



## EMPOWERING FEMALE VALUES: AN ANALYSIS OF DISNEY'S FILM 'MULAN' IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** This study titled “Empowering Female Values: An Analysis of Disney’s Film ‘Mulan’ in English Language Education” explores the representation of female empowerment and gender roles in the animated film ‘Mulan’ produced by The Walt Disney Company. The research focuses on utilizing the film as an educational resource within the context of English Language Education (ELE) to foster discussions on gender equality and female values among students. The research employs qualitative methods, specifically content analysis and a review of academic literature, to systematically examine selected scenes, dialogues, and character interactions in ‘Mulan’ that portray empowering female values. The study aims to shed light on the significance of using the film as an educational tool while acknowledging certain limitations, such as cultural context, generalizability, and the depth of film analysis. The research identifies critical terms for framing the study’s focus, including empowering female values, Disney’s film 'Mulan,' gender equality, and cultural awareness. The study’s findings emphasize that "Mulan" depicts the protagonist's determination to break free from societal expectations and fulfill her true potential. Through triangulation of data from the film and academic literature, the research confirms the positive impact of 'Mulan' in promoting meaningful discussions on gender equality and cultural awareness in ELE classrooms. This research provides valuable insights into the role of media representation in English Language Education, demonstrating the potential of 'Mulan' to inspire and empower learners to challenge gender norms and embrace female values in their pursuit of personal and academic growth.

**Keywords:** *English Language Education, Empowering Female Values, Mulan.*

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### INTRODUCTION

The influence of the United States on products within the Audio Visual (AV) industry has a significant global reach, offering enjoyment to diverse communities worldwide. American animated films frequently incorporate themes that revolve around the historical backgrounds of various nations, including China, Greece, England, Saudi Arabia, and others (Abrams, 2011). The creators of these films often draw upon diverse sources of inspiration to shape their narratives, with one such source being the folklore and traditions of different countries and cultures. Notable examples can be found in movies like *Aladdin* (1992), *Mulan* (1998), *King Arthur* (2004), *Kung Fu Panda* (2008), and *Robin Hood* (2010). This dynamic serves as a compelling gateway for fostering deeper connections between American culture and other global cultures. The art of storytelling in these films represents a conceptual framework, carrying intricate meanings embedded within the

minds of their creators (Umar, 2010).

Writing serves as an appealing avenue for individuals to articulate their ideas and then weave them into narratives, stories, or fictitious accounts. Literature has the capacity to emerge from a blend of creative concepts and factual information within a textual framework (Abrams, 2011). When literature paints a portrait of human existence that the community can relish, comprehend, and apply, it becomes a form of innovative artistic creation. Authors generate outcomes by amalgamating their inventive intellect, crafting it into a scholarly piece. Literature materializes as an immensely imaginative representation of human life and societal dynamics, facilitated through language as a medium, and it holds significant value in the realm of human existence (Abrams, 2011). It can be deduced that literary compositions mirror human life in its various facets. Literature encompasses diverse genres such as short stories, novels, plays, and poetry. According to (Westview, 2009), cinema stands as a prime exemplar of the boundless realm of mass media.

A renowned producer of animated films is Walt Disney. The animated movies crafted by Disney cater to both children and adults due to their varied genres, including live-action, musical animation, comedy, family, horror, and an array of other genres that Disney presents to its audience (Adyatmasani, 2021). Consequently, Disney films are suitable for individuals of all age groups, spanning from kids to teenagers and adults alike. The paradigm shift in Walt Disney's portrayal of the lead female characters, evolving them into more feminist personas, marks the dawn of a new era (Oktaviana, 2021). This transformation takes the archetype of a delicate and beautiful princess and morphs her into an independent, resilient figure capable of asserting control over her destiny (Aquino, 1976). The likes of *Mulan* (1998), *Moana* (2016), *Beauty and The Beast* (1991), *Tangled* (2010), *Frozen* (2013), and various others within the Disney repertoire delve into the theme of feminism (Adyatmasani, 2021). The concept of feminism carries substantial potential to shape people's ideologies, prompting Walt Disney to reconfigure the genre of one of their animated features, which subsequently became a powerful catalyst for feminism's influence (Adyatmasani, 2021). Within these films, Disney reshaped the central female characters into embodiments of strength, courage, and intelligence (Adyatmasani, 2021). Notably, these strong and valiant Disney Princess protagonists retain a gentle femininity despite their masculine qualities (Umar, 2010). Through their films, Walt Disney aimed to communicate to audiences that women are not inherently weak and deserve respect.

