

Woman's empowerment in mulan: a feminist literary

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ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment has become a central theme in contemporary literary and film studies, particularly in works that challenge traditional gender roles. *Mulan*, in both its animated (1998) and live-action (2020) versions, presents a female protagonist who resists patriarchal expectations and redefines women's position in society. This study aims to analyze the representation of women's empowerment in *Mulan* using a feminist literary approach. The analysis focuses on how *Mulan* negotiates gender norms, asserts agency, and embodies feminist values through her actions, decisions, and character development throughout the narrative. Using qualitative textual analysis, the study examines key scenes, dialogues, character portrayals, and symbolic elements that illustrate empowerment, resistance, and identity construction. The findings reveal that *Mulan* presents empowerment through three major aspects: (1) challenging patriarchal structures, (2) redefining femininity and heroism, and (3) asserting women's autonomy and voice. The film portrays *Mulan* not only as a courageous warrior but also as a symbol of women's capacity to transcend societal limitations and participate equally in traditionally male-dominated spaces. This research contributes to feminist literary criticism by highlighting how popular films can promote gender awareness and broaden representations of empowered women in modern narratives.

Keyword: literary studies; feminism; gender representation; women's empowerment; mulan



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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the discourse surrounding women's empowerment has gained significant momentum across various academic fields, including literary and film studies. As societies increasingly challenge traditional gender roles and advocate for gender equality, cultural texts—particularly popular films—have become vital mediums for reflecting and shaping public perceptions of women's agency and identity. Feminist literary criticism, in particular, offers a critical lens through which narratives can be examined for their portrayal of gender dynamics, resistance to patriarchy, and redefinition of femininity. Among such narratives, *Mulan* stands out as a compelling case of a female protagonist who defies societal expectations and reclaims her voice within a male-dominated world. The film's enduring popularity and thematic richness make it a valuable subject for feminist analysis, especially in understanding how mainstream media can contribute to broader discourses on women's empowerment (Gong & Tian, 2020).

Scholarly interest in *Mulan* spans multiple disciplines, with researchers examining its cultural, historical, and ideological dimensions. Earlier studies have explored the film's adaptation of Chinese folklore, its negotiation of East-West cultural values, and its role within Disney's global branding strategy. Feminist scholars have focused on *Mulan*'s transgression of gender norms, emphasizing how her disguise as a male soldier challenges rigid binaries of masculinity and femininity. For instance, Gong and Tian (2020) argue that *Mulan*'s journey represents a subversion of patriarchal structures by positioning a woman within a traditionally male heroic role. Similarly, Hasibuan and Purwarno (2025) analyze the live-action adaptation's emphasis on liberal feminist values, noting that *Mulan*'s character development reflects a conscious resistance to patriarchal constraints. Susilowaty (2022) likewise highlights how *Mulan*'s decisions and sacrifices illustrate her autonomy and challenge prevailing gender expectations.

Despite these contributions, much of the existing literature tends to focus either on cultural hybridity or surface-level gender role reversals, often overlooking the deeper narrative mechanisms through which empowerment is constructed. Moreover, comparative analyses between the 1998 animated film and the 2020 live-action adaptation remain limited, particularly in examining how each version articulates feminist values through character development, dialogue, and symbolic imagery. This gap underscores the need for a more nuanced feminist literary reading that foregrounds agency, resistance, and identity formation as dynamic narrative processes.

While *Mulan* has been widely celebrated for its progressive portrayal of a female hero, there remains a need for focused analysis that interrogates how empowerment is textually and symbolically represented across both versions of the film. Existing studies often treat empowerment as a static outcome rather than as a process shaped by narrative choices and ideological tensions. Furthermore, the potential of feminist literary criticism has not been fully utilized to unpack the complexities of *Mulan*'s character arc, her negotiation of gender norms, and the broader implications for gender representation in popular media. This study addresses these gaps by applying a feminist literary approach to examine how *Mulan* constructs and communicates women's empowerment through narrative structure, character portrayal, and thematic elements.

