

# Representation of Gender and Race in Disney's Non-White Princess Films

---

Špika, Ivana

Master's thesis / Diplomski rad

2020

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **University of Zadar / Sveučilište u Zadru**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:162:700518>

Rights / Prava: [In copyright](#) / [Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.](#)

Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-12-20**



**Sveučilište u Zadru**  
Universitas Studiorum  
Jadertina | 1396 | 2002 |

Repository / Repozitorij:

[University of Zadar Institutional Repository](#)



Sveučilište u Zadru

Odjel za anglistiku

Diplomski studij Anglistike: Nastavnički smjer

**Ivana Špika**

**Representation of Gender and Race in Disney's  
Non-White Princess Films**

**Diplomski rad**

Zadar, 2020.

Sveučilište u Zadru

Odjel za anglistiku  
Diplomski studij Anglistike: Nastavnički smjer

Representation of Gender and Race in Disney's Non-White Princess Films

Diplomski rad

Student/ica:

Ivana Špika

Mentor/ica:

Doc. Dr. Sc. Marko Lukić

Komentor/ica:

Dr. Sc. Zlatko Bukač

Zadar, 2020.



## Izjava o akademskoj čestitosti

Ja, **Ivana Špika**, ovime izjavljujem da je moj **diplomski** rad pod naslovom **Representation of Gender and Race in Disney's Non-White Princess Films** rezultat mojega vlastitog rada, da se temelji na mojim istraživanjima te da se oslanja na izvore i radove navedene u bilješkama i popisu literature. Ni jedan dio mojega rada nije napisan na nedopušten način, odnosno nije prepisan iz necitiranih radova i ne krši bilo čija autorska prava.

Izjavljujem da ni jedan dio ovoga rada nije iskorišten u kojem drugom radu pri bilo kojoj drugoj visokoškolskoj, znanstvenoj, obrazovnoj ili inoj ustanovi.

Sadržaj mojega rada u potpunosti odgovara sadržaju obranjenoga i nakon obrane uređenoga rada.

Zadar, 30. rujna 2020.

## Table of contents:

1. Introduction .....	5
2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND.....	6
2.1. Representation.....	6
2.2. Gender.....	9
2.3. Race.....	10
2.4. Gender and Racial Stereotypes and Concepts.....	12
2.4.1. The Strong Black Woman Stereotype.....	12
2.4.2. Orientalism.....	15
2.4.3. Noble Savage.....	17
3. DISNEY PRINCESSES.....	17
3.1. Evolution of Disney Princesses.....	17
4. PORTRAYAL OF NON-WHITE DISNEY PRINCESSES.....	20
4.1. Romance and Race.....	22
4.2. Physical Appearance.....	24
4.3. Racial and Ethnic Portrayal.....	28
4.4. Personal Goals.....	33
4.5. ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ Traits and Gender Norms.....	35
4.6. The Importance of the Father Figure.....	39
5. CONCLUSION.....	42
6. WORKS CITED .....	44
7. THESIS TITLE IN ENGLISH: Summary and key words.....	47
8. NASLOV RADA NA HRVATSKOM JEZIKU: Sažetak i ključne riječi.....	47

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The portrayal of women on screen as well the active role of women in the filmmaking process and the position of women who are involved in film and television, from actresses to female directors and producers has been an important topic in media and in studies for the past years. For more than a century women have been overlooked in the business of filmmaking and often not portrayed on screen or omitted from film or television narratives.

Another issue in the film industry and in pop culture in general is the non-existent or stereotypical representation of people of color on screen. Certain ethnicities or races have just been omitted from film and television while others have been portrayed as stereotypes or caricatures.

This issue is also present in Disney films. From its very beginning, Disney created animated films with women as main characters, usually based on well-known stories and fairy tales. These characters brought different kinds of stereotypical portrayals of women especially in the early Disney filmmaking period. Throughout the decades, and along with changes in society connected to the feminist movement, the representation evolved and starting including female characters with more complex personalities and higher level of independence as well as characters of color and with different ethnic backgrounds.

