

A Distorted Feminism:

The Justification of Patriarchy and Oppression in Disney's *Mulan*

Disney's *Mulan* tells the story of a young Chinese girl who dresses as a man and goes to war in order to save her father's life. Her courage, determination, and ultimate success in saving her country unite to form an image of a feminist who challenges social boundaries and gains respect and power. However, the values of feminism are downplayed in this film by the implication that radical change is not necessary for women to feel useful and fulfilled. Mulan's actions and the motivations behind them fit neatly within the patriarchal framework of Disney's portrayal of Chinese culture, thus falling short of upsetting tradition and inspiring change. Although she is portrayed as a strong female character who in many ways challenges the rules and roles imposed upon her sex, her story distorts the values of feminism and ultimately reinforces anti-feminist ideas. An emphasis on patriarchal order and subservience to men is so skillfully cloaked in the guise of feminism that Mulan's rejection of upward mobility and power at the end of the film is presented as a sign that she happily accepts her position, and in fact chooses to remain powerless, thus justifying the oppression of her sex.

The beginning of the film presents an equilibrium, or an initial scene in which "potentially opposing forces are in balance" (Hutchinson, 2011c). This is important, as it establishes a portrait of the patriarchal structure of Mulan's world, which in turn creates a point of comparison against which to measure her progress at the end of the film. In these first few scenes, gender distinctions are emphasized, yet they are presented in a way that suggests peace and happiness. Mulan is introduced as a girl who knows what is expected of her and, despite some confusion and nervousness, appears to be willing

and even excited to present herself to the village matchmaker. Men and women are supposed to delight in performing their respective duties in order to receive and preserve the highly sought-after “honor” that serves as both a reward for them – pride and fulfillment - and justification for rigid gender roles; if someone steps outside the bounds of acceptable behavior for their sex, they jeopardize not only their own honor, but also that of their family. This makes it significantly more difficult to defy societal norms.

Included in these important opening scenes is the first musical number, “Honor to Us All”, in which Mulan’s mother and other married women prepare her for her meeting with the matchmaker. Throughout a sequence depicting an intensive beauty regime, the older and “wiser” women remind Mulan of what is expected of her as a daughter and as a bride. They sing, “A girl can bring her family great honor in one way/By striking a good match...” (Coats & Bancroft, 1998). In order to do this, a young girl needs “a great hairdo,” “good breeding,” and “a tiny waist” (Coats & Bancroft, 1998). Thus, beauty, serenity and obedience will attract a man and allow a girl to make herself useful to society by marrying and “bearing sons” (Coats & Bancroft, 1998). In these endeavors her chief goal is to please the men in her life. The product of her efforts to become “primed and polished” (Coats & Bancroft, 1998) is meant “for men to enjoy, not the woman herself” (Hutchinson, 2011a). Moreover, in the song Mulan herself sings that she hopes to “keep [her] father standing tall” (Coats & Bancroft, 1998) by successfully procuring a husband. Thus, her every action is performed for the benefit of men rather than herself. All of this constitutes “honorable” behavior for a woman; for a man,

“bearing arms” (Coats & Bancroft, 1998) and demonstrating strength and courage falls under the same category. From this one can conclude that at its most basic level, “honor” for a woman signifies passivity, while for men it signifies action.

Disney attempts to separate Mulan from this ideology by showing that she does not fit in, and by endowing her with feminist traits. In this they are partially successful, but their failures outweigh these successes, and the warped image of feminism thus created counteracts any progress that could have been made. Viewed through a prism of a fragmented subjectivity, or the presence of multiple, often conflicting identities in media (Hutchinson, 2011a), Mulan is both a feminist and a dependent, subservient woman. In a way, she defies the social structure of her village simply by being different. At the beginning of the film, despite her desire to bring honor to her family and her willingness to see the matchmaker, Mulan demonstrates her incompatibility with Chinese ideals of femininity by creating a cheat sheet for herself. She writes the words, “quiet, demure, graceful, polite, delicate, refined, poised, [and] punctual” (Coats & Bancroft, 1998) on her arm to help her remember how she is expected to behave, showing that she does not naturally possess all of these traits, and that they are not inherently “feminine.” This alone exposes a crack in the foundation of her cultural environment, providing evidence of the need for change. Moreover, not only does Mulan lack conventionally “feminine” traits, but she also violates the strict gender dichotomy in several ways. She challenges the binary opposition of “passive woman vs. dynamic man” when she takes action to save her father. She does not surrender and allow the oppressive values of masculinity and honor to take her father’s life and control her

family's destiny. In this way, she is portrayed as courageous, strong, and independent rather than fragile and meek.

