CURSED, CAPTIVE OR CONQUEROR? A CRITICAL STUDY OF BODY POLITICS IN DISNEY MOVIES

Project submitted to St. Teresa's College (Autonomous) in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of BACHELOR OF ARTS in English Language and Literature

By

NEHA TOGAN

Register No. AB22ENG019

III B. A. English Literature

St. Teresa's College

Ernakulam

Cochin – 682 011

Kerala

Supervisor

MS. ATHIRA BABU

Assistant Professor

Department of English

St. Teresa's College

Ernakulam

Kerala

March 2025

ST.TERESA'S COLLEGE (AUTONOMOUS) ERNAKULAM

Author Name	NEHA TOGAN
Course of Study	English Language & Literature
Name of Guide	MS. ATHIRA BABU
Department	English & Centre for Research
Acceptable Maximum Limit	20
Submitted By	library@teresas.ac.in
Paper Title	CURSED, CAPTIVE OR CONQUEROR? A CRITICAL STUDY OF BODY POLITICS IN DISNEY MOVIES
Similarity	6% AI-6%
Paper ID	3396427
Total Pages	37
Submission Date	2025-03-12 11:31:33

Signature of Student

Signature of Guide

Checked By
College Librarian

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project titled "Cursed, Captive, or Conqueror? A Critical Study of Body Politics in Disney Movies" is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Ms. Athira Babu, Assistant Professor, Department of English.

Neha Togan

Register No. AB22ENG019

III B.A. English Literature

Ernakulam

St. Teresa's College (Autonomous)

March 2025

Ernakulam

CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that this project entitled "Cursed, Captive, or Conqueror? A Critical Study of Body Politics in Disney Movies". by Neha Togan is a record of bona fide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

Ms. Athira Babu

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Ernakulam   St. Teresa's College (Autonomous)

March 2025   Ernakulam

Cursed, Captive, or Conqueror?

A Critical Study of Body Politics in Disney Movies

By

NEHA TOGAN

B.A. English Language and Literature

St.Teresa'sCollege(Autonomous)

Ernakulam

Register No:AB22ENG019

2022 - 2025

Supervising Teacher: Ms. Athira Babu

This study critically examines the evolution of body politics in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Tangled* (2010), and *Mulan* (2020), investigating how these films construct and regulate female bodies in relation to beauty, power, race, and agency. Drawing on the theoretical foundations of Michel Foucault's biopolitics, Judith Butler's performativity, and Frantz Fanon's racialized embodiment, this research explores the shifting dynamics of control and resistance inscribed onto the female form.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

CONTENTS

List of Figures

Introduction

It is not true that fairytales and body politics don't get along, but rather, these narratives often serve as a powerful reflection of societal norms, using beauty, age, and power to both reinforce and challenge the roles assigned to individuals, particularly women, in the real world. The intersection of fairy tales and body politics is not coincidental but deeply entrenched in the ways bodies are regulated, gender is constructed, and power is exercised.

The goal of this project is to unravel the veiled narratives of body-politics in the very famous Disney movies of the current century: *Mulan*, and *Tangled* which loaded pieces of work that invite criticism in the way the characters in these films are regulated by the societal structures. The objective of this project lies in deconstructing the ideas of gender, power, identity and resistance explored through different bodies. It also aims at analyzing the intersection of race with these impressions and brings out how body politics define femineity. While these narratives have evolved from earlier Disney princess films such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), they remain embedded in ideological frameworks that demand scrutiny.

The central inquiries driving this project are as follows, this research seeks to answer them:

1)How does Disney's smash-hits create and reinforce the existing concepts of gender norms and traditional beauty standards aligned to the bodies? And on contrary do they challenge and subvert the social constructs and stereotypes through the physical portrayal of the protagonists?

2)   The transformations undergone by the protagonists during the runtime not only brings in much personality to the movie but evidences: of how these bodily changes are integrated to the cultural entities of power and beauty?

3)   How are physical traits of the characters used as a tool to create dynamics of power, supremacy and agency? How the aforementioned movies rooting from the Western canon link various characters to the ideal signature roles which are much more layered than gender roles?

4)   How does the intersection of race with body politics play different strokes on different folks? How do these motion pictures depict interracial bodies? What are the possible cultural assumptions suggested by them?

5)   Is physicality used as a tool of hostility and resistance or a victim of conformity and subjugation? The bottom-line lies in navigating between societal pressures and personal autonomy. Do these feature films let your conscience to be your guide or tricks you to believe in the conventions that are portrayed?