However, certain issues still remain present both in the storyline itself or in the reception. In my thesis I will give an overview of Disney's representation of female characters throughout the decades and then give a more in-depth analysis of Disney's non-white princess characters which are Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan, Tiana and Moana.

I will analyze how Disney represented gender and race through these films, whether or not the portrayal changed from the early films, and in what way, compare non-white princesses and the films in which they appear and define what kind of stereotypes appear in certain films.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### *2.1. Representation*

Representation was defined by the British cultural theorist, sociologist and activist Stuart Hall. Hall described the connection of culture, representation and language. He defined culture as shared meanings among a group of people while language is defined as the medium through which we make sense of things. Representation is achieved through language; thus, representation is a core aspect in the process of producing meaning.

Culture is produced through systems of representation and culture and language cause the production and circulation of meaning. (Hall 2)

Hall cites the *Shorter Oxford English Language Dictionary* and gives two definitions of representation. The first is that

There are two systems of representation, the first is mental representation while the second one is language. Language in its broader sense includes, among others, different visual images that are produced either by electronics and digital devices, mechanical devices or by hand, as long as they produce and express a certain meaning. The first one states that to represent something means to ‘describe or depict it, call it up in the mind by description or portrayal or imagination’, while the second one is ‘to symbolize, stand for, to be a specimen of, or substitute for.’

Hall defines visual signs or iconic signs as signs that bear resemblance in form to the object. He defines written and spoken signs as indexical signs. They have no obvious connection to the object and the connection is arbitrary

In the chapter *Sharing the codes*, Hall states that meaning is created by a system of representation. He also defines the code as connection between our 'conceptual system and our language system'. (Hall 21)

Culture is defined by shared conceptual maps and shared language systems and the codes which connect them and enable the translation between them.

Hall describes three approaches on how we construct representation of meaning through language. The first is the reflective approach. This means that language reflects real life. The second is the intentional approach which means that the speakers give their own meaning through language. This approach is flawed since language is created through communication and not through the meaning given by an individual. The third approach is called the constructionist approach which describes the theory that neither objects themselves nor individuals can construct fixed meanings. Hall states that there is a distinction between the material world and symbolic practices. (Hall 24)

Signs have material dimensions such as sounds, images and impulses; however, the meaning does not depend on the material quality but on the symbolic functions. Signs, such as sounds or words, symbolize or represent something.

Hall also mentions Saussure and his legacy. Saussure defined that signs have a form and an idea or concept, or a signifier and the signified. He also stated that meanings, although arbitrary, are not fixed, they can change. (Hall 31)

In the following chapter Hall writes about the social aspect of language. Language is defined by the rules and codes of its linguistic system (the *langue*), and the act of speaking (*parole*).

In one of his lectures called *Representation and Media*, Hall presents both the old view and new view on representation. In the first chapter, *Old View-Representation as Reflection*, he states that when defining the term representation, people often think about two definitions, either to present something again, or to stand in for something.



He continues by stating that the old view on representation presented in the idea that:

Representation is the idea of giving meaning. So, the representation is the way in which meaning is somehow given to the things which are depicted through the images or whatever it is, on screens or the words on a page which stand for what we're talking about. (Hall 6)

If people were to deal with representation more closely, they could also examine the distortion between what is the true meaning of something and how it is represented in the media. (Hall 6)

In the following chapter, Hall offers a *New View on Representation – Representation as a Constitutive*. In this part he states that nothing actually has a fixed meaning until it is represented and that it actually changes from person to person. (Hall 7) Hall also states that representation does not come after some event, but that it is a constitutive part of the event, it is not on the outside and does not come after the event, but is *within* the event. (Hall 7) In the later chapters he acknowledges that it is actually ideology that tries to produce and portray meanings as fixed. (Hall 19)

From Hall's theory of representation, we can see that language, through which representation is achieved, is not only words and speech but also different visual images, thus, film and television can also be a form of language and a media of representation and construct meaning. Disney, through their animated film represent women and create meaning which the audience then consumes. When Disney depicts women in a certain way it influences the way audience members create meaning and their views on women, their role in society, what traits should they carry and how they should behave.

