2020* defying gender roles is portrayed in several ways, at the beginning of the film Mulan's journey begins with a rejection of the gender roles that are prevalent in her patriarchal society. In order to challenge the ingrained stereotype that women are weaker or less capable than men, the movie shows her choice to pose as a male soldier.<sup>21</sup> Mulan's act of defiance develops into a potent declaration of agency and a rejection of the restrictions imposed by gender norms. Mulan asserts her right to choose her own path and escapes the limitations limiting her potential by stepping outside the bounds of conventional femininity. As she declared that she will bring honor to them all, this passage exemplifies Mulan's determination to defy the social norms that society had set for her as a woman. It is shown in figure 01, that Mulan have decided to embrace her identity and join the army.<sup>22</sup>



**Figure01: Mulan joining the army.(00:30:01)**

In this scene, Mulan was in the line she stands her ground without hesitation, refusing to back down from a confrontation with a fellow soldier. Despite being a woman in a male-dominated environment, she shows no fear or doubt about her ability to defend herself, demonstrating her courage and determination to prove herself as a capable warrior.<sup>23</sup>

Mulan challenges the gender roles that restrict her by claiming her identity and stating her desire to defend the honor of her family. It is shown how she rejects gender stereotypes and her determination to demonstrate her equality with men in terms of ability .The film provides several notable examples of Mulan's defiance, as it is shown in figure 02 (00:49:35).



**Figure 02: Mulan defying her male friends. (00:49 :35)**

In this scene, Mulan without making any effort climbs up with a wooden pole, surpassing her male comrades and challenging the stereotype of women as physically weak. Her determination, courage, and intelligence enable her to excel in training and demonstrate her capacities as a warrior. Mulan's accomplishments not only challenge gender roles but also underscore the importance of recognizing and valuing individual skills and talents beyond societal expectations based on gender.

The quote *"We are going to make men out of every single one of you!"* from the film *"Mulan"* (2020), spoken by Sergeant Qiang to the new recruits, emphasizes the transformation of the recruits into soldiers. However, this quote also highlights the complexity of the world and the diversity of experiences that individuals face, particularly in the case of Mulan.

The film depicts Mulan's struggle to balance her own desires and aspirations with the expectations placed upon her by society. By posing as a male soldier, her act of defiance against social norms illustrates the film's empowerment and equality-focused feminist message.<sup>24</sup>

Mulan's actions not only go against gender expectations but they also trample on cultural

expectations for a daughter. Mulan becomes a representation of empowerment and liberation when she embraces her own agency and resists these conflicting expectations. Mulan's story serves as a potent illustration of the power of feminism.

In Disney's *Mulan* 2020, raising consciousness is evident throughout the film in various ways, including gender roles and empowerment, identity and authenticity, family and sacrifice, and leadership and courage. The film challenges traditional gender roles by portraying Mulan as a brave and skilled warrior, demonstrating that a woman can excel in a role typically filled by men, and dispelling stereotypes while promoting awareness of gender equality and female empowerment. In addition to highlighting the value of family ties and sacrifice as Mulan risks her life to protect her father and save her country, Mulan's journey of self-discovery and embracing her true identity is another theme that raises consciousness about the importance of staying true to oneself despite societal pressures, that expresses disguising her true identity as a woman to conform societal expectations of male bravery and honor. While she temporarily embraces this false identity to protect her family and serve her country. Mulan, has struggled with her identity due to the expectations placed on her by her family and society. Despite the initial pressure to conform to traditional gender roles, Mulan stays true to herself and chooses her own path, as we can see it in figure 03 (00 :27 :13).



**Figure03: Mulan's journey to self-discovery.(00:27 :13)**

Mulan's journey is a story of self-discovery and defying societal expectations, this decision sets her on a path of personal growth and transformation as she learns the true extent of her abilities and courage. The song "Reflection" in Disney's Mulan serves as an example of Mulan's journey of self- discovering and embracing her true identity:

'Look at me! You may think you see who I really am, But you'll never know me. Every day it's as if I play a part. Now, I see if I wear a mask I can fool the world. But I cannot fool my heart. Who is that girl I see, staring straight back at me? Why is my reflection someone I don't know? Somehow, I cannot hide who I am, though I've tried. When will my reflection show who I am inside?' (Mulan, 00:27:14)

This song occurs after she fails her matchmaker assessment and before she embarks on her journey to join the army, resonates with her inner struggle to find her true identity and challenge the expectations placed upon her by society. The lyrics expresses Mulan's struggle with her identity, reflecting her confusion about her true self and desire to break free from societal pressures and traditional gender role.