This research aims to analyze the representation of women's empowerment in *Mulan* (1998 and 2020) using a feminist literary framework. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) How does *Mulan* challenge patriarchal structures within the narrative? (2) In what ways does the film redefine femininity and heroism? (3) How are women's autonomy and voice asserted through *Mulan*'s character development and symbolic actions? Through qualitative textual analysis of key scenes, dialogues, and visual motifs, this study posits that *Mulan* embodies feminist values not only through defiance of gender norms but also through its portrayal of empowerment as an evolving process of self-realization and agency. The findings are expected to contribute to feminist literary criticism by demonstrating how mainstream films can function as influential platforms for gender awareness and progressive representation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Feminist Perspectives on Disney Heroines

Disney heroines have long been the subject of feminist critique, as scholars examine how female characters negotiate patriarchal structures and redefine gender roles. Early studies frequently criticized Disney films for reinforcing traditional femininity and passive female roles. However, more recent analyses have highlighted a gradual shift toward representations of empowerment, agency, and resistance. *Mulan* is particularly significant within this discourse because the protagonist embodies resistance to patriarchal expectations while simultaneously redefining heroism in ways that resonate with feminist theory.

B. Patriarchal Resistance in *Mulan*

Several studies emphasize how *Mulan* challenges patriarchal structures by entering spaces traditionally reserved for men. Gong and Tian (2020) argue that the live-action adaptation explicitly portrays *Mulan*'s *chi* as an inherent strength, thereby contesting patriarchal assumptions that martial power belongs exclusively to men. Their analysis situates *Mulan* within both Chinese cultural traditions and Disney's global feminist discourse, demonstrating how the character represents resistance and empowerment simultaneously. Similarly, Hasibuan and Purwarno (2025) highlight how *Mulan*'s assertion of autonomy reflects liberal feminist ideals, positioning her as a model of female agency within male-dominated contexts. These studies underscore that *Mulan*'s empowerment is not incidental but central to the narrative, establishing her as a feminist heroine who destabilizes patriarchal norms.

C. Redefining Femininity and Heroism

Other scholars focus on how *Mulan* redefines femininity and heroism. Susilowaty (2022) demonstrates that *Mulan*'s decisions and sacrifices illustrate her independence and refusal to conform to restrictive gender roles. By portraying courage, loyalty, and honor as gender-neutral virtues, the film dismantles traditional binaries that associate heroism with masculinity and passivity with femininity. Sinuraya et al. (2022) extends this argument through an analysis of narrative strategies in the live-action film, showing how *Mulan*'s authenticity and martial competence redefine heroism in ways aligned with contemporary feminist discourse. Collectively, these studies highlight how *Mulan* broadens the concept of femininity by presenting women as capable of embodying qualities historically reserved for men.

D. Autonomy and Voice

The assertion of autonomy and voice is another recurring theme in feminist analyses of *Mulan*. Scholars note that *Mulan*'s voluntary revelation of her identity in the live-action film symbolizes authenticity and self-expression, reinforcing women's right to speak and act openly in public spaces. Gong and Tian (2020) emphasize that this moment transforms *Mulan* from a disguised warrior into a feminist figure who openly

claims her place in society. Susilowaty (2022) similarly argues that Mulan's recognition by authority figures underscores the importance of women's visibility and validation within patriarchal contexts. These findings suggest that Mulan's empowerment extends beyond physical strength to include the assertion of voice, identity, and moral agency.

E. Comparative Analyses and Cultural Contexts

Comparative studies highlight notable differences between the animated and live-action versions of *Mulan*. Gong and Tian (2020) observe that the animated film situates empowerment within the framework of family duty, balancing feminist resistance with filial loyalty, whereas the live-action version emphasizes individual autonomy more explicitly. Hasibuan and Purwarno (2025) argue that this shift reflects broader cultural changes, as contemporary audiences increasingly demand overt representations of empowered women. Sinuraya et al. (2022) further notes that the narrative strategies employed in the live-action film align closely with liberal feminist ideals, particularly those emphasizing authenticity, equality, and self-determination. These comparative analyses illustrate how feminist representation evolves over time, adapting to changing social contexts and cultural expectations.