## 2.2. Gender

When defining gender and gender representation, it is important to mention Zimmerman's and West's *Doing Gender* from 1987. The authors offer explanations for several definitions and notions connected to sex and gender. Firstly, they state that sex is defined as 'a determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females or males.' (West and Zimmerman 127); while a sex category is 'achieved through application of the sex criteria, but in everyday life, categorization is established and sustained by the socially required identificatory displays that proclaim one's membership in one or the other category.' (West and Zimmerman 127).

According to them, gender 'is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category.' (West and Zimmerman 127). They mention notions such as gender roles, which are conducted in everyday activities, and gender display which are acted out in interaction.

An important notion is *doing gender*. West and Zimmerman state that :

'In one sense, of course, it is individuals who "do" gender. But it is a situated doing, carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented to its production. Rather than as a property of individuals, we conceive of gender as an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society. West and Zimmerman 126)'

From the article we can conclude that notions of gender are socially constructed as a result of our understanding of sex differences. Gender depictions are more influenced by social constructs and interactions than by sexual and biological elements. According to the role theory, gender roles (sex roles) are learned and enacted. The authors mention Cahill and his statements

on the influence of constructs of gender on children. Children go through the process of transitioning from baby identity to boy or girl. They monitor their own and the behavior of others and acquire not only gender ideals that are presented to them, but also their own gender identity. (West and Zimmerman 141)

If we manage to conduct gender roles correctly, we sustain and reproduce in society, while if they are misconducted, the individual may face judgement.

Since children often acquire gender ideals from animated films and TV series, it is important to analyze the way gender roles are represented in Disney animated films, especially in the female characters.

### *2.3.Race*

Race is defined ‘as the idea that the human species is divided into distinct groups on the basis of inherited physical and behavioral differences’, however, ‘genetic studies in the late 20th century refuted the existence of biogenetically distinct races, and scholars now argue that “races” are cultural interventions reflecting specific attitudes and beliefs that were imposed on different populations in the wake of western European conquests beginning in the 15th century.’ (Encyclopedia Britannica)

Race can have different definitions based on how different people define it or what they perceive as race. Most definitions categorize people based on their physical features (color of skin, hair, facial features), and usually perceive different races to be associated with geographically distant populations. However, in newer researches scientists are claiming that based on genetics, people have much more in common and that 'geographically widely separated populations vary from one another in only about 6 to 8 percent of their genes'. (Encyclopedia Britannica)

Scientists also state that physical distinctions between different groups do not fit racial

models. Also, many scientists have begun viewing race as more of a social than a biological construct.

The idea of different races started becoming more popular with European colonization of other continents and that people differentiate based on their race, whereas racism can be defined as the belief that people belong to different races and that certain races are superior to others.

The difference between race and ethnicity is that ethnicity is related to certain groups that share culture, religion, language and habits, which are all learned and influenced by our surroundings, while someone's race is believed to be innate and cannot be learned or changed. (Encyclopedia Britannica)

The issue of representation of different races in the media or in popular culture is important since it can have influence on the life of the members of the race or ethnicity that is represented and their position in society and create certain stereotypes.

Racial minorities have been underrepresented or misrepresented by the media and the entertainment business for decades. The inadequate representation results in not only lack of understanding of different minorities, but also influence society's perception and discrimination, violence, deportations and anti-immigrant policies. (Castañeda 3) Non-white communities are marginalized and forced to fight for their place in mainstream media.

The media's representation of racial minorities, or the lack of it, can cause various ethnic and racial stereotypes which when combined class, gender and sexuality stereotypes produce racist, sexist, homophobic and classist hegemony. (Castañeda 4)

Castaneda adds that various stereotypes in which certain minorities are portrayed as dangerous, lazy, unintelligent, overly sexual, 'create the belief that minority groups lack the capacity to cultivate the fertile political, social and cultural land of the U.S. and only white communities have the knowledge and power to deserve the bountiful resources of the nation.' (Castañeda 8)

Disney's representation of non-white racial groups in princess films started in the 1990s. After decades of creating only white characters, the company began to include those of various races and ethnic backgrounds. In the next chapters I will analyze on how Disney represented race in different princess films and compare them, as well as examine if the representations reinforced certain stereotypes that were already present in popular culture.