Leadership and courage are presented in *Mulan*, as she transforms from a timid person to a fearless leader. The film encourages personal development by promoting traits such as bravery, resilience, and leadership.<sup>25</sup> An example of *Mulan's* transformation can be seen when she takes charge during the battle at the snowy mountain, where she devises a plan to defeat the Huns and ultimately save the emperor. This example highlights *Mulan's* growth as a leader and her display of courage in the face of adversity, contributing to the film's themes of leadership and personal development.

*Hua Mulan 2020* highlights the importance of solidarity and community, emphasizing the power of collective action, mutual support, and strength in unity. The soldiers in the film demonstrate the power of team work by standing together as a collective force to protect their country, leveraging their combined strengths and weaknesses to overcome obstacles and achieve their objectives, as we can see it in the figure below 04 (01 :23 :32)



**Figure03: the soldiers working together. (01:23:32)**

In this scene, the soldiers support and encourage each other, fostering a strong sense of camaraderie that empowers them to overcome challenges during training and in battles against the Hun invasion. The film emphasizes the power of unity by showcasing how the

soldiers, when they gathered together, have more capacity to achieve their goals. In a pivotal scene, Mulan delivers a rousing speech to her fellow soldiers, emphasizing the importance of unity and protection in the face of adversity. As she rallies her comrades, Mulan declares,

‘Who knows who will live tomorrow, maybe we will never see each other again. My father once said, there is no courage without fear, so, so this natural Listen to me, all of you. We will live, I guarantee it. Because I will protect you, and we will protect each other. We will fight for each other’ (Mulan, 56:32).

In fact, the speech highlights the importance of unity and mutual protection. In the film, the strong bonds between the soldiers are exemplified in the interaction between Mulan and her comrade Honghui, who declares,

‘I can’t believe all this time you were keeping your skills a secret. What was that today! It was incredible. I know we have started off from the wrong foot, but can we be friends? Very well! But you are my equal. We fight together against the same enemy. I will do all I can to protect the others, you can turn your back on me, but when the time comes, do not turn your back on them’ (Mulan, 43:20)

This quote reflects the developing bond between Mulan and Honghui, highlighting recognition and equality. Honghui’s surprise at Mulan hidden talents reflects his respect for her abilities. His offer of friendship despite their initial conflict shows willingness to move past misunderstanding and embrace teamwork. By stating that Mulan is his equal, he emphasizes mutual respect, suggesting that gender does not define one’s role in battle.

Resistance and liberation are central themes in the story of Mulan, as she defies traditional gender roles and societal expectations, ultimately leading to the liberation of her country. This act of defiance against the gender norms of her society is a powerful form of resistance that ultimately leads to her own liberation and the liberation of China. Another key moment is when Mulan speaks to her father, using nationalist language to convince him that dying for the country would be as honorable for women as for men, highlighting her determination to challenge the oppressive system.<sup>26</sup>

Mulan's actions not only free her from the constraints of her gender but also play a crucial role in the battle that saves her country from the Huns, showcasing how her individual

resistance leads to collective liberation, we can clearly see through the movie how she was expected to be, when the matchmaker was talking to Mulan , saying

“quiet, composed, graceful, elegant, posed, polite, these are the qualities we see in a good wife, these are the qualities we see in Mulan, a wife serves her husband, , she must be silent, she must be invisible. Dishonor to the Hua family, they failed to raise a good daughter” (Mulan , 16 :30)

As we can also see it through the shot figure 04 ( 17:48)



**Figure 04: the matchmaker’s disappointment.(17:48)**

Through this scene we deduce that women in Mulan’s time were considered as objects and maids, but Mulan decided to resist and make her own path. This act of resistance directly challenges the social expectations that she should stay at home, and conform to traditions. Her decision reflects her determination to free herself from these chains and to prove her worth as a woman and a warrior.

At the end, *Hua Mulan 2020* is a story that matches with the principle keys of bell hook’s theory. It encourages us to challenge stereotypes, resist oppression, and embrace our true identities by illustrating the importance of authenticity and self acceptance. Mulan disguises herself as a man to fight for her family, demonstrating that true strength comes from

being true to oneself. Ultimately, Mulan's bravery serves as a powerful reminder to embrace our true selves, regardless of societal expectations. Through Mulan's journey, we learn the deep impact that resistance, liberation, and empowerment can have, not only in movies, but also in real life.