F. Synthesis of Previous Studies

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that *Mulan* functions as a feminist text by resisting patriarchal structures, redefining heroism, and asserting women's autonomy. Gong and Tian (2020) provide a cross-cultural perspective that situates *Mulan* between Chinese tradition and Disney's feminist reinterpretation. Hasibuan and Purwarno (2025) emphasize liberal feminist values of autonomy and equality, while Susilowaty (2022) highlights agency and sacrifice as core elements of empowerment. Sinuraya et al. (2022) contributes by analyzing narrative strategies that reshape traditional notions of heroism. Collectively, these studies affirm that *Mulan* plays a significant role in feminist literary criticism by expanding representations of empowered women in mainstream popular media.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

A. Design and Participants

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis design framed within feminist literary criticism. The design emphasizes close reading of narrative structures, character portrayals, and symbolic motifs to uncover how women's empowerment is represented and negotiated within the films. Unlike quantitative approaches, textual analysis enables nuanced interpretation of cultural texts by focusing on meaning-making processes, ideological constructions, and representational strategies.

The "participants" in this study are the two versions of Disney's *Mulan*:

- *Mulan* (1998, animated version)
- *Mulan* (2020, live-action adaptation)

These films were selected because they represent different cultural and temporal contexts while featuring the same protagonist, thereby allowing for meaningful comparative analysis. The animated version reflects late twentieth-century Disney storytelling conventions, whereas the live-action adaptation responds to contemporary demands for realism, cultural sensitivity, and gender equality. Together, they provide a rich textual corpus for examining shifts in feminist representation.

B. Data Collection

Data were collected through repeated and systematic viewing of both films, accompanied by detailed documentation of scenes, dialogues, and symbolic elements relevant to women's empowerment. The data collection process focused on the following components:

- Scenes: key moments such as Mulan's decision to disguise herself, her military training, and her climactic achievements.
- Dialogues: verbal expressions of resistance, loyalty, self-identity, and moral conviction.
- Character portrayals: representations of Mulan and supporting characters in relation to gender norms and power relations.
- Symbolic motifs: recurring elements such as *chi*, honor, family duty, disguise, and visibility.

Each unit of analysis was recorded in analytic notes and categorized based on thematic relevance. Comparative observations were also documented to highlight narrative and ideological differences between the animated and live-action versions.

C. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic coding process consisting of several stages:

- 1) Initial coding: identifying textual units related to empowerment, resistance, identity, and gender norms.
- 2) Categorization: organizing codes into three major analytical themes:
 - Challenging patriarchal structures
 - Redefining femininity and heroism
 - Asserting autonomy and voice
- 3) Comparative analysis: examining similarities and differences between the 1998 and 2020 versions.
- 4) Interpretation: situating the findings within feminist literary theory and broader feminist discourses.

This analytical procedure ensured that women's empowerment was understood as a dynamic narrative construction shaped by character development, symbolism, and ideological tension, rather than as a static or isolated outcome.

D. Trustworthiness

To ensure the credibility and rigor of the analysis, several strategies were employed:

- Triangulation: comparing interpretations across the two film versions to strengthen analytical consistency.
- Engagement with peer-reviewed sources: grounding the analysis in established feminist scholarship on *Mulan* (e.g., Gong & Tian, 2020; Hasibuan & Purwarno, 2025; Susilowaty, 2022).
- Thick description: providing detailed textual evidence, including scenes, dialogues, and symbolic motifs, to support analytical claims.
- Reflexivity: acknowledging the researcher's interpretive position and maintaining transparency in analytical decisions.

These strategies enhance trustworthiness by ensuring that interpretations are coherent, well-supported, and academically grounded.