Both *Fa Mulan* (1998) and *Live-action Mulan* (2020) from Disney serve as illustrative instances where the central female character embodies a blend of both masculine and feminine qualities, with the overarching aim of challenging the prevailing societal patriarchy (Umar, 2010). Disney's rendition of the *Mulan* tale was officially unveiled in September 2020 (Adyatmasani, 2021). The narrative of "*Mulan*" draws inspiration from the ancient Chinese poem "*Song of Mulan*," hailing from the Northern Dynasty period. The narrative revolves around *Mulan*, a young woman driven by her aspiration to champion women's rights, allowing them the freedom to chart their own destinies, regardless of gender constraints. Disguising herself as a man, she enlists in the army to spare her ailing father and embarks on a mission that unexpectedly leads to a remarkable feat on the battlefield (Ramrao, 2016). Rejecting the emperor's bestowed gifts, her

intentions are solely focused on restoring her family's honor and reuniting after the conflict concludes. The poem paints a picture of Mulan's kindness and courage, spotlighting her defense of her country and unwavering love for her homeland. Setting it apart from most war-themed compositions, this poem integrates descriptions of daily life in ancient China, endowing the narrative with historical and literary significance (Tian, 2013).

In concurrence with prior research, this study's commonality lies in its subject matter the film "Mulan." However, this investigation distinguishes itself through the application of unique theories and the exploration of previously unaddressed issues (Aquino, 1976). The primary focus of both preceding research and this study pertains to the main character. Yet, what sets this research apart is the chosen theoretical framework and the novel questions posed, which have yet to be scrutinized. This investigation centers on the "Mulan" film due to its distinct narrative and the profound moral messages it conveys. The protagonist's unwavering efforts to advocate for gender parity and equal rights serve as a wellspring of inspiration, motivating the researcher. This study thus endeavors to delve into the feminism inherent in the central character of the Mulan movie. Consequently, the researcher undertakes a study titled "Empowering Female Values: An Analysis Of Disney's Film 'Mulan' In English Language Education." "Empowering Female Values" denotes the act of endorsing and elevating constructive characteristics, traits, and actions that are commonly linked with femininity and are considered empowering for women. These values confront conventional gender roles and preconceived notions, underlining the importance of acknowledging and valuing the diverse capabilities and contributions of individuals, irrespective of their gender (Adyatmasani, 2021).

English Language Education (ELE) pertains to the procedure of instructing and assimilating the English language as a secondary or non-native language (Hossain, 2017). This encompasses the acquisition of proficiencies in English, encompassing verbal expression, auditory perception, textual comprehension, and written composition. Additionally, it entails grasping grammatical structures, vocabulary usage, and pronunciation nuances. ELE plays a pivotal role for individuals aspiring to proficiently communicate in English for individual, scholastic, or vocational intentions (Wright, 2003). English has evolved into a universal lingua franca, extensively employed as a shared means of communication among individuals with varying native languages. Consequently, there has been a substantial surge in the need for English language education, leading to millions across the globe undertaking the study of English as either a second language (ESL) or a foreign language (EFL).