## **2- From a Damsel in Distress Pocahontas 1995, to an Empowered Protagonist**

Disney's *Pocahontas* is a movie that is released in 1995. It tells the story of a young woman, a character who embodies feminist ideals. She is a strong and independent woman who challenges traditional gender roles and societal norms. The movie celebrates women's empowerment and encourages people to respect the choices and voices of women. In this analysis, we will explore how the movie portrays feminist themes by applying bell hook's theory *Feminism Is For Everybody* (2000), we focus on exploring concepts like gender role, consciousness raising, race and gender to gain new insights and perspectives into the portrayal of these elements in the film. Her thoughts have had a big impact on today's feminist thinking. Her goals for feminism show she cares about justice and equal rights for all.

In *Pocahontas*, gender role is a primary theme which is what society expects from people based on their gender, which is shown in various ways in the film. At the beginning of the movie we can see that men are portrayed as adventurous, brave, strong...and women are shown as housewives and caretakers, they are just responsible for doing domestic tasks like cooking, cleaning and taking care of their families, as shown in shot figure 1 (00 :06 :51).



**Figure1: The role of women in the past society of Pocahontas (00:06:51)**

The film portrays the role of women in the past society through the English settler women following these traditional roles. Pocahontas, on the other hand, is different. She is shown as adventurous, brave, sociable, and a leader in her tribe, challenging these traditional gender roles for women at the time. This shows how the film makes us think about how women are expected to act in the past, and how Pocahontas breaks those old ideas, it shows that women can be strong and do important things, not just follow the traditional gender roles. <sup>26</sup>

In this movie, we see Pocahontas refusal to marrying Kocoum, even though her dad thinks he is perfect, he describes him as loyal, serious, strong and that she will be protected with him. she declines by saying to her father that she thinks that her dream is putting down another path. *Pocahontas* (Pentecost, 1995, 11 min: 37). This challenges the idea of what women should do. It shows that she wants to make her own choices, which is not typically expected of women in her society. This refusal reflects her independence and breaks away from traditional gender roles, where marriage was often seen as the primary goal. This act of defiance highlights her independence and her desire to forge her own path, rather than simply following the traditional expectations placed on her. Overall, Pocahontas's choice is a significant statement about empowerment and the importance of individual agency in a world

that often limits women's options.<sup>27</sup>

Consciousness raising, another central theme which is represented in the film which is a constant change of heart, bell hook emphasizes the male dominance and oppression that women experience on daily basis life. (hook, 2000. P7). In Pocahontas, the concept of raising consciousness is shown when she is supposed to marry Kocoum a strong warrior chosen by her tribe, but she refused to because it is not what she really want. As we can see it in this passage from the movie, when she is questioning herself by singing:

" just around the river bend Should I choose the smoothest course Steady as the beating drum ? Should I marry Kocoum is all my dreaming at an end?"  
Pocahontas (Pentecost ,1995,14min:27)

Pocahontas is reflecting her choices and expected path, particularly the idea of marrying Kocoum. Her reflection increased awareness and consciousness of her own desire. This song illustrates her personal growth and the process of questioning traditional roles and expectations, which is a key theme of consciousness raising.

Pocahontas's conversation with Grandmother Willow is a powerful representation of raising consciousness. Grandmother Willow is a wise and spiritual tree who gives Pocahontas valuable guidance. For instance, she advises and encourages her to listen to her heart and follow her own path, and sings this song to her:

"Que que na- to-ra You will understand Listen with your heart You will understand Let it break upon you Like a wave upon the sand Listen with your heart You will understand!." (Pentecost, 1995, 17min: 27)

Then, after her conversation with grandmother willow, Pocahontas sees a strange cloud, which refers to something new, it symbolizes her becoming open to new experiences and ideas, she is starting to see things in a different light as shown in shot in figure 2 (00 :18 :09).



**Figure 2: The arrival of the English settlers (00:18:09)**

In Pocahontas, the cloud symbolizes the arrival of the English settlers and the significant changes and challenges that will follow. It foreshadows the disruption and conflict that their presence will bring to Pocahontas's world, marking a turning point in her life and the lives of her people.

In the movie, when Pocahontas and John Smith meet, and her saving him from execution represent a significant exchange of culture, this moment shows Pocahontas's respect for life and desire to connect with the English settlers. By intervening, she demonstrates her belief in compassion while John Smith's acceptance of her actions shows he is open to learning from her culture. As they spend time together, they share their dreams and values, their love flourishes despite the conflict between their communities. Her decision demonstrates her raising of consciousness, and her becoming more aware of the world around her.<sup>28</sup> As shown in figure 3(01:07:02).