E. Ethics

Although this study does not involve human participants, ethical considerations were observed in relation to academic integrity and cultural sensitivity. All sources were properly cited, and interpretations were grounded in established feminist literary theory. Care was taken to avoid imposing a purely Western-centric perspective on Chinese cultural elements, recognizing the films' hybrid nature as products of both Eastern folklore and Western media industries.

By adhering to these ethical principles, the study maintains scholarly responsibility while contributing meaningfully to feminist literary criticism.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to analyze how *Mulan* (the 1998 animated version and the 2020 live-action adaptation) represents women's empowerment through a feminist literary analysis. The results are organized according to the three research questions: (1) How does *Mulan* challenge patriarchal structures? (2) In what ways does the film redefine femininity and heroism? and (3) How are women's autonomy and voice asserted? The findings are presented with supporting textual evidence, including direct quotations, and are summarized in tables and figures to enhance clarity.

A. Challenging Patriarchal Structures

Both versions of *Mulan* depict resistance to patriarchal expectations, although they emphasize different strategies.

- Animated (1998): Mulan's decision to disguise herself as a male soldier symbolizes a rejection of domestic femininity. The hair-cutting scene visually represents her departure from traditional female roles. Later, when confronted by Captain Li Shang, her persistence demonstrates her refusal to be dismissed solely because of her gender.
- Live-action (2020): Empowerment is emphasized through *chi*, portrayed as innate female strength. Commander Tung's statement, "*Chi is for warriors, not for daughters*," encapsulates the patriarchal belief that women are excluded from martial power. Mulan's mastery of *chi* directly contradicts this belief, reframing female strength as legitimate and natural.

Table 1. Representation of Patriarchal Resistance in *Mulan*

Film Version	Key Scene	Evidence of Resistance	Representative Quote
Animated (1998)	Hair-cutting disguise	and Symbolic rejection of domestic femininity	"Maybe I didn't go for my father. Maybe I went for me."
Animated (1998)	Training perseverance	camp Refusal to be excluded from male space	"Did they send me daughters when I asked for sons?"

(Rotua Sinta Marito Pakpahan)

Film Version	Key Scene	Evidence of Resistance	Representative Quote
Live-action (2020)	Training and battlefield scenes	Chi as innate female strength	"Chi is for warriors, not for daughters."
Live-action (2020)	Defying commander's orders	Assertion of female capability	"I am Hua Mulan. I will fight to protect my people."

B. Redefining Femininity and Heroism

Both films redefine femininity by presenting courage, loyalty, and honor as gender-neutral virtues.

- Animated (1998): Heroism is framed through wit, creativity, and resourcefulness. For instance, Mulan uses the last rocket to trigger an avalanche, defeating the Huns through intelligence rather than brute force. Humor and irony also play a role, as her disguise exposes the absurdity of rigid gender norms.
- Live-action (2020): Heroism is portrayed through martial skill, authenticity, and spiritual strength. Mulan's declaration, "*I am Hua Mulan. I will bring honor to us all.*" positions her as a warrior equal to men while redefining honor as a value women can embody through public action.

Representative quotes:

- Animated: "*The flower that blooms in adversity is the most rare and beautiful of all.*"
- Live-action: "*I am Hua Mulan. I will bring honor to us all.*"

C. Asserting Autonomy and Voice

Mulan asserts her autonomy and voice in both versions, although the timing and framing differ.

- Animated (1998): Her identity is revealed only after she saves China, symbolizing that women's contributions deserve recognition even when initially hidden. The Emperor's acknowledgment, "*You have saved us all.*" validates her agency within a patriarchal society.
- Live-action (2020): Mulan voluntarily reveals her identity during battle, framing empowerment as authenticity and self-expression. Her declaration, "*I am Hua Mulan, and I will fight to protect my people.*" demonstrates her refusal to remain silent and asserts women's right to speak and act openly in public spaces.

