

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Film as Literary Works

The word "literature" actually traces back to the Latin term "Litteratura," which comes from "littera," meaning the smallest unit in a sequence of writing (Klarer, 2004). Abrams (1999) adds that one branch called the Literature of the Absurd includes plays and prose that reflect how absurd human life can be, and interestingly, these works are often written in an equally absurd style to match that idea. This shows that literature isn't just about neat, structured writing; it can also be a kind of performance that captures the strange and irrational sides of being human. Abrams (1999) also points out that since Plato and Aristotle's time, literature has generally been grouped into three main types: lyric, epic or narrative, and drama, a classification still used in literary discussions today.

Interestingly, literature and film are closely connected. Totawad, as cited in Nagnath Ramrao (2016), mentions that literature used to exist mainly in printed form, giving it a fixed and lasting shape, but its influence extends beyond the page. In fact, understanding a film often requires looking at it through a literary lens, while literature's true depth can sometimes be better appreciated through film. Nagnath Ramrao (2016) further explains that literature has long been a rich source of inspiration for filmmakers, helping many great movies come to life.

Because of this connection, a movie script can also be studied as a literary text since it contains dialogue, character descriptions, and narrative structure, just like a novel or play. This research specifically focuses on how Samantha Boone's character is built through the script's language, dialogue, and narrative style, particularly in shaping her gender and racial identity. Jahn (2021) explains that narratological film analysis studies how movies build their stories through point of view, focalization,

and narrative voice, ideas that actually originated in literary theory and were later applied to film. So, film studies serve as the method for treating the script as a literary text in this research, while intersectionality theory becomes the lens for understanding how Samantha Booke's identity is portrayed through the writing itself.

2.1.2 Feminist in Literature

Feminism in literature refers to a critical approach that examines how women are represented in literary works, and how those representations relate to power, identity, and social structures. Feminist literary criticism does not only focus on whether female characters are present, but also questions how they are portrayed, what roles they are given, and whether they are allowed to have agency over their own lives. According to Elaine Showalter (2015), feminist criticism aims to uncover how literature has historically reinforced male dominance while also opening space to read texts from women's perspectives. Thus, feminist literary analysis allows us to see that *Mulan* is not simply a story of empowerment, but also a text that negotiates between resistance and limitation. Her character challenges the boundaries placed on women, yet at the same time reveals how strong those boundaries still are. Through this lens, *Mulan* becomes more than just a heroic figure, she becomes a representation of how women's identities are continuously shaped, restricted, and at times, redefined within cultural and literary narratives.

2.1.3 Traditional Feminism

Traditional feminism refers to the earlier stages of the feminist movement, generally associated with first-wave and second-wave feminism, which mainly focused on securing women's basic legal and political rights. First-wave feminism, which developed from the nineteenth century into the early twentieth century, fought for women's access to property, divorce, and the right to vote, while second-wave feminism, which grew from the 1960s to the 1980s, expanded the struggle to workplace equality, reproductive rights, and legal protection from violence and discrimination (Freedman, 2002; Rampton, 2015). The central idea behind this stage of feminism is that women should have the

same rights and opportunities as men, and that the inequality they experience comes from long-standing patriarchal systems embedded in law, education, and family structures.

Traditional feminism generally explains gender inequality by pointing to how society divides men and women into separate roles and spaces. Men are typically associated with leadership, decision-making, and public life, while women are expected to remain in the domestic sphere and follow cultural expectations tied to marriage and family (Evans, 1995). This division of roles becomes a barrier that limits women's independence and prevents them from claiming the same social and political standing as men.

In Disney's *Mulan* (2020), this framework is clearly visible in the expectations placed on Mulan simply because she is a woman. She is expected to behave “properly,” bring honor to her family through an arranged marriage, and stay away from the battlefield, because the military is considered a space that belongs to men. By disguising herself and joining the army, Mulan directly challenges this traditional division of roles. Her actions reflect the spirit of traditional feminism because she proves, through her bravery, leadership, and physical skill, that women are just as capable as men of performing tasks that society reserves for men only.