#### *2.4. Gender and Racial Stereotypes and Concepts*

In his previously mentioned lecture *Representation and Media*, Hall talks about stereotypes and the problematic of negative and positive stereotypes. He states that stereotypes are limited definitions of who people can be. (Hall 20) He adds that stereotypes are attempts to fix, and that opening up stereotypes means increasing the possibilities which the subject can be and increasing identities which have not been seen before. (Hall 20) He also says that in order to change a trope or stereotype, one must intervene in the exchange between the image and its psychological meaning. (Hall 20) In the following chapter I will name some stereotypes or concepts that influenced the creation of certain stereotypes, which could be applied in the analysis of Disney's non-white princesses, based on their racial and gender characteristics.

##### *2.4.1. Strong Black Woman Stereotype*

Although seemingly a positive portrayal, many agree that this trope or stereotype has also negatively influenced African American and all Black women. Throughout cinematographic history, black women have been portrayed through several different 'types'. Cailyn Petrona Stewart writes in her paper *The Mule of the World: The Strong Black Woman and The Woes of Being 'Independent'* that the Strong Black Woman (SBW) stereotype was perceived as support and a celebration for black women but in reality, it created a burden. It is also contradictory, since while Black women were celebrated and applauded in certain films, they were exploited,

underpaid and mistreated by society. The modern Black woman is often portrayed as either a working single mother who sacrifices her life in numerous ways in order to provide for her children and she is strong enough to manage it all without anyone's help; or she is the strong educated and successful woman without romantic interest or partners. These portrayals normalize white supremacy and the way Black women are treated and their position in today's society. Since they are always portrayed as so strong and independent, it is expected that they have no problem of carrying this kind of burden and it does not question the society's role. Stewart states that by this stereotype the SBW is 'emotionally zombified and disabled', she is not allowed to be affected by stress, mistreatment, hard labor or social injustice. This form of turning Black women into some kind of 'superhumans' has roots in the historical context of slavery.

The idea that Black female slaves were strong enough to endure any pain and keep on going justified slaveowners' abuses, including rape: The Black woman's mythic 'strength' became a convenient justification for every atrocity committed on her (Wyatt 2008 p. 60).

If a Black woman shows signs of stress or exhaustion, she is considered weak or needy. Stewart characterizes the 'Angry Black Woman' as a trope and the Strong Black Woman as a stereotype and she states that they both show that Black women are thought to have one emotion, which is anger, and that their only quality is strength and she is often represented as too mad or too strong.

Stewart adds that these stereotypes force Black women to adapt to them in order to survive in the contemporary society while it takes toll on her sanity and health. The society sends the message that Black women's emotions and mental health are not valid yet they can be exploited and mistreated.

The second type of the trope or stereotype is The Mammy that was present in older

Hollywood films. A famous example is *Gone with The Wind*. These Black women were often working for wealthy white families and history showed us that they were heavily mistreated and exploited but these Hollywood representations show nurturing Black women who are devoted to the family they are working and almost 'enjoying' their position. This can be drawn back to the Post-Civil period in which people began creating a nostalgic idyllic version of the past. They created the version of The Mammy in which she is portrayed as an older, overweight, asexual grandmother type. However, these women were often teenagers taken from their families, their access to food was controlled by the white slaveowners and their difficult physical labor during their life guaranteed a shorter life span. (Versluys 10) This kind of representation was used to justify years of slavery but also to romanticize the position of the Black domestic help after slavery was abolished. (Versluys 11)

The third type of the trope is the Jezebel, or the oversexualized portrayal of Black women. The Jezebel also draws its roots from the period of slavery when Black women were portrayed as oversexualized, exotic beings, as oppose to the white woman, which served as a sort of 'justification' for slavery and rape. Since Black women were seen as possession, rape was not considered a crime, and it was seen as the Black women seducing the slaveowner and not as sexual abuse. (Versuys 11)

The oversexualized portrayal of Black women continued in the 20 century and became often in American cinematography. Famous examples are films *Foxy Brown* and *Taxi Driver*. (<https://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/jezebel/>)

The Strong Black Woman stereotype is important when analyzing Disney's, *The Princess and The Frog*, since the main character Tiana is depicted with several characteristics that resemble the stereotypical portrayals of Black women in Hollywood. She was one of the few Disney princesses of the newer generations portrayed doing domestic labor and one of her main characteristics was her work ethics and how much she sacrificed in order to achieve her goal.