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

The study utilizes qualitative methodologies (Moelong, 2018), specifically content analysis and a comprehensive review of scholarly literature, to systematically investigate designated scenes, dialogues, and interactions among characters in the movie "Mulan" that underscore the expression of empowering female attributes. The primary objective of the research is to illuminate the educational potential of employing the film, while acknowledging inherent constraints such as cultural context, the extent of film analysis, and the applicability of findings beyond specific contexts. The research delineates key

concepts essential for framing the focal point of the study, encompassing empowering female attributes, Disney's cinematic production 'Mulan,' gender parity, and cultural mindfulness. These terms establish a cornerstone for dissecting the film's portrayal of female empowerment and its role in challenging traditional gender conventions (Tian, 2013).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Findings**

#### **1.1 The Portrayal Of Feminism Entail In The Movie 'Mulan'**

Women possess the capacity to pursue their aspirations without constraints: In the movie 'Mulan,' the discontent of Mulan's mother with her father's permissiveness in allowing Mulan to engage in activities typically attributed to boys, like catching chickens, becomes evident. The local cultural tradition mandates that daughters should epitomize refinement and delicacy to enhance the family's honor, primarily through swift marital arrangements. Mulan's rejection of these norms disappoints her mother and upends the societal beliefs regarding women's predefined roles within the village (Adyatmasani, 2021).

Moreover, 'Mulan' exemplifies the equivalence of women's potential to that of men. Even though Mulan's father instructs her to conceal her Chi (an inherent life force), she inadvertently discloses it upon her enlistment in the military. This revelation signifies her possessing a capability parallel to that of male soldiers, irrespective of conventional societal norms asserting that women lack comparable Chi. Mulan's determination to unveil her true capabilities underscores her distinctiveness and contests conventional gender constructs (Umar, 2010).

The movie also emphasizes that women have the right to make independent and rational choices. Mulan's parents decide to arrange her marriage, but she appears shocked and saddened by this decision. Despite initially accepting her family's choice, Mulan feels unable to express her desires openly due to the cultural expectations surrounding her. Her family, particularly her mother, insists on her finding a partner, leaving Mulan conflicted between her wishes and societal pressures (Tian, 2013).

In summary, 'Mulan' portrays women as capable of pursuing their dreams, challenging gender norms, and making individual choices.

#### **1.2 Analyzing Mulan's Endeavors In Advocating For Women's Rights Throughout The Film**

- a) Boldly embracing risks to enlist in the army: Mulan casts aside traditional gender boundaries and enters spaces predominantly occupied by men. Departing from her home, she assumes her father's role on the battlefield, a bold step given that the Chinese army typically consists of household heads and sons. Mulan's resolute decision to adopt a male identity underscores her conviction that gender should not circumscribe her capabilities.
- b) Excelling in her portrayal of a male role: Mulan, along with her comrades, executes defensive maneuvers with sticks, showcasing unwavering commitment and rigorous training. Mulan's adeptness in martial arts, demonstrated through her practice sessions with Hong Hui, evidences her proficiency in activities

- traditionally linked with men. This prowess garners her the trust and respect of fellow soldiers, even while disguised as a man.
- c) Displaying audacity in truth-telling and embracing repercussions: In the inaugural battle, Mulan employs strategic tactics to divert the enemy's attention, safeguarding her fellow troops. Yet, this maneuver necessitates the revelation of her true identity as Hua Mulan. Despite the inherent risk of expulsion, she valiantly confesses to her commander and comrades. Commander Tung elects to discharge her, but Mulan, resolute in her principles, prefers facing death over returning to her village shorn of honor.
  - d) A woman who gains recognition: Mulan's bravery earns her recognition from society and the Emperor for protecting the kingdom and saving them. She is offered the honorary title of Emperor and a position as part of the Imperial Officers. Despite this honor, Mulan prioritizes her family's forgiveness and apologizes for causing them fear. Her actions challenge society's views on gender roles and prove that women can make decisions and achieve recognition.

Mulan's journey showcases her determination to break free from societal expectations and fight for women's rights. Her actions emphasize that women can make decisions and contribute significantly to their families and communities. Mulan's ability to rise above societal norms and bring honor to her family and the Emperor underscores the importance of empowering women to determine their paths.

### **1.3 Investigating Niki Caro's Motivations Behind Endorsing The Depiction Of Feminism In The Film 'Mulan'**

This cinematic rendition, derived from Disney's 1998 animated edition, presents a distinctive viewpoint distinct from the conventions typically found in conventional princess narratives. Through the persona of Mulan, the film challenges the conventional portrayal of a princess as dainty, delicate, and exclusively feminine.