However, she does not take her father's place with the intention of gaining independence and power. Her purpose is not to defy patriarchal order, to make a statement, or to fight against the oppression of women. She does it in part out of love for her father, which in itself is a noble cause, but also because she is confused and ashamed of herself for not being able to bring honor to her family in the traditional and expected way. Rather than dismissing the importance of beauty, grace, and obedience in her society, she tries in vain to live up to those standards, and is disappointed in herself when she fails. Towards the end of the film it seems as if Disney attempts to detach Mulan's actions thus far from her male-centered motivations with this line spoken by Mulan: "Maybe I didn't go for my father..." (Coats & Bancroft, 1998). However, although this suggests that she went to war for her own self-fulfillment and made her own needs a priority, she goes on to say, "Maybe what I really wanted was to prove I could do things right – so when I looked in the mirror I'd see someone worthwhile" (Coats & Bancroft, 1998). With this it becomes clear that Mulan accepts society's ideals as natural and right, and sees herself, rather than her culture's anti-feminist ideology, as flawed. She does not feel worthy just being who she is, so, having failed at being feminine, she tries to attain honor in the only other manner available – by adopting exalted masculine traits. Thus, it is her courage in the face of adversity that defies expectations of her sex, and in this one can catch a glimpse of feminist values; however, her perceptions of and motivations behind her own actions are merely a

product of majority belief, and in this way she fails to break through any social boundaries.

Similarly, Mulan's experience at the training camp offers muddled, contradictory messages about masculinity and femininity. At first she is shown to be more or less equal to the other men at the camp in strength, agility, and so on. However, this is undermined when Shang sings, "Did they send me daughters when I asked for sons?" (Coats & Bancroft, 1998); this, as well as many other lines in the song, "I'll Make a Man Out of You", associates the soldiers' lack of skill with femininity. They are contrasted with Shang, the hegemonic "strong, stoic, resilient warrior [who] copes with overwhelming odds [and] immense pain" (Hutchinson, 2011b). The other men (and Mulan) are far from this ideal; they have to be "initiated into masculinity" by adopting a "new appearance," "submit[ting] to older men," and "endur[ing] physical tests" (Hutchinson, 2011b). Thus Mulan is not anywhere near "equal" or honorable until her captain, a man of higher rank, "make[s] a man out of [her]" (Coats & Bancroft, 1998). Consequently, equality slips even further out of reach now that she has given up much of her own identity in an attempt to achieve it.

Even after Mulan develops the physical prowess necessary to be accepted by her captain and her fellow soldiers, she remains awkwardly stuck between two gendered spheres, portrayed as an outsider rather than a pioneer. The fourth musical number in the film, "A Girl Worth Fighting For," appears to keep Mulan on the outskirts of the male world just when she begins to feel comfortable. While the soldiers sing of women that are "paler than the moon," that "marvel at [their] strength," and that cook

well enough to satisfy them, Mulan begins to show visible signs of uneasiness. When they turn to her, she offers feebly, “How about a girl who’s got a brain, who always speaks her mind...?” (Coats & Bancroft, 1998), and to their dismissive response – “Nah!” (Coats & Bancroft, 1998) – she reacts simply by looking embarrassed. Rather than portraying Mulan as an independent woman who has conquered the rigidly gendered world in which she lives while staying true to herself, this scene merely demonstrates her inherent inability to fit in with the soldiers. In this case, her difference is cast in a negative light, making her appear clumsy and incompetent, unable to participate in the full male experience. Thus, at this point the film has not succeeded in emphasizing that difference is good; it has instead shown that difference yields insecurity, confusion, and ostracism.