It will also apply the methodology of cross-film comparisons and thematic synthesis for contemplating broader conclusions on the matter. This project argues that Disney movies are not just gripping tales for entertainment, nevertheless they are fine cultural crafts that influence and shape young viewers perception of themselves and others as they are intricately linked with ideas of body politics: power, identity and social norms through the sketches of the characters. These compulsive films reflect the cultural programming of masculinity equalled to strength, power and heroism while femineity is linked with destructive roles of hysteria, vulnerability and beauty. But in spite of that there are moments where the characters push the envelope challenging established stereotypes and go out with the old and in with the new depictions of agency and empowerment. The transformation that the protagonist undergoes brings out a bigger image of cultural

standards of body image, beauty standards and self-worth. The intersectionality of race in these films depict how body politics differ by people revealing nuances of implicit biases and reinforcing or confronting customary labels assigned to the bodies.

This research is structured into three main chapters, each addressing a distinct aspect of body politics within *Mulan* (2020) and *Tangled* (2010):

Chapter 1: Theoretical Foundations of Body Politics – This chapter establishes the theoretical framework, drawing on Foucault's biopolitics, Butler's performativity, and Fanon's discourse on racialized bodies. It explores how these theories inform an understanding of body regulation, gender norms, and beauty standards in media narratives.

Chapter 2: Cross-Film Analysis and Transformation of Body Politics – This chapter examines the shifts in body politics from earlier portrayals, comparing *Snow White*, *Tangled*, and *Mulan* to highlight how female agency, beauty ideals, and racial representation have evolved. It evaluates whether these films successfully challenge traditional constraints or merely reconfigure them in new forms.

Chapter 3: Pitfalls and Limitations in the Evolution of Body Politics – While *Tangled* and *Mulan* attempt to redefine female protagonists, they are not free from limitations. This chapter critiques the persistence of exceptionalism, Eurocentric beauty norms, and commercialized empowerment, revealing how these films continue to operate within constrained ideological frameworks.

Through this structured analysis, the study seeks to uncover how these films navigate body politics, questioning whether their evolution marks true progress or merely a reformulation of existing narratives. By engaging with contemporary feminist and cultural critiques, this research aims to contribute to broader discussions on gender, race, and media representation.

Chapter 1

Theories on the body politics construct by the fairy tale factory

"There is no aspect of human life that is not touched by the politics of the body"

(Bordo 21).

Body politics is a theoretical approach towards analysing the power dynamics

surrounding the body and ways it is influenced by the society which more than often restrict

one's personal autonomy, controls and regulates its activity through power structures,

institutions and beliefs that are social, cultural, political and economic. The concept emerged

as a critical discourse within feminist theory in 1960s. Deeply rooted in the ideas of second

wave of feminism, body politics aims to address the systemic inequalities, societal norms,

gender controlling roles and sexual politics which are beyond the legal and political rights and

often overlooked. The works of Michel Foucault, particularly *Discipline and Punish and The*

History of Sexuality laid the foundations from which the feminist critics that further expanded

the questions of regulation and oppression weighed upon gendered bodies. It concerns body's

sociopolitical construction. Foucault introduced the concept of biopower to examine how

states exert control over the bodies, transforming them into instruments of political and

economic utility (Foucault 140). Foucault's notion of disciplinary power delineates how

bodies are trained, regulated, and surveyed through mechanisms such as education, medicine,

and the penal system (Foucault 199). All bodies especially that of females are subtly

educated to conform to the normality approved by the society. These docile bodies to

Foucault are evidences of restriction and sites of power, generated to build up a system of

hierarchies and to demand obedience. The body that belongs to a person is not his/her alone

but it is inscribed with meaning and is prone to be abiding by the roles, actions and expected

behaviours. (Foucault 202).

Foucault's basic ideas is in the productive nature of power, i.e., it creates identities, desires, and behaviours but also represses some of it. Here, in the realm of body politics, gender roles, racial identities, and bodily ideals are not naturally occurring to a person in his mind but is socially produced and it forms a person's identity and behaviour thus bringing discipline out of him/her. This obviously state that all the stereotypes of gender identities and racial bodies are nothing but social constructs, it is all stories made up by people in power to dominate others.

His conclusion is that contemporary society's strategy towards body politics is one of control and classification, whereby bodies are classified, disciplined, and commodified to be used for greater political and economic purposes (Foucault148). Foucault entreprenerd the concept of biopolitics in T*he History of Sexuality* where he introduced the idea that power operates not only through regulation or imposition alone by also through self-control. The "Panopticon" is a metaphor used by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* how power operates in an individual without even he/she realising about it and how modern societies regulate the power structures. This analogy is best in examining how individuals regulate their own bodies and behaviours not just through external rules but also through self -regulation and internalized discipline as if they are always under surveillance under a "Central watchtower" which can be equated with patriarchy.

In *The Second Sex,* Simone de Beauvoir famously stated, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 267), highlighting how femininity is socially constructed rather than biologically determined. This idea foreshadows the following arguments by Judith Butler about gender performativity (Butler 25) as expressed in Gender Trouble. Butler claims that gender is not an essential characteristic but a repeated performance determined by social conventions (Butler

25). This performative nature of gender is arranged through narratives that regulate how bodies inhabit and express masculinity and femininity.