During an interview, Niki Caro articulated that Mulan encapsulates feminist principles while concurrently exemplifying ancient Confucian ideals. Caro shapes Mulan into a resolute and tenacious woman, undauntedly facing challenges in a predominantly male setting while remaining steadfast to her familial commitments. Caro's portrayal of Mulan effectively underscores her as a feminist figure, instilling in women the empowerment to shatter societal limitations and chart their personal trajectories.

Niki Caro further emphasized in the interview that women should have the agency to determine their destinies without limitations. This statement reinforces her support for feminism in the film. By showcasing Mulan's struggle and determination to choose her path, the movie effectively conveys that women deserve the freedom to choose and face the consequences bravely.

In essence, Niki Caro strongly advocates for feminism in "Mulan," as the movie's main character becomes a powerful representation of a young woman fighting to prove that women are equally capable of making life-altering decisions without fear of the challenges that may lie ahead. The film's portrayal of Mulan as a feminist role model aims to inspire and empower audiences, transcending gender norms and promoting gender equality.

a) Mulan as a careless daughter

Carelessness is a trait characterized by inattentiveness and a lack of consideration in one's actions. According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary, recklessness describes a demeanor where an individual responds impulsively without in-depth contemplation, often leading to predicaments. This aligns with (Adyatmasani, 2021) that carelessness signifies negligence and an inability to address situations effectively. Such a disposition stems from hasty attitudes that generate issues and damage. The inclination to act before thinking is indicative of a careless disposition. Consequently, a heedless approach is advised against for everyone. In Disney's 2020 live-action rendition of "Mulan," Hua Mulan is recognized for her spirited nature. This recklessness has manifested from her early years, consistent with (Adyatmasani, 2021) that observed Hua Mulan's impetuous traits from her childhood, subsequently exhibited in her impulsive behaviors. This carelessness is illuminated in subsection 2a, where Mulan playfully chases chickens into their coop. The camera's medium-long shot, combined with a gradual zoom, captures the small village's essence and the villagers' activities. Amidst the bustling morning scene, Hua Mulan chases after a chicken with laughter, inadvertently causing disorder. She topples fruit baskets, and the phoenix statue's wings suffer breakage, events depicted in sub-sections 2b and 2c. The camera trail follows Mulan's sprint before returning to a medium close-up. The auditory backdrop encompasses traditional Chinese instruments followed by chicken clucks, baskets falling, the phoenix statue's wing fracture, infant cries, a woman's outcry, and the voices of Mulan's parents.

b) Mulan's Valor as a Daring Imperial Warrior

Courage is a virtue that should reside within all individuals. (Salden, 2019) emphasize courage as confronting danger and pain devoid of fear. This trait surfaces when one actively chooses to face fear, overcome adversity, and combat uncertainty. Such actions are commonly witnessed when confronting intimidation, spurring individuals to advocate for themselves or others. Hence, cultivating courage is pivotal to safeguard oneself, those around them, and surmount challenges. Mulan's bravery is illuminated in subsections 6f and 6h, where she absconds with her father's armor, sword, and horse to replace him on the battlefield. The night before her father's departure, Mulan engages in a heartfelt conversation with him while he sharpens his sword. The camera focuses intently on Mulan's father's hand and the sword, adopting an extreme close-up. He recounts how their ancestors, symbolized as a Phoenix, safeguarded him throughout his military endeavors. As highlighted by (Tian, 2013) Mulan's decision to assume her father's role in the war mirrors her courage.

Moreover, Mulan's motivation stems from an unswerving devotion to her parents and their sovereign (Adyatmasani, 2021). Immersed in her father's narrative, her eyes brim with tears reflecting her melancholy. She

aspires to emulate her father's valor. The auditory backdrop transitions to mournful melodies. Overwhelmed by empathy for her frail father, she takes his armor, sword, and horse under the cover of midnight while her family slumbers. Her countenance transforms, adopting a stern and resolute demeanor poised for combat. Through the cold night, she embarks on her journey to the imperial capital. Her actions underscore her bravery in protecting her father, echoing the valiant steps taken by Belle in "Beauty and the Beast" when she navigated a dark, icy forest to rescue her father and ultimately reach the castle (Oktaviana, 2021). As dawn breaks, the sight of Mulan's father, mother, and sister confronting the absence of their war equipment evokes shock and concern. Mulan's father worries and offers prayers for his daughter's safety.