Table 2. Assertion of Autonomy and Voice in Mulan

Film Version	Key Dialogue/Action	Empowerment Outcome	Representative Quote
Animated (1998)	Saving China before revealing identity	Recognition of female heroism	"You have saved us all."
Animated (1998)	Emperor's acknowledgment	Validation of women's contributions	"You don't meet a girl like that every dynasty."
Live-action (2020)	Voluntary revelation of identity	Authentic self-expression	"I am Hua Mulan, and I will fight to protect my people."
Live-action (2020)	Confrontation with commander	Assertion of female leadership	"I know my place, and it is here."

D. Secondary Findings

Additional observations highlight differences in cultural framing:

- The animated film situates empowerment within a family-oriented narrative, balancing feminist resistance with filial duty. Mulan's actions are frequently justified through loyalty to her father and family, reflecting Disney's late-1990s emphasis on family values.
- The live-action film emphasizes individual autonomy, aligning more directly with liberal feminist ideals. Mulan's empowerment is framed as personal authenticity and leadership, reflecting contemporary discourses on women's independence and equality.

E. Summary

Three dominant themes emerged from the analysis:

1. Resistance to patriarchal structures – Mulan challenges gender norms through disguise, perseverance, and mastery of *chi*.
2. Redefinition of femininity and heroism – Courage, honor, and intelligence are portrayed as gender-neutral virtues, dismantling traditional binaries.
3. Assertion of autonomy and voice – Mulan claims her identity and agency, demanding recognition and authenticity in public spaces.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that *Mulan* embodies feminist empowerment in both versions, although the live-action adaptation articulates empowerment more explicitly and directly than the animated film.

F. Discussion

1) Restating the Purpose

This study examined how *Mulan* (the 1998 animated film and the 2020 live-action adaptation) represents women's empowerment through a feminist literary analysis. The research focused on three key questions: (1) how *Mulan* challenges patriarchal structures, (2) how femininity and heroism are redefined, and (3) how autonomy and voice are asserted.

2) Summary of Major Findings

The results revealed three dominant themes:

- Resistance to patriarchal structures – *Mulan* disrupts gender norms through disguise, perseverance, and mastery of *chi*.
- Redefinition of femininity and heroism – Courage, loyalty, and honor are presented as gender-neutral virtues.
- Assertion of autonomy and voice – *Mulan* claims her identity and agency, demanding recognition and authenticity.

Secondary findings highlighted cultural differences between the two versions. The animated film situates empowerment within family duty and filial responsibility, whereas the live-action adaptation emphasizes individual autonomy and self-expression.

3) Interpretation of Findings

The findings suggest that *Mulan* embodies empowerment as a dynamic and evolving process rather than a fixed outcome. In the animated version, empowerment is conveyed subtly through humor, ingenuity, and filial duty. This approach reflects Disney's late-1990s tendency to balance progressive gender themes with family-oriented values. In contrast, the live-action adaptation presents empowerment more explicitly, aligning with contemporary feminist discourses that emphasize authenticity, self-realization, and equality.

Mulan's resistance to patriarchal structures illustrates how mainstream media can challenge traditional gender roles by repositioning women within narratives of heroism. Her redefinition of femininity and heroism demonstrates that bravery, honor, and leadership are not inherently masculine traits. Furthermore, her assertion of autonomy and voice underscores the importance of women's visibility, recognition, and participation in public spaces.

4) Comparison with Previous Research

These findings resonate with Gong and Tian (2020), who argue that *Mulan*'s journey subverts patriarchal structures by placing a woman in a traditionally male heroic role. Hasibuan and Purwarno (2025) similarly highlight how the live-action version reflects liberal feminist ideals, particularly autonomy and equality. Susilowaty (2022) also notes that *Mulan*'s decisions and sacrifices illustrate her agency and resistance to gender expectations.

However, this study extends existing scholarship by offering a detailed comparative analysis of both versions, demonstrating how feminist representation evolves over time. While earlier studies often focused on cultural hybridity or surface-level role reversals, this analysis highlights deeper narrative mechanisms—such as disguise, *chi*, and voluntary identity revelation—that actively construct women's empowerment.