Although traditional feminism does not fully account for how factors such as culture or social class also shape a woman's experience, a limitation that becomes clearer in the following discussion of modern and intersectional feminism, it remains useful for explaining Mulan's basic struggle against the rigid rules of her society. It shows how her resistance functions as a direct statement against the restrictions placed specifically on women's access to public and military life.

2.1.4 Modern Feminism

Modern feminism is generally associated with the third and fourth waves of the feminist movement, which developed from the early 1990s onward and focus on understanding women's experiences in a more complex and inclusive way (Snyder, 2008). This period of feminism was

strongly shaped by Kimberle Crenshaw's (1989) introduction of intersectionality, which showed that gender cannot be separated from other social categories such as race, class, and culture, as well as by Judith Butler's (1990) argument that gender itself is not a fixed trait but something produced through repeated social behavior. Unlike earlier, more legalistic forms of feminism that mainly emphasized equal rights under the law, modern feminism examines how gender interacts with other factors such as race, class, culture, sexuality, and personal identity, arguing that women's experiences cannot be reduced to gender alone because different women face different pressures depending on their social background (Munro, 2013).

A key idea in modern feminism is that empowerment does not look the same for every woman. Modern feminists highlight the importance of voice, agency, and personal choice, and they critique social norms, media representations, and cultural expectations that continue to limit women even in societies that appear open or progressive. This approach recognizes that equality is not only about giving women the same opportunities as men, but also about addressing deeper biases and structures that shape everyday life.

In Disney's *Mulan* (2020), modern feminism is reflected in the film's focus on Mulan's personal identity and inner conflict. Instead of simply fighting for equal treatment, Mulan struggles with how she wants to define herself outside the expectations of her family, culture, and tradition. Her journey is not only about proving that women can fight like men, but also about learning to embrace her own strength without hiding who she truly is. The film shows how cultural norms shape Mulan's experiences, and how her gender intersects with family honor, social expectations, and class background, a pattern that aligns closely with modern feminism's attention to overlapping social forces rather than gender in isolation.

This aligns with modern feminist ideas because it highlights how identity is shaped by multiple social forces, not just gender. Mulan's courage to reveal her true self and challenge the rules of her society demonstrates a modern feminist message: empowerment comes from

being able to define one's own identity and break free from limiting norms.

2.1.5 Intersectional Feminism

Intersectional feminism is a feminist approach that emphasizes that women's experiences cannot be understood through a single dimension of identity, such as gender, but must be analyzed through the intersections of multiple factors including social class, race, culture, and sexuality (K. Crenshaw, 2018). The concept was first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) to explain how Black women in the United States experienced double discrimination, both as women and as members of a racial minority group.

Crenshaw argues that discrimination does not operate in isolation but rather in overlapping and compounding ways. Women may face unique and complex forms of oppression when their identities intersect across different social categories. Intersectional feminism therefore seeks to understand how patriarchy, class structures, and cultural norms interact simultaneously to shape women's lives.

Multiple Identities. Every individual embodies multiple aspects of identity that are interconnected. A woman is not only defined by her gender but also by her class position, cultural background, and ethnic identity.

Unique Experiences The forms of discrimination women face vary depending on the combination of identities they hold. For instance, women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may encounter different pressures compared to women from privileged classes, even though both groups experience patriarchal constraints.

Social Structures and Power Intersectional feminism highlights that oppression is rooted in social, legal, and cultural systems that reinforce hierarchies and inequalities. Feminist analysis must therefore examine how these structures function together.

In the context of Disney's *Mulan* (2020), intersectional feminism provides a comprehensive lens to analyze how Mulan navigates layered forms of oppression:

1. **Gender:** As a woman, Mulan is expected to be obedient, graceful, and bring honor to her family through marriage. Gender norms restrict her freedom and exclude her from military participation.
2. **Social Class:** Mulan comes from a modest family. Her father, weakened by illness, cannot fulfill his military duty, which compels Mulan to take his place. Her class position limits her family's options and intensifies her sense of responsibility.
3. **Culture:** In traditional Chinese society, family honor is a central value. Mulan's choices are not merely personal but deeply tied to her family's reputation within the community. Cultural expectations reinforce the pressures she faces.