### 2.4.2. *Orientalism*

The concept of Orientalism was explained in Edward Said's book *Orientalism* from 1978. However, the term was used for centuries before. It was defined as a scholarly discipline practiced in the Western world in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century which studied the arts, languages, philosophies, cultures, laws, religion, histories and literature of Asian nations and societies, especially ancient ones. The term was also used for an overall interest and fascination with the Orient (as oppose to the Occident), that was present in the Western world. Later, scholars began to use the term Asian studies, rather than Orientalism, in order to distance themselves from the colonial connotation of Orientalism. (Encyclopedia Britannica)

Said defined the concept as a stereotypical, oversimplified and exotic conception of the Asian and Arab world in the West.

In defining the term Orient, Said says that it is almost a European construct. (Said 1). He explains the fascination with the Orient with the fact that it was one of Europe's richest colonies and the most often representation of *the Other* for Europeans.

Said writes: 'Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident.' (Said 2) He says that it can also mean a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient, and a Western style of ruling the Orient. (Said 3)

Said mentions that the Orient can be defined as a British and French enterprise and that mostly involves India and Bible lands. (Said 4) He writes: 'Orientalism is more valuable as a sign of European -Atlantic power over the Orient than that it is a truthful discourse about the Orient.' (Said 6)

Said mentions Gramsci and his concept of hegemony which he defines as a cultural leadership that is established in a society because of the fact that some ideas are more influential



than others. He connects this concept to Orientalism and to what Denys Hay calls the idea of Europe which defines Europeans as 'us' against 'those', all other non-Europeans. He also mentions that a great element of European culture is the idea that European identity is superior over others. (Said 7)

Said continues to explain that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the East signified danger for the people of the United States (Said 26) while electronics made the Orient less of a mythical area and more of an area of American interest (Said 223)

In the postmodern world films and various other types of Western (mostly American) media created and reinforced stereotypes of the Middle East, the people living there as well as their culture and religions, mostly concentrating on Arabs, which was reinforced by political situations in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. (Said 223) Said says:

In the films and television the Arab is associated either with lechery or bloodthirsty dishonesty. He appears as an oversexed degenerate, capable, it is true, of cleverly devious intrigues, but essentially sadistic, treacherous, low. Slave trader, camel driver, moneychanger, colorful scoundrel: these are some traditional Arab roles in the cinema. The Arab leader (of marauders, pirates, "native" insurgents) can often be seen snarlirig at the captured Western hero and the blond girl (both of them steeped in wholesomeness) (Said 286)

The concept of Orientalism can be connected to Disney's *Aladdin*, but also, in a broader sense, to *Mulan*. The Orient in popular culture is often a symbol for exoticness, mystery but also violence and barbarism, which was also the case in Disney films. Since the focus of this work is the representation of non-white female characters in Disney films, I will mostly focus on the issue of the exoticized and oversexualized representation of female characters from the Middle East.

### 2.4.3. *Noble Savage*

The Noble savage is also more of a concept, than a stereotype, yet it can still be connected to the stereotypical portrayal of certain ethnic groups which I will explain in the following chapters. This concept is primarily connected to literature and it can be defined as the perception of indigenous groups by colonizers, which are perceived to live in balance and harmony with nature and which are free of the influence and the negative impact of the ‘civilized world.’ (Encyclopedia Britannica)

The term ‘noble savage’ is mostly connected to Romanticism in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, and for example the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. However, the concept can also be found in ancient Greece. It also appeared in travel literature and plays in the period from the 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century. The term was first used *The Conquest of Granada* (1672) written by John Dryden and was also used in *Oroonoko*, written by Thomas Southerne and based on the novel by Aphra Behn. (Encyclopedia Britannica)

Although firstly connected to literature, we can also use 'the noble savage' when analyzing numerous examples of popular culture, such as Disney's *Pocahontas*. We will see, how in the film the Native Americans are represented extremely spiritual and with a deep connection to nature, as well as how the colonizers perceived them as savages and uncivilized.