One of the basic arguments in Butler's theory is that gender is maintained by acts, gestures, and cultural signifiers that reiterate societal norms (Butler 33). She argues that gender is an identity unstable and established in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts (Butler 33). Butler also develops Foucault's concepts of power by bringing out regulatory norms that determine which bodies are acceptable or intelligible in society (Butler 23).

She lay stress on the idea of the norms which primarily normalise hierarchies and gender constructs through familiarity. The overall conclusion of Butler's theory is that subverting these norms through breaking patterns of societal norms itself can bring out changes in social constructs (Butler 43).

Gender is not an act of performativity but rather a natural biological desire for an animal to have. And identity is fluid and is constructed, enforced, regulated by the societal and cultural forces. Body and its identity if traced again, will not be owned by a person who possesses it but by the society because it is by the society's demand different identities are given to everybody.

One of the most important features of Butler's theory is that the body doesn't have an essential identity, it depends on which language one and the culture one is a part of. (Butler 8). Strict norms regulating gendered bodies exclude those outside of them, perpetuating regimes of exclusion and marginalization. The constructed hierarchies and divisions are internalised and practiced as natural facts but not lies

imposed on the person or the beholder, which in the course of time get ingrained to one's psyche due to repeated actions making the body an unconscious agent of this disparity and also through the fear of repercussions of the society and the pennants the individuals will have to pay for their non-confirmatory behaviour.

> The primary argument in Butler's work is that performativity is a mechanism through which power operates. By adhering to expected behaviours, individuals reproduce dominant norms, often without realizing the constraints imposed upon them. However, because gender is performative, it also contains the potential for disruption and subversion. Drag performances, for instance, expose the performativity of gender by exaggerating its constructed nature. (Butler 137)

The intersection of race and body politics has been a significant domain of critical inquiry, particularly in the works of Frantz Fanon and bell hooks. Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, highlights how racialized bodies are inscribed with colonial discourses that render them subjugated or marginalized (Fanon 84). Furthermore, he argues that the dominant colonial discourses have othered the black body as an entity, oppressing and excluding them from the mainstream. The dominator's gaze thereby creates a strong polarization between them and the degraded "others". Parallelly Bell Hooks questioned how media and cultural narratives have hypersexualised black femineity and have created distorted notions of black people alike rejecting their individuality and identity. The politics of racialized bodies, therefore, revolves around both the erasure and hyper-exposure of certain identities within socio-political structures. These racialized inscriptions, much like gendered ones, are performed and policed through societal norms and media representations (hooks 61). Thus, race is not just a

biological category, it is a social and political construct developed by the colonial gaze to objectify and dehumanize racialised bodies. This initiative was carried forward throughout the third wave intersectional feminism where race, class, sexuality and disability are studied on how they interact with body politics drawing in inspirations from theorists like Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, Bell Hook's in *Ain't I a Woman* and Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*. They critiqued mainstream feminism's Eurocentrism and examined how Black and queer bodies are uniquely marginalized.

On analysing the imaginary world manifestations of body politics like in fairy tales, it is evident that the narrative structures, character arcs, dialogues and costumes, all signify the depth to which the system has rooted in by now and it has been the same for a long time. Jack Zipes argues that fairy tales serve as ideological tools that socialize individuals into specific gendered and racialized roles. He argues, "Fairy tales prescribe gender roles that align with the dominant patriarchal order, shaping young minds to accept social hierarchies as natural and inevitable" (Zipes 81). Additionally, he critiques the portrayal of heroines, noting that "these narratives privilege beauty and passivity, ensuring that female protagonists conform to Western ideals of femininity while rewarding their submission with marriage and social elevation" (Zipes 94). The heroines in traditional narratives often adhere to Western standards of beauty, passivity, and heteronormativity, reinforcing hegemonic ideals of femininity (Zipes 81). From a Foucauldian point of view, the fairy tales are yet another device that ensures conformity of women to not just the societal roles but also beauty ideals. It equates femineity with exorbitant beauty standards often impossible to attain. Traditional heroines reflect patriarchy and racialised idea of femineity. Girls try to fit into this narrow pedestal from a young age, this is however indirect disciplining of women to how they should appear and behave in the society. Had Foucault not

disrupted the whole process of normalizing of biopower through fictional tales as an intentional objective of the power dynamics alone, Butler's gender performative theory would have educated on the habitual acceptance of gender roles which are imposed intricately for one to become a social being but would have remained in vague about the power politics associated in advocating the women to be docile, meek and submissive. Butler's performative theory adds to the complexity that the ideas and narratives of the fairy tales cannot just create gendered performances which are proved neither innate non inevitable but rather socially constructed acts, which can therefore be disrupted or reimagined.