Thus, Mulan's struggle is not only against patriarchy but also against cultural norms and class limitations that intersect to shape her journey. Intersectional feminism reveals that her empowerment cannot be understood in isolation but emerges from negotiating these overlapping systems of power.

2.1.6 Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment refers to the process by which women gain the ability to make strategic life choices, particularly in contexts where these abilities were previously lacking (Kabeer, 2016). Empowerment involves access to resources, agency in decision-making, and the achievement of outcomes that reflect autonomy and self-determination. According to (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015), women's empowerment relates not only to formal equality but also to changes in social structures that enable women to gain control over their lives. This includes the ability to challenge restrictive norms and define their own identity independently.

In the context of *Mulan* (2020), empowerment is seen through the main character's journey as she takes on a role socially prohibited for women. Mulan's decision to replace her father on the battlefield is not

merely an act of courage but also a form of reclaiming agency over her body and identity. However, empowerment in this film is not presented simply. Mulan initially must hide her identity to be accepted into the military system. This demonstrates that empowerment often occurs within the constraints of patriarchal structures. Transformation occurs when Mulan finally dares to reveal her true identity, which marks a more authentic form of empowerment, the freedom to be herself without having to conform to male standards.

2.1.7 Gender Roles

Gender roles are socially constructed expectations that dictate how individuals should behave based on their perceived gender (Connell, 2009). These roles are reinforced through cultural norms, institutions, and everyday practices, often positioning men in dominant public roles while assigning women to domestic and submissive positions. Gender roles function as a social system that indirectly regulates the distribution of power. Women are often judged based on their adherence to feminine norms such as gentleness, obedience, and modesty.

In *Mulan* (2020), gender roles are clearly depicted through societal expectations of women. Mulan is expected to become an "ideal" figure through marriage, not through individual achievement. Her bridegroom training demonstrates how women are molded to meet certain social standards. When Mulan enters the military, she must conform to masculine roles to be accepted. This demonstrates that gender is not fixed, but performative argument that gender is the result of repeated social practices. Thus, this film shows that gender roles not only limit women, but also create a system that forces individuals to conform in order to be accepted in the social structure.

2.1.8 Social Class Pressures

Social class refers to hierarchical distinctions in society based on economic resources, status, and power (Grusky & Hill, 2018). Class position influences access to opportunities, responsibilities, and social expectations. According to Savage et al. (2015), social class pressures are not always explicitly visible but operate through norms and expectations

that limit individual choices. Families from the lower-middle class tend to have limited social mobility, forcing family members to make decisions more collectively than individually.

Social class pressures are evident in Mulan's humble family circumstances. Her father, aged and ill, remains obligated to fulfill his military service. The lack of alternatives demonstrates the limitations the family faces due to their class position. Mulan's decision to succeed her father is driven not only by emotional factors but also by social and economic pressures. This demonstrates that individual agency is often shaped by structural conditions. In other words, Mulan's choices are not entirely free, but rather a response to existing limitations.

2.1.9 Patriarchal Structures

Patriarchy is a social system in which men hold dominant power in political, economic, and social institutions (Walby, 2015). This system operates through norms, laws, and cultural practices that place women in a subordinate position. According to Hooks (2015), patriarchy not only limits women but also shapes how society thinks about power and authority. Patriarchy is often perceived as "normal," making it difficult to recognize and challenge.

In Mulan (2020), patriarchal structures are evident in various aspects of social life, from the family to the military. Women are not allowed to serve in the military, and family honor is heavily dependent on women's adherence to norms. Mulan's resistance to this system demonstrates that patriarchy is not absolute but rather negotiable. However, the film also shows that to gain recognition, women often have to prove themselves to standards set by men. This indicates that even in the process of resistance, patriarchal structures still wield a powerful influence.