**Figure3: Pocahontas saving the captain John Smith (01:07:02)**

This scene in the movie is significant because it highlights Pocahontas's personal growth and realizing the importance of peaceful communication and learning from others, even when everyone expects something else, her courage and strength are showcased in several ways, she steps in front of Smith, risking her own safety to protect him, demonstrating her personal bravery and her willingness to challenge authority, She faced her father the leader of the tribe, when he comes to execute him, and she stopped him:

Pocahontas: No! If you kill him you have to kill me too ! Father: Daughter! Stand back! Pocahontas: I won't, I love him father ! Look around you, this is where the path of hatred has brought us. This is the path I choose, father !What will yours be?  
Pocahontas (Pentecost, 1995,1h:07 min)

This act can be interpreted as a moment of defiance against the traditional gender roles of her time. As a woman, Pocahontas is expected to be submissive and passive, but instead, she takes an active role in determining the fate of someone she cares for, making her an unexpected figure of resistance, she demonstrate her agency and moral conviction rather than simply acting as a passive participant in a male dominated society.

Her connection with nature also reflects the idea of consciousness raising, she is shown as deeply connected to nature and this is evident when she sings the song of "*The colors of the wind*". Pocahontas (Pentecost, 1995, 39min50). Pocahontas sees the beauty in every part of nature from the wind to the trees to the animals, she also teaches John Smith to see nature as a living thing not just something to use. This song emphasizes the idea that nature has its own consciousness and that human beings should respect and live in harmony with it.

Exploring another concept highlighted by bell hook, the ending violence, particularly the different forms of male violence against women, is crucial. She emphasizes that men need to understand that patriarchy is not only way to define their identity. Hook argues that traditional masculinity teaches men that their sense of self and purpose comes from their ability to dominate others. This perspective limits their understanding of what it means to be a man and promotes harmful behaviors, man can find healthier identities that do not rely on violence or control. (Hook, 2000 p.70)

Pocahontas plays a crucial role in changing John Smith's attitude, helping him move from viewing Indigenous people as "savages" to recognizing their humanity. Through their interactions, she challenges his preconceived notions and prejudices. Her courage and wisdom encourage Smith to see beyond the surface fostering empathy and understanding.

Additionally, the film uses music and cultural exchange as powerful tools to promote understanding and discourage violence. The song '*Colors of the wind*', reflects Pocahontas's desire to nature and highlights its beauty, inspiring those around her to appreciate the environment rather than exploit it. She emphasizes the value of cultural exchange as means to promote peace.<sup>29</sup>

In the movie, there is a battle between the English settlers and the Native Americans serves as a clear example of the consequences of violence. However, Pocahontas's journey transforms her from a traditional damsel in distress into an empowered protagonist. She

actively seeks to bridge the divide between her people and the settlers, using her voice and wisdom to advocate for peace and understanding. This evolution highlights the message that true strength lies not in conflict, but in the courage to foster dialogue and unity. By embracing her agency, Pocahontas embodies the potential of individuals to effect meaningful change. Pocahontas conveys the message that ending violence requires transformation, culture and understanding to seek peaceful resolutions and unity.<sup>30</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> García Gual, N. (2021). A Feminist Perspective on Disney's Brave (2012): Challenging Traditional Gender Roles. <https://dspace.uib.es/xmlui/bitstream/handle/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Memòria del Treball de Fi de Grau. A Feminist Perspective on Disney's Brave (2012): Challenging Traditional Gender Roles. <https://dspace.uib.es/xmlui/bitstream/handle/>

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Parsons, B. A. (2019). Cinderella Perseveres: A Classic Fairy Tale in the Modern Era. Skemman, 1-15. <https://skemman.is/bitstream/1946/46068/1/BA-PerlaRutPDF.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Beauvoir, S. de. (1949). The Second Sex. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.

<https://www.gallimard.fr/Catalogue/GALLIMARD/Blanche/Le-deuxieme-sexe2>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> ibid

<sup>10</sup>Anwesa Karmakar & Abhirup Bhadra. (n.d.). Disney setting and changing gender stereotypes.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/376189693\\_Disney\\_Setting\\_and\\_Changing\\_Gender\\_Stereotypes](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/376189693_Disney_Setting_and_Changing_Gender_Stereotypes)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> De Beauvoir, S. The second sex. (New York: Vintage Books, 2011)

<sup>13</sup> ibid

<sup>14</sup> De Beauvoir, S. (1949). *The second sex*. (p.15).