The latter of these consequences appears repeatedly throughout the film, especially after Mulan is discovered for being a woman. The scene preceding her exposure showcases her courage and intelligence, as it is she who comes up with the plan that defeats a majority of the Hun army. She thinks quickly under pressure, and with a look of determination, runs right up to the enemy to shoot a cannon that starts an avalanche. Within minutes she buries the Huns and rescues her captain, leaving her entire troop untouched. For this she is praised by her commanding officer and her comrades; this victory is short-lived, however, as an injury she received in the process of saving Shang’s life leads to a doctor’s examination that reveals her true sex. When her captain finds out that she is a woman, she cries, “I never meant for it to go this far” (Coats & Bancroft, 1998), seeming to apologize not for lying, but for being exceptionally

successful as a soldier instead of remaining in the background as a woman should. Despite her tearful pleading, and, more importantly, her valiant and selfless efforts in the previous battle, she is accused of “high treason” and committing the “ultimate dishonor” (Coats & Bancroft, 1998). Shang spares Mulan her life, but he leaves her behind to feel ashamed and alone. Thus, solely because she is a woman, she is robbed of respect, appreciation, and a well-deserved sense of pride.

Moreover, Mushu’s presence also serves to keep Mulan’s pride in check, downplaying her successes and preserving the modesty that both the viewer and the film’s characters expect of her. Firstly, it is deeply troubling that, despite his genuine affection for Mulan, Mushu has his own agenda; he is desperate to increase his status as an ancestor. Thus, in a way, Mulan’s quest to protect her father becomes a device for a male character to gain power. This greatly devalues any feminist gains Mulan makes, crippling her capacity to break free from oppressive forces. She is instead trapped within a male-dominated world, dependent on yet another man. Mushu appears as the second protagonist, robbing Mulan of the spotlight and sharing the credit for all of her accomplishments. He guides her through a world which Disney has implicitly deemed too difficult for her to navigate on her own. In fact, it is Mushu, not Mulan, who finally kills the evil opponent, Shan Yu. Mulan finds herself face-to-face with her foe, yet despite having succeeded in disarming him, she backs off. She shouts, “Ready, Mushu?” (Coats & Bancroft, 1998) and uses Shan Yu’s sword as a tool to hold him in place, setting him up for Mushu to do the deed. In this way she is renouncing her power in order to pave the way for a man’s success.

Despite her deference to Mushu in the previous scene, the Emperor still recognizes Mulan for her achievements, and again she is put in a position to gain power. He offers her the opportunity to not only become a member of his council, but also to take Chi Fu's place, as there are currently no available seats; he goes out of his way to create a space for her, seeing her simply as an individual with something valuable to offer. This is the closest the film gets to depicting true equality. Nevertheless, Mulan rejects his offer, thus rejecting independence and power, without a moment's hesitation. All of her hard work serves only to prove her worth to her family, namely her father, and to bring honor to them. Having achieved this, she no longer seems to have any ambitions outside of the home. Her sense of personal fulfillment depends on pleasing others rather than on intellectual pursuits and individual growth. Thus, patriarchal order is not challenged, but preserved, and Mulan is tucked neatly back into the place carved out for her from birth.

Throughout the film, Mulan "inhabits multiple[, conflicting] personas" that "promote feminism AND sexism" (Hutchinson, 2011a). She epitomizes the Warrior Woman with her courage, skill, and beauty (Hutchinson, 2011a), yet she simultaneously challenges gender norms and longs to live up to them. She shows unwavering respect and devotion to those that treat her as an inferior, and struggles to fit in rather than to fight for equality. Mulan's "feminist" battle is severely warped by the concept of "enlightened sexism," or the idea that because equality has supposedly been achieved, it is okay to "[resurrect] sexist stereotypes of girls and women" (Hutchinson, 2011a). The film's narrative is structured in a way that reinforces stereotypes throughout, and then

attempts to portray Mulan as a feminist simply by implying that she happily accepts this gendered ideology, and takes pleasure in serving the men in her life. The story has a definitive ending that establishes a new equilibrium (Hutchinson, 2011c) in which the gender dichotomy still exists, but no longer excludes Mulan, who can finally fulfill her role and contribute to society by becoming a bride. It is implied that this is the highest goal she can hope to achieve, and that the future lying ahead of her is bleak and unsatisfying. Nevertheless, the film ends on a happy note, ultimately protecting and justifying patriarchy rather than feminism.

References

Coats, P. (Producer), & Bancroft, T. (Director). (1998). *Mulan* [Motion picture]. United States: Walt Disney Pictures.

Hutchinson, R. (2011a). Images of women in the media. Communication Studies 101, Lecture.

Hutchinson, R. (2011b). Media & identity 2 (men). Communication Studies 101, Lecture.

Hutchinson, R. (2011c). Narrative analysis. Communication Studies 101, Lecture.