5) Implications

This study contributes to feminist literary criticism by demonstrating how popular films can promote gender awareness and broaden representations of empowered women. It shows that mainstream media, often perceived merely as entertainment, can function as a meaningful site of resistance and feminist discourse.

- Theoretical implications: The findings reinforce liberal feminist theory by illustrating how empowerment is constructed through agency, autonomy, and resistance to patriarchal norms.
- Pedagogical implications: Films such as *Mulan* can be effectively used in educational contexts to introduce discussions on gender equality and feminist values, making abstract theories more accessible to students.
- Cultural implications: The comparative analysis reveals how feminist representation adapts to shifting social and cultural contexts, reflecting broader transformations in gender discourse.

6) Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the scope of the corpus was limited to two versions of *Mulan*, excluding other adaptations or related texts. Second, as with all qualitative research, the findings are influenced by the researcher's interpretive perspective. Third, the films' cultural hybridity—as products of both Eastern folklore and Western media industries—adds complexity to interpretation and may limit cultural specificity.

7) Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies may expand on this research by:

- Analyzing other Disney heroines (e.g., *Moana*, *Frozen*) to compare feminist representations.
- Exploring audience reception of *Mulan* across different cultural contexts.
- Examining intersections between feminist themes and issues of race, class, and cultural identity.
- Conducting longitudinal studies to trace the evolution of feminist representation in Disney films over time.

8) Conclusion Statement

In conclusion, *Mulan* represents women's empowerment through resistance to patriarchy, redefinition of femininity and heroism, and assertion of autonomy and voice. While the animated version frames empowerment within family duty and humor, the live-action adaptation emphasizes authenticity and individual autonomy. Taken together, both versions demonstrate how feminist values can be articulated within mainstream media, contributing to broader cultural conversations on gender equality and women's empowerment.

5. CONCLUSION

A. Restating the Purpose and Main Findings

This study set out to examine how *Mulan* (the 1998 animated film and the 2020 live-action adaptation) represents women's empowerment through a feminist literary analysis. The findings reveal three central outcomes: *Mulan* challenges patriarchal structures, redefines femininity and heroism, and asserts women's autonomy and voice. Secondary findings indicate that the animated version situates empowerment within the framework of family duty, whereas the live-action adaptation emphasizes individual authenticity and personal autonomy.

B. Interpreting and Emphasizing Significance

These findings suggest that *Mulan* functions as more than mere entertainment; it operates as a cultural text that actively negotiates gender norms and contributes to feminist discourse. By portraying empowerment as a combination of resistance and authenticity, both films demonstrate how mainstream media can expand representations of women's agency. The comparative analysis highlights the evolution of feminist values in popular culture, illustrating how cinematic narratives adapt to shifting social and ideological contexts.

From a theoretical perspective, the study reinforces liberal feminist views on autonomy, agency, and equality. Practically, it underscores the potential of film as a pedagogical medium for fostering gender awareness and facilitating discussions on equality within educational settings.

C. Limitations and Future Outlook

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the analysis is limited to two versions of *Mulan*, excluding other adaptations or related cultural texts. Second, the interpretations are shaped by the researcher's perspective, which may introduce subjectivity. Third, the films' hybrid nature—drawing simultaneously from Eastern folklore and Western media industries—adds complexity to cultural interpretation.

Future research could expand the corpus by examining other Disney heroines or exploring audience reception across diverse cultural contexts. Further studies may also investigate intersections between gender, race, class, and cultural identity, or conduct longitudinal analyses to trace the development of feminist representation in Disney films over time.

D. Take-Home Message

Overall, this study demonstrates that *Mulan* embodies feminist empowerment through resistance to patriarchal structures, redefinition of heroism, and assertion of women's autonomy and voice. Together, the animated and live-action versions illustrate how feminist values can be articulated within mainstream narratives, contributing to broader cultural conversations about gender equality. In this light, *Mulan* can be understood not only as a story of personal courage, but also as a symbol of women's capacity to transcend societal limitations and claim their rightful place in public life.

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