<sup>15</sup> HEPTINSTALL, J. (2021, April 15). *The Feminist Portrayal of Snow White in ABC's Once Upon a Time*.

<sup>16</sup> CHAPTER 9: THE ETHICS OF SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR—FEMINISM, EXISTENTIALISM, AND AMBIGUITY.

<https://mlpp.pressbooks.pub/ethicalexplorations/chapter/chapter-9-the-ethics-of-simone-de-beauvoir-feminism-existentialism-and-ambiguity9>

<sup>17</sup> HEPTINSTALL, J. (2021, April 15). *The Feminist Portrayal of Snow White in ABC's Once Upon a Time*.

<sup>18</sup> Analysis Of Snow White's Stepmothers. <https://essaygpt.hix.ai/essay/analysis-of-snow-whites-stepmothers-39e8f4>

<sup>19</sup> HEPTINSTALL, J. (2021, April 15). *The Feminist Portrayal of Snow White in ABC's Once Upon a Time*.

<sup>20</sup> *Brave: A Feminist Perspective on the Disney Princess Movie*

<sup>21</sup> Bell Hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mulan>

<sup>23</sup> *A Girl Worth Fighting For?: Transformations of the Woman Warrior*. <https://atrium.lib.uoguelph.ca/items/5336bfab-c3b3-48cd-8917-f2ebba29b8b6>

<sup>24</sup> Vasconcelos, T. 107 *Mulan: A Timeless Tale of Bravery and Inspiration*. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/107-mulan-timeless-tale-bravery-inspiration-tiago-vasconcelos-jcsxe>

<sup>25</sup> How Disney's 'Mulan' became one of 2020's most controversial movies.  
<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2020-09-11/disneys-mulan-debuts-in-china-heres-why-its-controversial>

<sup>26</sup> Mulan in China and America: From Premodern to Modern.  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2018.1482681>

<sup>27</sup> Pocahontas. <https://historicalnovelsociety.org/reviews/pocahontas>

<sup>28</sup> Pocahontas Movie Analysis: Gender, Ethnicity, ,race and Native American culture in Disney's movie Pocahontas. <https://knowunity.de/knows/englisch-facharbeitsbeispiel-englisch-the-portrayal-of-genderethnicityrace-and-native-american-culture-in-disneys-movie-pocahontas-7effbe46-39ba-43c1-85d4-17075d6ab0c2>

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*

<sup>30</sup> Claire Her. (2019). Saving Pocahontas: a Conversation on Gender, Culture, and Power in the Storied Saving Moment.

[https://scholar.valpo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=undergrad\\_capstones](https://scholar.valpo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=undergrad_capstones)

## V. General Conclusion

Through this dissertation, we have attempted to analyze the portrayal of women's dependency and independency in both early Disney movies *Snow White and the seven dwarfs* 1937 ,and *Cinderella* 1950 ,and recent ones *Pocahontas* 1995, and *Mulan* 2020 through a feminist perspective, relying on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) , and Bell Hooks *Feminism is For Everybody* (2000). Our analysis is based on the different representations of female characters in both old and new Disney movies. In addition, we have dealt with the evolution of female gender roles in Disney movies over time .

The result that has been attained in our work is that the portrayal of women's dependence and independence in old and recent Disney movies has evolved significantly over the years. In the earlier Disney movies, women were often depicted as dependent on men, lacking their own identity by being portrayed primarily in relation to male characters, and being pretty and young. These movies often featured female characters as damsels in distress, waiting to be rescued by a prince or a male protagonist.

However, in recent Disney movies, there has been a noticeable shift in the portrayal of female characters. Modern Disney films have shown stronger, independent, and courageous women who are not just objects of beauty waiting to be rescued, but are capable of being the heroes of their own stories. These characters have ambitions and goals of their own.

This evolution in the portrayal of female characters in Disney movies signifies a positive shift

Towards, more empowering and diverse representations of women in popular media, aligning with the principles advocated by feminist scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir and bell hook. Overall, our research highlights the importance of critically analyzing the representation of gender in popular culture and the potential impact it can have on shaping societal perceptions and attitudes towards gender roles.

By critically examining the evolution of female gender roles in Disney movies, our research contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender representation in popular media and the broader pursuit of gender equality and empowerment. This examination delves into the complex changes of how women are portrayed in these films, shedding light on the broader quest for gender equality and empowerment. Through a detailed exploration of the shifting dynamics of female characters in Disney movies, our study aims to provide valuable insights into the complexities of gender roles depicted in mainstream media and their impact on societal perceptions of gender.

