

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of The Study

Film has long been recognized as a powerful medium that reflects and shapes cultural values, social structures, and gender norms. Popular films, especially those produced by global companies like The Walt Disney Company, often carry narratives that both entertain and reinforce or challenge societal expectations. “The True Feminists Were Hidden in Plain Sight: An Analysis of Disney Heroines Through a Fourth-Wave, Intersectional Lens” by Alexa Blair (2021) becomes one of the references that sharpens this discussion. Blair uses an intersectional lens (fourth-wave feminism) to analyze Disney heroines, placing them within a broader conversation about representation, power, and visibility.

She argues that “not all Disney heroines are feminist because not all of them address issues relevant to modern feminism, such as sexual violence and intersectionality (Blair, 2021). This statement highlights a gap between surface-level empowerment and deeper, more complex feminist values that resonate with contemporary audiences. Blair also concludes that because Disney heroine merchandise is minimal and often objectifying, the company does not value its feminist heroines as much as the “Princesses” (because “Princesses” make more money for Disney). This commercialization aspect subtly shows how market interests can shape which narratives are amplified and which are sidelined.

The character of Mulan is situated in a patriarchal and militarized society where women are expected to remain in domestic roles and uphold family honor through marriage. From *Mulan* (1998) to *Mulan* (2020): Disney Conventions, Cross-Cultural Feminist Intervention, and a Compromised Progress, Zhuoyi Wang compares the live-action remake of *Mulan* 2020 with the 1998 animated version in the context of feminism and intersectionality. She emphasizes that *Mulan* 2020 brings to light the “tension-ridden intersectionality of gender, sexual, racial, cultural, and political issues” in cross-cultural film production (Wang, 2021). What becomes more visible here is not just the difference in storytelling style, but also the weight of representation, how a global company like The Walt Disney Company negotiates cultural authenticity while still operating

within its own conventions. Her decision to disguise herself as a man and join the army highlights the tension between individual identity and rigid social norms, but in the 2020 version, this decision feels less like spontaneous rebellion and more like something shaped by an almost predetermined sense of destiny. This subtle shift matters, because it changes how we read her agency.

Intersectionality is a concept introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw that provides a useful lens for analyzing Mulan's experiences. Intersectionality emphasizes that gender cannot be understood in isolation, but must be examined alongside other factors such as class, culture, and social obligations (K. Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality is a complex knowledge project that studies power relations and social inequalities, but its definition remain unclear, highlighting its importance for understanding and adressing social injustices (Collins, 2015). Collins asserts intersectionality as a "knowledge project" that focuses on power and inequality, where race, class, gender, and other categories are interconnected, not separate. The article "Definitional Dilemmas" asserts that categories such as race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, and age are not singular entities, but interconstructive phenomena.

While previous studies on Mulan (2020), such as Gong and Tian (2021), Susilowaty and Prastiwi (2022), Putri and Thoyibi (2024), and Indriani and Wenerda (2024), have largely approached the film as an audiovisual text, drawing their analysis from what is seen and heard on screen, this study instead positions the movie script itself as a literary artifact worthy of close textual analysis. Treating the script, rather than the film, as the primary data allows the researcher to examine how Mulan's gender identity, social class, and cultural positioning are constructed through dialogue and stage directions, the specific linguistic and narrative choices embedded in the written text. This approach distinguishes the present research from earlier studies and forms part of its contribution: demonstrating that a movie script can be read and analyzed as literature in its own right, not merely as a supporting document to the finished film.

1.2 Research Questions

Based on the background of the study described above, the following research questions are formulated:

1. How does the movie script represent women's empowerment through the interaction of gender roles, and social class pressures faced by Mulan?
2. In what ways do patriarchal structures and cultural norms simultaneously influence Mulan's experiences and choices throughout the movie script?

1.3 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

1. To examine how the character of Mulan, as portrayed in Disney's 2020 live-action Mulan script, represents women's empowerment through the interaction of gender roles and social class pressures within a patriarchal and military society.
2. To investigate the ways in which Mulan's personal experiences and choices are shaped and influenced by the intersections of class, gender, and cultural expectations throughout the script.

1.4 Significant of the Research

Every research is expected to give meaningful contribution, both to the development of theory and to practical matters in real life. For that reason, the significance of this study is divided into two parts, namely theoretical significance and practical significance, as explained below.

1.4.1 Theoretical Significance

This study contributes to the theoretical development of feminist literary and film studies in several ways. First, it extends the use of Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectional feminist approach beyond its original

legal and sociological context into the analysis of a popular film character, offering a model for how intersectionality can be applied to media and literary studies.

Second, this research fills a gap in the existing body of knowledge on Disney's 2020 live-action *Mulan*, since most previous studies only look at one factor at a time, such as gender stereotypes or liberal feminism, without considering how gender, social class, and cultural norms work together. By combining these three factors in one framework, this study offers a more complete way of understanding how a woman's identity is shaped in a patriarchal and militaristic setting.