c) Mulan's Spirit as an Autonomous Individual

Independence signifies an individual's capacity to execute tasks autonomously, devoid of external involvement. Building an independent disposition necessitates inner motivation. According to (Adyatmasani, 2021), independence denotes cultivating a mindset capable of fostering beneficial transformations personally. Furthermore, independence equips individuals with the critical acumen to surmount challenges and sustain themselves without dependency. As stipulated by (Oktaviana, 2021), nurturing independence from an early stage is crucial. Hua Mulan's self-sufficiency is exhibited in subsections 6k and 6l, illustrating her journey to the imperial capital. Following her appropriation of her father's armor, sword, and horse, Mulan offers prayers to her forebears.

## **Discussion**

Through the conducted analysis, various critical facets of liberal feminism become apparent in the film "Mulan." Primarily, the movie portrays the notion that women have the liberty to pursue their aspirations and ambitions without hindrance. Mulan's character serves as a counterpoint to traditional gender expectations, demonstrated through her tomboyish demeanor, which elicits disappointment from her mother in light of local norms prescribing girls to conform.

Additionally, the film showcases that women possess an equal potential to men. Mulan's character exhibits remarkable abilities, on par with those of male soldiers, despite societal norms discouraging women from showcasing such aptitude. Moreover, the movie underscores women's autonomy in making rational decisions. While initially disheartened, Mulan eventually embraces her family's decision regarding marriage, underscoring her reverence for their wishes. This perspective aligns with the principles upheld by liberal feminism, which advocate for women's right to determine their actions and trajectories based on personal preferences and best interests.

Regarding Mulan's endeavors in advocating for women's rights, the film depicts her courage in embracing risks by enlisting in the army and excelling in roles typically associated with men. Additionally, she fearlessly confronts the truth, even when it brings about arduous consequences, ultimately receiving acclaim from her community for her heroic feats.

Niki Caro, the film's director, fervently supports the depiction of feminism in "Mulan." In an interview, she characterizes Mulan as a feminist figure embodying ancient Chinese Confucian values. Mulan represents a resolute woman unafraid of challenges, flourishing in male-dominated settings, and upholding familial commitments. Caro underscores the notion that women possess the liberty to carve their paths devoid of restrictions, thus magnifying the empowering message that Mulan's character encapsulates. The film "Mulan" effectively captures the essence of liberal feminism by showcasing a strong and autonomous female character that confronts societal conventions and advocates for women's rights. Niki Caro's endorsement of this portrayal further amplifies the film's potent message of empowerment and individual choice for women.

## CONCLUSION

The first research question addresses whether women can do anything they want, and the findings corroborate Tong's theory of Liberal feminism, which highlights women's freedom and autonomy to determine their actions. Three indicators were identified to answer this question:

- a) Mulan's non-conformity to traditional gender roles
- b) her demonstration of similar potential as male soldiers
- c) her acceptance of societal expectations despite her initial disappointment

The second inquiry delves into Mulan's endeavors in championing women's rights, and it concludes that her actions can be classified into four distinct categories: her bold decision to enlist in the army, her adeptness in performing roles typically associated with men, her unflinching honesty regardless of the consequences, and her attainment of recognition. These undertakings underscore her unwavering determination to challenge conventional gender norms and fervently advocate for the rights of women.

The third research query centers on Niki Caro's motivations for championing feminism in "Mulan." The analysis corroborates that Niki Caro ardently supports the depiction of feminism in the film. This is because it portrays the arduous journey of a young woman striving to assert her entitlement to shape her own trajectory without succumbing to apprehension of potential repercussions.

In conclusion, the film "Mulan" aligns with the principles of Liberal feminism, showcasing Mulan's endeavors to challenge societal expectations, break gender barriers, and advocate for women's freedom and choices. Niki Caro's support for this representation reinforces the film's powerful message of female empowerment and highlights women's agency's role in shaping their destinies.

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