Chapter 2

From Snow White to Mulan: A Journey of Evolution Do

bodies matter?

This question is rarely biological but largely political. On quoting Judith

Butler words insofar as it took the world by storm. "The body is a materiality

that bears meaning, but it is never merely a fact of nature. It is shaped, invested,

and regulated by power". (Foucault 25)

Media has always been a tool of patriarchy that further enforces the power

dynamics associated with female bodies and the beauty standards they have to follow

which disguise the phantom behind it under the pretention of "girlhood". Body for

women is the albatross around her neck. It is both a burden and a battleground,

subjected to social, political, and cultural forces that dictate its worth and function. It

is the society that aligns and have a bit much aligned roles to body identities and this

in turn has drawn a line in the sand, creating a world of illusion where we believe in

the image constructed by the cream of society by which we define the pedestals of

behavioural patterns, gendered roles and other conformities that clip the wings of

individuals across the gender spectrum alike but most importantly a woman.

The earlier portrayals of women in animated movies like *Snow White and the Seven*

Dwarfs were undeniably traditionally stereotyped gender roles. Their character arcs

had nothing in particular in terms of complexity or agency, they were simply "damsel

in distresses" in wait of their prince charming to rescue them. The canon has idealised

women to be as one like snow white -submissive, vulnerable, dependent, delicate,

naive, fragile, irrational, weak and nurturing. A woman's worth was calculated

through her beauty, obedience and domesticity. Snow White, for instance, embodies

the idealized woman of her time—gentle, nurturing, and reliant on male

figures for protection and salvation. Her primary role revolves around caregiving, whether it be for the dwarfs or in her ultimate fate of being rescued by the prince. Women are painted obsessive over beauty through the self- obsession of the wicked step mother \the queen to be "the fairest of them all" (Grimm & Grimm 1). While a virtuous, passive, young woman is celebrated as heroine, the villain was casted to be a powerful, wicked and older female figure. The film reflects a broader cultural perspective in which women who conform to societal expectations are rewarded, while those who seek power or challenge norms are framed as antagonists. Snow White, with her fair skin, delicate features, and submissive demeanour, aligns with Western feminine ideals that prioritize whiteness, fragility, and innocence. Meanwhile, the Evil Queen's transformation into the Witch represents a stark contrast: her beauty is stripped away, and she is depicted as grotesque, reinforcing a dichotomy where beauty equals goodness and ugliness signifies evil (Zipes, 2006, p. 81). When women's bodies are objectified and valued based on unrealistic standards by media constructs like this, Eurocentric beauty ideals and commodification of bodies are normalised and how beauty standards dictate worth and the societal pressure on women to conform to narrow definitions of beauty is concerning. Women do not own their own identity. They are considered as objects.

These animations are having the potential to influence young and old minds alike. However, the hold it has on shaping the characters of children through their influence is of great importance, as children try to imagine those as realities and try to enact them in real life. It promotes unrealistic ideas in young minds and propagates incorrect notions from a very young age. It affects the way children and young adults view things and how they see others.

It also trains young boys to believe that to be a true man, they have to be powerful and as for young girls, to be a true woman she has to be domestic. Therefore, it is harmful to both men and women because they are always in a battle to fulfil the expectations placed upon them. This also creates an idea in their minds that women are weak and inferior to them . The over glorified beauty idealisms create the lack of self- esteem stemming from the belief that they don't look good enough according to the beauty ideals lead to dysmorphia, eating-disorders and more. Cooley in *The theory of Looking-Glass Self* suggest that people shape their self-worth based on how others perceive them. If society upholds thinness, muscularity, or a certain skin tone as beautiful, individuals who do not conform to these ideals may develop negative self-perceptions. When individuals' real bodies do not align with idealised standards, they develop a cognitive dissonance in body image leading to psychological distress, eating disorders, obsessive gym culture or cosmetic surgery dependence. The politics of fair and dark skin as beauty and ugliness respectively being injected to the unconscious of a second-grade child as is as grave as inflicting attitudes that debase women and shame them for their bodies. Snow White's ultimate reward is marriage to the prince, reinforcing traditional fairy-tale endings where female happiness is contingent upon male validation. Later adaptations of Snow White, such as *Snow White and the Huntsman*, attempt to modernize the character by giving her more agency and warrior-like qualities. However, these versions still struggle to fully break free from the beauty-centric and Eurocentric ideals ingrained in the original narrative. The film operates within a rigid framework of body politics, reinforcing Eurocentric beauty ideals—Snow White's "skin white as snow" symbolizes purity and desirability, while the Evil Queen's obsession with beauty underscores societal pressures on women to maintain youth and attractiveness. The

application of Foucault's theory suggests the disciplinary power of femineity and beauty as a virtue and form of control, while the bio politics of the story naturalises gender norms and normalising the conduct of behaviour and appearance for young girls instructing desirability which should morally be out of the minds of young children for their better perception of the world by laying overemphasis on these ideas. The racial undertones in Snow White furthermore reinforce Eurocentrism—her pale complexion is idealized, while darker features (often associated with villains) symbolize danger. The power dynamic between Snow White and the Evil Queen mirrors societal fears of women who seek autonomy, portraying them as unnatural and threatening.