2.1.10 Cultural Norms

Cultural norms are shared expectations and rules that guide behavior within a society (Hechter & Opp, 2017). These norms shape how individuals think, act, and judge themselves and others. According to

Hofstede (2016), culture plays a significant role in shaping collective values such as honor, family, and social responsibility. In collectivist societies, such as the one depicted in *Mulan*, family interests often take precedence over individual interests. In this film, the concept of "honor" is central to the cultural norms that govern Mulan's actions. Every decision she makes impacts not only her own life but also her family's reputation. This creates a conflict between personal desires and social demands. Cultural norms also reinforce gender roles and patriarchy. The expectation for women to maintain family honor through marriage demonstrates how culture functions as a mechanism of social control. Thus, Mulan's struggle is not only against the patriarchal system, but also against the cultural norms that limit her freedom of movement.

2.2 Previous Studies

Previous studies on *Mulan* (2020) have explored various aspects of feminism, gender representation, and cultural values, yet most of them tend to examine these issues through the film as an audiovisual object rather than through the script as a literary text, and most also tend to apply a single analytical lens. This section reviews five relevant studies to identify their contributions and to highlight the position of this research among them.

Susilowaty and Prastiwi (2022) conducted a study titled "The Representation of Feminism of the Main Character in *Mulan* Movie as Seen Through Liberal Feminism Approach," an undergraduate thesis submitted to Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta that examines how Mulan's character reflects the values of liberal feminism, a strand of feminism that emphasizes formal equality, individual rights, and equal access to opportunity. Using a qualitative descriptive method, the study analyzes Mulan's dialogue and actions as they appear on screen to show how she represents women's struggle for equal participation in public and military life, and concludes that Mulan embodies liberal feminist ideals through her demand to be judged on ability rather than gender.

This study is similar to the present research in that both examine gender inequality in the same story through a feminist framework. However, it differs in two important ways: first, Susilowaty and Prastiwi

treat the film as their primary text rather than the written script, meaning their reading of Mulan's characterization is shaped by visual and performative elements rather than the script's own dialogue, stage directions, and descriptive passages; second, they focus only on individual rights and equal opportunity as a single analytical axis, without considering how social class or cultural expectation also shape Mulan's choices, which is exactly the gap that the intersectional, script-based approach in this study addresses.

Gong and Tian (2021), in their article "A Feminist Analysis of the Live-Action Disney Film *Mulan*," published in *Frontiers in Art Research*, examine how the film builds feminist meaning by comparing Mulan with two other female figures in the story: her mother and sister, who represent traditional femininity, and the witch Xianniang, who has great power yet still submits to men. Through this comparison, drawn primarily from viewing the film, the study finds that the narrative gradually reveals Mulan's growing awareness of her own gender identity, and that this awareness eventually inspires a change in how Xianniang understands her own position as a woman. This study is similar to the present research in its object of analysis and its general feminist framework, but it differs in both method and focus: Gong and Tian rely on the film itself and concentrate on comparing several female characters to illustrate a general feminist message, while the present study treats the script as the primary literary artifact and concentrates on Mulan alone, analyzing her experience through the specific and interacting categories of gender, social class, and culture as they are constructed in the written text, rather than through character comparison drawn from viewing.

Kusen, Noah, Setiawan, and Silaen (2024), in "Challenging Gender Binaries in a 'Journey to Honor': A Feminist Critique of Performativity in *Mulan* (2020) Movie," published in *Boanerges: Makarios Education Journal*, apply Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to examine how Mulan actively subverts the binary opposition between masculinity and femininity by taking on roles traditionally reserved for men. The study also analyzes the symbol of "chi" as a metaphor for inner strength that breaks the usual association between power and masculinity, and concludes that the film blends

Confucian cultural values with feminist ideals while questioning the fixedness of gender identity.

This study is similar to the present research in its attention to how gender norms are constructed and challenged within the story's Chinese cultural setting. It differs, however, on two counts: Kusen et al. read performativity through the film's visual and performed action, whereas the present study locates that construction in the script's dialogue and stage directions; and Kusen et al. rely on gender performativity theory to explain how gender itself is produced through repeated action, whereas the present study uses intersectional feminism to explain how gender interacts with separate systems of social class and cultural obligation, rather than focusing on performativity alone.