Third, this study adds to the growing academic conversation in cultural studies, film studies, and feminist literary criticism by showing that popular media can be read not simply as entertainment, but as a text that negotiates resistance and conformity at the same time. This contributes a theoretical example for future students who want to study identity and power in film using an intersectional lens.

1.4.2 Practical Significance

Practically, this research is expected to give several benefits. For readers, this study helps them understand how cultural expectations, socioeconomic status, and gender identity intersect and shape the lives of women, as shown through *Mulan*'s experience in a patriarchal and militarized society. This understanding may encourage readers to notice similar patterns of pressure and negotiation in real-life situations around them.

For future researchers, this study can serve as a reference and a starting point for further investigations into intersectional feminism in literature and film. It may encourage other researchers to apply intersectionality and feminist theory to examine other characters, stories, or cultural products, especially those that involve overlapping issues of gender, class, and culture.

For students and lecturers in English Education and literary studies, this research can be used as supplementary material for teaching gender studies, media literacy, and literary criticism, since it provides a concrete

example of how a popular film can be analyzed critically rather than simply enjoyed as entertainment.

1.5 Scope and Limitation

1.5.1 Scope of the Study

This research examines the character of Mulan in Disney's 2020 live-action. The study is confined to the examination of Mulan's negotiation of her gender identity within a patriarchal and militaristic society, while also looking at how that negotiation unfolds in a space that constantly demands conformity. It focuses on how intersecting dynamics of class, gender, and cultural norms shape her experiences, not just as background context, but as forces that quietly direct her choices and limit her possibilities. At the same time, the discussion pays attention to how these pressures are not always visible on the surface, but still present in the way Mulan moves, decides, and positions herself within the narrative.

1.5.2 Limitation of the Study

A detailed comparison between the 2020 live-action adaptation and earlier animated Mulan adaptations is not included in this study. Furthermore, this study focuses solely on how the main character is portrayed in the film, without extending the analysis to other characters or engaging in broader historical interpretations of the Mulan mythology. Only specific dialogue and gestures within the movie that are directly relevant to the research topic are included in the analysis.

1.6 Definition of the Key Term

1. Intersectionals

Intersectionality originated in Black feminist thought and was popularized by Kimberlé Crenshaw to explain how Black women experience racial and gender discrimination simultaneously, which cannot be explained by a "single-axis" framework alone (K. W. Crenshaw, 2013). Intersectionality is a term used to describe how different aspects of a person's identity such as gender, class, race, or

culture overlap and shape their experiences. Instead of looking at these factors separately, intersectionality helps us understand how they work together to create unique forms of privilege or discrimination in someone's life.

2. Feminism

Feminism is a movement and way of thinking that focuses on achieving equality between women and men. Feminism challenges the patriarchal system and cultural norms that limit women's rights, opportunities, and voices. Feminism seeks to eliminate male domination, guaranteeing equal rights and opportunities in all spheres (Lum & Chik, 2022). Overall, feminism aims to empower women and promote justice in all areas of life.

3. Mulan

Mulan is a legendary heroine in Chinese folklore whose story was first recorded in the folk poem “The Ballad of Mulan” (Mulan Ci), believed to date from the Northern Wei dynasty period (386–535 CE) and later preserved in the Song dynasty anthology Yuefu Shiji. Over the centuries, her story has been retold through poems, plays, novels, and films, and she has become a well-known symbol of courage, filial piety, and the negotiation between personal identity and social duty (Edwards, 2010). In this study, Mulan refers specifically to the character as portrayed in Disney's 2020 live-action film, whose journey of disguising her gender to fulfill her family's duty and prove herself within a patriarchal, militaristic society becomes the central object of analysis.

4. Gender Roles

Gender roles are socially and culturally constructed expectations about how men and women should behave, think, and perform in society. Gender roles and norms function as sociocultural frameworks that regulate behaviors, attitudes, and values, delineating social expectations for men and women (Connell, 2009). These constructs are internalized from early childhood through language, dress codes, and behaviors, rather

than being static, evolve across different historical periods and social contexts, adapting to societal changes. These roles often assign men to public and leadership positions while women are expected to fulfill domestic and supportive roles.

5. Social Class

Social class refers to a group of people within society who share similar economic status, social position, and access to resources. Differences in social class can influence individuals' opportunities, responsibilities, and social experiences. Differences in social class shape a person's experiences, responsibilities, and access to power in society (Grusky & Hill, 2018). Furthermore, social class is not only about economic conditions but also about social relationships and cultural expectations that shape inequality.

6. Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence (Akgul, 2017). In practice, this system isn't always overtly present, but rather operates subtly through norms, customs, and ways of thinking deemed "normal" by society. It manifests in how men are raised to feel entitled, and women are taught to accept, adapt, and even limit themselves. This dominance is not only evident in personal relationships but also permeates broader structures such as the family, education, and even popular culture. As a result, this inequality is continually reproduced, seemingly natural, when in fact it is continually shaped, maintained, and perpetuated.