It is true that efforts have been made by Disney to change the stories to deal with this gender troubles and stereotypes. Rapunzel in *Tangled* (2010) has changed from the previous depictions of Disney princesses. The story definitely has its own loop holes, but the character of Rapunzel is fresh. She is more energetic, and adventurous. She is inspiring to young girls to lead their lives in their own terms.

The background setup of the movie is something not very different from the others. But this offers a different reading, there lived a girl in a tower deep in the wildwood. She was locked up by her foster mother who tried to exploit her for the magical powers of her hair to remain young forever. Fate's wheel turned in her favour with the arrival of Flynn Rider into her tower in search of refuge into her life. She made a decision to take a step for herself once and for all. Her journey goes from exploring the kingdom with Flynn and later realising that she is the lost princess. Mother Gothel tries to repress her and hide her strength and magical power just like what patriarchy does to women

Women are thrown away to the margins and are taught to believe that being meek, timid and innocent is better for them. They are denied their rights, freedom and power to be their self and is constantly asked to live according to other's decisions. Women are made to think that they are unfit emotionally to think for themselves. here Butler's gender performativity is reflected through the portrayal of gender as a learned behaviour than natural and Rapunzel's transformation from a sheltered girl to an independent woman. Although *Tangled* introduces a stronger female lead, it still upholds Eurocentric beauty standards. Rapunzel's golden hair and large eyes conform to Western ideals, while Mother Gothel's darker features position her as an outsider.

Mulan marks a radical departure from previous portrayals by centring on a woman who defies gender roles. Unlike Snow White and Rapunzel, Mulan's journey is not about romance but self-actualization and duty. The film diverges from the original *Ballad of Mulan* by emphasizing personal growth and military prowess, reflecting evolving feminist ideals. Mulan serves as an empowering role model, encouraging young audiences to challenge societal constraints and value bravery over traditional femininity. Mulan [2020] is a live-action, likeminded film whose narrative transcends a tale of bravery, it critically acclaims the archetypes of gender bodies and how the physical entity becomes sites of both conformity and rebellion. The movie draws inspiration through it's powerful attack on gender binaries and notions of performativity. The plot unfolds around Hua Mulan, a timeless figure in Chinese myth and culture as a young girl, eldest daughter of her family trying to fit into the roles of domesticity and obedience and in search of a good suitor, which she does so reluctantly under her familial pressure. The story arc begins with a cold opening "a young shoot, all green; unaware of the blade "(*Mulan* 00:00:53)but she had a

special gift of valour and athletics and was far from the usual demure and delicate conventional image of a young woman .She is constantly told to hide away her gift by her own father who even after realizing her potential and the exceptionally capable blessing she holds fearing lack of discernment and probable alienation from the society which believed that only a son could wield a chi and that a daughter would risk shame , honour and exile in doing so. This is directly related to argument that women's power is too often seen as threatening, resulting in them being excluded from public and political life Be that as it may, she steps into her father's place 'a son would do', when the imperial edict called for one man per household to fight in the army.

In spite of the difficulties and the danger of revelation that could kill her very existence, Mulan pretends to be a man 'Ping' to the male world of training camps that bars women regardless of their strength and resolute nature Although, her true nature behind her disguise is revealed, she struggled against the enemy forces-after once attacking her homeland and other social expectations that threaten her identity. Mulan's family burdens her with the weight of hiding her gift ,she dismantles the impression of strength as something that comes only from masculine bodies and also passivity never occurs naturally as a feminine trait .However, the movie suggest that her strength is associated with her chi ,presented upon her innately by birth and by the matter of fact, her prowess and might comparable to men is an exceptional case of biological predetermination and not by her choice or practice ,thus implying that women unless they have physical abilities like Mulan had, couldn't have performed this way, hinting at the universality of the idea of women as the weaker sex.

Mulan on the flip side resorts the belief of infirmity in decision making that the society has associated to be belonging to women. She withstood the adversities of the enemy's attack so effortlessly as she had priorly sought to voice herself against the misogynistic social fabric engrained in her own household. Nevertheless, she hiding her identity fearing rejected in a male dominated sphere of armed forces and later standing in her true self shows her enlightenment that power is not tied to bodies but to minds, thus defying the sexist outlook of society.