## **VI. Bibliography**

### **Primary sources**

Disney SnowWhite animated movie. 1937. Carthay Circle Theatre, Los Angeles, California, United States.

Disney Cinderella animated movie. 1950. RKO Pantages Theatre, Hollywood, California, United States.

Disney Mulan live action movie. 2020. (direct-to-streaming release).

Disney Pocahontas animated movie. 1995. New York City, New York, United States.

### **Secondary sources**

#### **Books**

Beauvoir, S. de. (1949). *The Second Sex*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.

Beauvoir, S. de. (1949). *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books.

hooks, B. (2000). *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

García Gual, N. (2021). *A Feminist Perspective on Disney's Brave (2012): Challenging Traditional Gender Roles*. Memòria del Treball de Fi de Grau.

#### **Theses and dissertations**

Rothenberg, Nina. "Women and the mass media in Italy." Thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2005.

Johnsson, Malin. "Why only women? : An interview study of individual members' experiences and perceptions of the women-only online community Heja Livet!" Thesis, Malmö universitet, Institutionen för konst, kultur och kommunikation (K3), 2021.

Chimba, Mwenya Diana. "Women, media and democracy : news coverage of women in the Zambian press." Thesis, Cardiff University, 2005.

Nuraddin, Nabila. "Women and the Media : The Representation of Muslim Women in Liberal-nonpartisan Italian Newspapers." Thesis, Högskolan för lärande och kommunikation, Högskolan i Jönköping, HLK, Medie-och kommunikationsvetenskap, 2017.

Zayati, Nabila. "Empowering Arab Women through Media Development : A case study." Thesis, Malmö universitet, Malmö högskola, Institutionen för konst, kultur och kommunikation (K3), 2021.

Marcellus, Jane Berry. "Women, work, and femininity : representation of employed women in U.S. magazines, 1918-1941 /." Thesis, University of Oregon, 2004.

Kevci, Perisan. "Women journalists on the path of truth -an intersectional and critical discourse analysis." Thesis, Malmö universitet, Institutionen för konst, kultur och kommunikation (K3), 2021.

Scheuneman, Scott Isabel. ""Deadly Women": Examining (Audio)Visual (Re)Presentations of Violent Women and Girls in Infotainment Media." Thesis, Université d'Ottawa / University of Ottawa, 2015.

Willhoit, Krystal. "Women's response to media : a naturalistic inquiry /." Thesis, University of Missouri, 1998.

Ciclitira, Karen Elizabeth. "What does pornography mean to women?" Thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University, 1998.

## **Articles**

Edwards, M. (2024, January 6). The feminist view of media: An outline, explanation, and analysis. Easy Sociology.

Wood, A. (2023). Analysis of Snow White from a feminist perspective. GradesFixers.

Heptinstall, J. (2021, April 15). Little Snow White from a feminist perspective: Another misleading message towards young girls. Academia.edu.

Vargas, H. G. T. (2023). Feminist criticism on Cinderella. Academia.edu.

Weng, S. (2020, October 27). Patriarchy in Disney's live-action Mulan. Harvard Political Review.

Pewewardy, C. (2023, November 8). Why one can't ignore Pocahontas. Rethinking Schools.

### **Internet sources**

Anwesa Karmakar & Abhirup Bhadra. (n.d.). Disney setting and changing gender stereotypes. ResearchGate.

Vasconcelos, T. (n.d.). 107 Mulan: A Timeless Tale of Bravery and Inspiration. LinkedIn.

How Disney's 'Mulan' became one of 2020's most controversial movies. (n.d.). The Los Angeles Times.

Mulan in China and America: From Premodern to Modern. (n.d.). Taylor & Francis Online.

Pocahontas. (n.d.). Historical Novel Society.

Pocahontas Movie Analysis: Gender, Ethnicity, race and Native American culture in Disney's movie Pocahontas. (n.d.). KnowUnity.

Claire Ehr : Saving Pocahontas: a Conversation on Gender, Culture, and Power in the Storied Saving Moment. (n.d.). Scholarly Commons.

Danielle Morrison. Brave: A Feminist Perspective on the Disney Princess Movie. (n.d.). Digital Commons.

Disney Classics between Feminism and Victimization of Women: A Historical Analysis.

(n.d.). Academia.edu.

Disney Setting and Changing Gender Stereotypes. (n.d.). ResearchGate.