Putri and Thoyibi (2024), in "Gender Empowerment in Disney's Live-Action *Mulan* (2020): A Feminist Perspective," published in *Ethical Lingua: Journal of Language Teaching and Literature*, use a literature study method framed by liberal feminist theory to identify indicators of gender empowerment in the film. Their findings describe five indicators of gender empowerment present in *Mulan* (2020), including *Mulan*'s active decision-making, her physical and mental capability, and her resistance toward restrictive social expectations placed on women. This study is similar to the present research in its concern with women's empowerment as a central theme. The difference lies in both scope and source: Putri and Thoyibi treat empowerment mainly as an individual achievement measured through separate indicators drawn from the film, while the present study investigates how that same empowerment is negotiated within overlapping structures of patriarchy, class pressure, and cultural expectation as they are written into the script, treating empowerment as a relational process constructed at the textual level rather than a checklist of individual traits observed on screen.

Indriani and Wenerda (2024), in "Representation of Liberal Feminism on the 2020 *Mulan* Movie," published in *COMMICAST*, use a qualitative descriptive approach through direct observation of the film's narrative to explore how liberal feminist values, individual rights, equal opportunity, and freedom from restrictive gender roles, are represented

through Mulan's actions on screen. Their findings show that Mulan challenges the boundaries society places on women by demanding to be judged on ability rather than gender, and by seeking changes in social treatment that do not discriminate against women.

This study is similar to the present research in that both address gender equality and empowerment in the same film. It differs, however, in method and scope: Indriani and Wenerda rely on direct observation of the film's narrative as their data, rather than the written script's dialogue and stage directions, and they interpret Mulan's actions solely through liberal feminism, treating gender as an isolated axis of analysis. The present study instead reads the script as the primary literary text and situates gender alongside social class and cultural norms within Crenshaw's intersectional framework, showing that Mulan's empowerment cannot be reduced to individual rights alone but is also shaped by family economic pressure and inherited cultural obligation, a combination that a single-axis liberal feminist reading does not fully capture.

Based on the review above, it can be seen that previous studies have provided important insights into feminism, gender roles, and empowerment in *Mulan* (2020). However, most of them treat the film, rather than the script, as their primary object of analysis, and most examine these aspects through a single lens, whether liberal feminism, gender performativity, or a general feminist perspective. None of them systematically examine how gender, social class, and cultural norms are constructed together at the textual level, through dialogue and stage directions, to shape the main character's experience. This limitation is discussed further in the research gap below.

2.3 Research Gap

Two main gaps emerge from the previous studies discussed above. First, existing research on *Mulan* (2020) consistently analyzes the film as an audiovisual text, drawing conclusions from what is seen and heard on screen, rather than treating the movie script itself as a literary artifact worthy of close textual analysis. This means that these studies interpret Mulan's characterization through performance, cinematography,

and visual representation, rather than through the specific linguistic and narrative choices, dialogue, stage directions, and descriptive passages, that construct her identity at the level of the written text.

Second, existing research tends to rely on single-axis feminist frameworks, such as liberal feminism or gender performativity, that examine gender inequality as though it operates independently from other social categories, without considering how Mulan's resistance is also shaped, limited, or intensified by her family's social class or by the cultural value placed on honor and obedience. Third, previous studies generally treat women's empowerment as an individual achievement, measured by indicators such as courage, physical skill, or decision-making, without examining empowerment as something negotiated within, rather than simply achieved against, overlapping structures of power.

The novelty of this study lies in its treatment of the Mulan (2020) movie script as a literary text in its own right, analyzed through Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectional feminist approach, to examine how patriarchy, social class, and cultural norms interact simultaneously within the script's dialogue and stage directions rather than through the film's visual or performative dimensions. Unlike previous research that reads Mulan's characterization primarily through screen performance and isolates gender as the only relevant analytical category, this study positions the script itself as the primary data and gender as one of several interconnected forces that together produce Mulan's specific characterization, one that cannot be fully explained by looking at gender, class, or culture on their own, nor by looking at the film alone. By doing so, this study offers both a methodological and a substantive contribution: it demonstrates that a movie script can be read as a literary text amenable to close analysis, and it provides a more comprehensive understanding of how empowerment is textually negotiated, rather than simply asserted, within a constrained social structure, a case study that existing scholarship on Mulan (2020) has not yet provided in this combined, script-centered form.