On analysing through Foucault's perspective, the circumstances prompt Mulan to disguise herself to get into the patriarchal military troop. This itself is evidence of the disciplinary power of the narrative that reflects the social conditioning of the society. Further in the army there are operations of biopolitics in how the gendered bodies are regulated, to be precise on how army has strict expectations about the physical and mental might of the "men" and are instructed upon to behave in a legit way. Portraying Mulan as offering resistance against being meek by refusing to oblige by the patriarchal notions of gender divide and the traditional femineity and passivity assigned to the feminine bodies. The gender performativity as argued by Butler is of great importance here. Mulan performs masculinity to gain social legitimacy   showing that the system has normalised men and only men to be able to put up a resistance force. Her disguising as a man and how she wins the approval of the people in the army just because she is a man and a warrior which are the only terms that go together, while she actually is a woman shows that gender is a fluid construct and no matter a person be a man or woman, they can be meritorious is shown here while the society accepts only a man to do so. Her success proves that

gender norms assigned are not innate but arbitrary and can be disrupted. *Mulan*
also challenges western beauty ideals and norms by featuring an East Asian
protagonist breaking the notions of savage and barbarity imposed on them and
also a woman who prioritizes her skill over appearance.

Figure 1. Mulan in the 2020 live-action film.

As depicted in figure 1 Mulan's character and personality escapes the pre- set notions
laid down for a girl .she challenges herself and the society she lives in breaking the
steriotypes.

While the earlier animated version of the movie *Mulan* depicted the
protagonist's journey as one of self -discovery and perseverance only the 2020 live-
action adaptation introduced a new idea of chi as an innate power. The transformation
fits with modern action cinema's propensity to have exceptional protagonists,
breaking away from previous narratives of individual maturation.

The animated *Mulan* (1998) focused on the bodily transformation through intense
training, complementing Foucault's notion of disciplinary power, wherein institutions

(the army) mold individuals into useful subjects. By contrast, *Mulan* (2020) introduces Mulan as already born gifted with chi, presenting her body as inherently powerful instead of having been crafted through discipline. And the archetypal Rapunzel story had positioned the heroine in a passive, waiting-to-be-rescued role, yet *Tangled* recast Rapunzel as an active, self-motivated force operating in her own life, one who voluntarily sets out into the world in search of Identity. Both Mulan and Rapunzel act according to the roles set for them but later claimed agency of their actions. There is large change from mere passive heroines to active ones. This aligns with Foucault's discourse on bio politics suggests that bodies are sites of power, and these films reframe heroines' bodies as instruments of action rather than passive symbols of attractiveness.

Rejection of the Traditional Romantic Body Narrative is of great importance. The removal of Li Shang de-emphasizes romance, focusing instead on Mulan's personal journey. This contrasts with earlier narratives where female protagonists' arcs were intertwined with love interests. While Rapunzel and Flynn Rider develop a romantic relationship, it is not the film's central focus. Rapunzel's journey is framed as self-actualization rather than a quest for love. By reflecting broader cultural shifts, modern narratives prioritize self-empowerment over traditional romantic resolutions. The heroines' bodies are no longer positioned as sites of desire but as instruments of personal and societal transformation.

On considering the evolution of villainous characters from monstrous to manipulative, the narrative subtly changes the centre of attention to more contemporary relevance. While in the animated version of Mulan, Shan Yu was portrayed as a physically imposing, foreign invader, embodying external military

threats, The live-action adaptation introduced Xianniang, a shape-shifting antagonist who mirrors

Mulan's struggle but is ultimately ostracized for her power. The introduction of Xianniang shifts the focus from external invasion to internal struggles within a rigid societal system, reflecting contemporary discourses on gender and power. It adds complexity to the villain archetype, moving away from one-dimensional antagonists.

Representing villains as witches was the trend before. But as times changed, villains are realistic. they do have differences in their costumes, darker features and portrayals but not entirely fictional or illogical. Like, Rapunzel's stepmother who doesn't use magical spells to bring her to control but through manipulation.

Figure 2. Xianniang promotional poster.

The figure 2 shows a similar portrayal Of Xianniang as the vivid representation of villain character using darker tropes, powerful postures and exotic attires enforcing on them being othered and different from the heroines. This also hints at the intersectionality of race with body politics.

Chapter 3

Mapping the Shifting Faces of Disney's Women

The narratives have changed considerably from the animated adaptions to the live adaptation released in the 21ˢᵗ century and the broader cultural shifts associated with femineity, power and identity to define female agency and strength have successfully progressed. However, these revisions do not entirely escape the pitfalls of earlier narratives, as they continue to operate within structural limitations that reinforce certain hegemonic ideals.

Rapunzel and Mulan actively shape their destinies unlike the previous overtly feminine characters that were commercialised. Rapunzel escapes her tower, using her own resource - her hair as both a weapon and a tool of agency and freed herself from the cultural expectations that force women to be obedient and subservient to the power structures in the cultural programming of the society, while Mulan makes the utmost of her bodily strength, might and intelligence to undergo a rigorous selfdiscipline journey to claim her place as a warrior in the army resisting the spatial politics and interfering into the domain socially dedicated to men in terms of access and status. These shifts align with Judith Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble* that gender is a performance shaped by cultural expectations. The notion that women need to be rescued by her prince, and she expecting princess treatment and her happiness lies in fairy-tale wedding and a happily ever after is a deeply ingrained myth sold to us freely by patriarchy through the previously released movies is exposed here. Stressing more on Butler's performativity, these movies shows that bodies can become sites of defiance and there is no particular ways in which each body is casted

to is a great revelation. Rapunzel and Mulan challenge the performance of femininity expected of them, disrupting traditional norms that equate passivity with virtue. This reclaiming autonomy over one's body becomes an act of rebellion against the societal norms and cultural setup.

However, this evolution is not without limitations. While both Rapunzel and Mulan exhibit power, their narratives still operate within conformity to constrained frameworks. Rapunzel's defiance remains softened by her ultimate return to royal identity, reinforcing the notion that empowerment must be reconciled with traditional roles. Mulan's transformation, while celebrated, is accompanied by an idealized martial skillset that suggests women must adopt traditionally masculine traits to attain legitimacy. This is degrading the progress so far made in terms of liberation from body politics.

Tangled and *Mulan* has attempted to attempt to diversify the representation of beauty by emphasizing individuality and strength over aesthetic perfection. Rapunzel, while still conforming to Eurocentric ideals, exhibits a more dynamic and expressive personality, reducing the earlier emphasis on demure femininity. She has power over her abilities towards the end of the movie , this is didactic in educating young girls to believe in their inherent abilities , however this comes with a trouble that in the movie, it is the royal privilege that she has that uplifts her, this might create a wrong notion over tender minds that they need a considerably well -off background to assert themselves , offering it as a luxury of the privileged. The 2020 *Mulan* moves further by rejecting hyper-feminine beauty standards, portraying Mulan with minimal adornment and a more athletic physique. Despite these advances, the films continue to operate within restrictive visual paradigms. Rapunzel, despite her rebellious nature,

still embodies the conventional attractiveness associated with animated princesses—large eyes, small waist, golden hair and delicate facial features. Mulan's rejection of makeup in battle serves as a symbolic rejection of imposed femininity, yet her acceptance into the warrior class does not dismantle the broader association of female worth with appearance. The expectations men have of their wives are narrated only to bring in a chaos of perceptions in beauty ideals and Mulan's consistent efforts to fit into the male domain, be like a man and act like a man sets in stereotypes that define gender bodies. This illustrates Foucault's assertion that power structures are not eliminated but reconfigured into new forms in *Discipline and Punish.*

Even though these films have come a long way in the transformation of characters both films fall into the pitfall of exceptionalism. Rapunzel's power is ultimately tied to her royal lineage, reinforcing the idea that empowerment is linked to inherited privilege. Mulan's skillset, while impressive, is framed as an anomaly rather than part of a broader restructuring of gender roles. These narratives suggest that while individual heroines can defy societal constraints, the structures themselves remain largely intact. And despite the attempts to ground the story of Mulan in Chinese tradition, the adaptation was criticized for catering to Western sensibilities rather than authentically engaging with Chinese historical narratives. The character of Mulan, while celebrated as a strong female lead, is shaped through a Western feminist lens that may not fully align with the cultural context of the original legend.

While this study critically examines the transformations in these films identifying the persistent shortcomings that complicate their progress, there exists an ongoing tension between progress and constraints. Foucault's theory of power suggests that change does not necessarily dismantle existing structures but instead

creates new modes of discipline and control in *The History of Sexuality*. In this context, while Disney's heroines have gained greater autonomy, they remain confined within frameworks that continue to privilege certain ideals of femininity, beauty, and heroism. Judith Butler's argument on gender performativity in *Bodies That Matter* also reveals the ongoing constraints within these narratives. While heroines like Rapunzel and Mulan challenge traditional roles, their journeys still rely on performative elements that conform to pre-established heroic archetypes. The expectation that female empowerment must manifest through physical ability like Mulan's chi or royal lineage of Rapunzel instrumental in her empowerment suggests that true narrative liberation has yet to be achieved.

While *Tangled* and *Mulan* signify progress, their pitfalls highlight the complexities of dismantling entrenched gender and racial hierarchies in media. The question remains: does the evolution of body politics in these films truly liberate the heroine, or does it merely reshape the confines of her role within a new set of expectations? As storytelling continues to evolve, a deeper interrogation of these structures will be necessary to move beyond symbolic progress toward genuine narrative transformation.

Conclusion

This study critically examines the evolution of body politics in Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Tangled* (2010), and *Mulan* (2020) by analyzing how the women characters have changed in their character arcs and personality . The shifting portrayals of female protagonists and antagonists in relation to power, gender, race, beauty, colour and cultural representation is explored through the theory of body politics that gained deep recognition from the second wave of feminism. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of thinkers and veteran feminists like Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Frantz Fanon, and bell hooks, and people from any walk of life who have given in insightful thoughts on this idea are navigated in this research. The whole purpose of the study is to investigate how evolving narratives have redefined femininity, agency, and identity while still operating within structural constraints that reinforce hegemonic ideals.

The central argument of this study is that while contemporary adaptations of fairy tales have sought to present more independent and empowered heroines, these portrayals remain confined within pre-existing ideological frameworks. Earlier narratives, fairy-tales and children's classics positioned female protagonists as passive, embodying traditional femininity and Eurocentric beauty ideals, while antagonists, particularly older women, were depicted as threats due to their power and autonomy. In contrast, modern reinterpretations attempt to subvert these tropes by granting heroines greater agency, positioning them as active participants in their own destinies. However, these changes are not entirely free from the limitations of prior representations, as empowerment often remains tied to exceptionalism, royal lineage, or innate abilities rather than structural transformation.

The findings of this study indicate that while *Tangled* and *Mulan* mark significant progress in redefining gender norms, they also introduce new constraints. Rapunzel's independence is ultimately reconciled with her royal identity, reinforcing the notion that empowerment comes only to the privileged and can't be earned through work like it should be. Similarly, *Mulan* (2020) distances itself from the animated *Mulan* (1998) by attributing the protagonist's strength to an innate power (*chi*), rather than self-discipline and perseverance. This shift diminishes the film's feminist potential by suggesting that only those with extraordinary abilities can transcend societal limitations. Additionally, the evolution of female villains from horrifying figures to psychologically manipulative characters reflect a nuanced approach to power but still, it frames ambitious women as dangerous and should be controlled to avoid them dominating others which hitherto is considered with eerie. A similar instance which is often dismissed as a thought is the alibi behind the old, not so beautiful women -villain characters to take a drastic approach. Why is it overlooked as mere obsession over beauty isn't unknown but little is talked about the circumstances that made their resolve to correct their disability in which they believe in, only due to the societal expectations that have raised the benchmarks of beauty standards so high forcing them to defy morality, act crime and assert a perfection over their real self, reform themselves to make them look appealing to others.

Another explored idea in this study is the cohesion with racial and body colour. And this ensures that the complexity of Inter-racial body politics is a matter worth critical attention.

Society dictates certain beauty standards which makes individual feel that they need to blend with the crowd, this restricts their individuality and uniqueness. Such

standards are unrealistic to achieve for most women. Over the years, people have begun to favour those with lighter skin colour as it is considered more pleasing to the eye. This happens in all communities regardless of race. This gives those with fair skin and advantage while those with a darker skin tone see themselves as less . This results in stereotypes such as portraying black and indigenous women as exotic, submissive, deviant etc. in films and literature. An example of this can be seen in the movie Mulan, where the character of Xianniang is showed as the other because of her power and capabilities. Other fairy tales also show a similar pattern where similar power dynamics of a damsel in distress and a big strong man coming to save her who is in most cases white. Theories such as the works of Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Lacan along with queer theories and post Colonialism would further support this argument.

While Disney movies made in the recent times have been more accurate in presenting gender roles, it will still take a long time before the narrative is changed to reflect the actual reality.

Works Cited

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley, New York, Vintage Books,1949.

Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. University of California Press, 1993.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. Routledge, 1993. ---. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.

Cooley, Charles Horton. *Human Nature and the Social Order*. Scribner's, 1902.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, vol. 1989, no. 1, 1989, pp. 139-67.

 Mulan. Directed by Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook, Walt Disney Pictures, 1998. *Mulan*. Directed by Niki Caro, Walt Disney Pictures, 2020. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Directed by David Hand, Walt Disney Pictures, 1937. *Tangled*. Directed by Nathan Greno and Byron Howard, Walt Disney Pictures, 2010.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann, Pluto Press, 1952.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Pantheon Books, 1975. ---. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley, Vintage, 1976.

Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm Grimm. *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. Translated by Margaret Hunt, George Bell & Sons, 1884.

Hooks, Bell. *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*. South End Press, 1981. ---. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. South End Press, 1992.

Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits: A Selection*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, W.W. Norton & Company, 1977.

Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 1984.

Liu, Yifei. Interview by Rebecca Davis. *Variety*, 10 Sept. 2020, www.variety.com.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978.

Zipes, Jack. *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*. Routledge, 2006.

"Mulan (2020) Posters." *The Movie Database (TMDB)*,

www.themoviedb.org/movie/337401-mulan/images/posters

"Xianniang Poster 1." *Disney Wiki*,
www.disney.fandom.com/wiki/Mulan_(2020_film)/Gallery.

Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, University of California Press, 1993, p. 21.

Zipes, Jack. *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilization*. Routledge, 2006.