## 3. DISNEY PRINCESSES

### 3.1. *Evolution of Disney Princesses*

Disney's representation of female characters in their *Princess* series has changed and evolved over the years, from the first princesses being Eurocentric looking and with little or no participation in their own story to more independent characters of various descents and races. In this chapter I will offer a short overview of Disney's representation of women in princess films and proceed to analyze films with non-white princesses.

Several authors offered categorizations of Disney princesses based on the period in which the film was made and the way female characters were portrayed (Reilly; Venkat; England, Descartes & Collier-Meek). Authors mostly agree that the first category of Disney princess films are *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*. In these films we see the prototype of the Disney princess, which has often been criticized in the years to come. The princesses were maidens and of a European descent. They were all modest, doing household labor, not being paid or acknowledged for their work and not complaining about being mistreated. They also never actively participated in distancing themselves from a problematic situation and were always saved by the male protagonist. (Reilly 53)

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Disney created a new generation of princesses in films such as *Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Aladdin*. This generation was characterized by a new modern appearance with big eyes and unrealistic proportions. The princesses were active participants in their story, had their own interests and rebelled against authority. However, most of them made great sacrifices for male characters. (Reilly 53). It is important to mention that the first non-white Disney princess appeared in the film *Aladdin*. However, Jasmine was not a main character and the character held a stereotypical representation of Middle Eastern women. (Venkat 36)

In the late 1990s and early 2000s Disney presented three films with non-white princesses as main characters, *Mulan*, *Pocahontas* and *The Princess and the Frog*. The main characters were not of a European descent and they were a representation of ‘otherness’. The issue with this kind of representation was that it often turned into a caricature of the culture that was being portrayed. After these films, Disney was criticized for not doing a thorough research on the culture. In order to compensate for the Euro-centric portrayal of princesses in the previous films, Disney, as Reilly states, went to ‘the point of offensively exoticizing the ethnicities of these princesses.’ He also states that the princess held a kind of a burden for being the only

representatives of their culture. Since most of the previous princesses were Euro-centric, Mulan was *the* Asian princess, Pocahontas was *the* Native American princess and Tiana was *the* African American princess. (Reilly 54)

In recent years, Disney presented various new princess characters such as Rapunzel from *Tangled*, Merida from *Brave*, Elsa and Anna from *Frozen* and another non-white princess character, Moana from *Moana*. These princesses were characterized by their strong will, goals and independence. They even question the characters that have seemingly their best interest. They also question those showing them affection and differentiate ‘affection with an agenda versus genuine love’.

According to Venkat, *Brave* and *Frozen* are representatives of third-wave feminism, concerning that they were the only ones that centered almost entirely on the heroine and did not finish with a wedding. Another example of a Disney princess movie without a romantic storyline is also, the latest Disney princess character – *Moana*. In this generation, princesses are portrayed as not as sophisticated as the ones before them, but they are adventurous and free spirited.

The storyline were not revolving solely on a romantic story and princesses were portrayed not being interested in romantic relations as well as not getting married shortly after meeting their partner (Reilly 59) The filmmakers also concentrated more on different types of bonds and put more emphasis on friendship and sisterly love instead of a romantic connection. (Reilly 59; Venkat 37)

#### 4. THE PORTRAYAL OF NON-WHITE PRINCESSES

In this chapter, I will analyze five Disney's non-white princess characters, and the films in which they appear based on certain elements which I found reoccurred in all of the films and are important to mention in the analysis and comparison of the films, with emphasis on the way race and gender were represented in the films. The categories by which I analyzed the films are *Race and Romance*, *Physical Appearance*, *Racial and Ethnic Portrayal*, *Personal Goals*, *'Male' and 'Female' Traits and Gender Norms*, and *The Importance of The Father Figure*.

Jasmine is the Arab princess and she is the only princess that is not the main character of her film. The character appeared in the 1993 film *Aladdin*. She belongs to the second wave of princesses created in the 1990s and shows a more autonomous personality than the older princesses, yet is still mainly characterized by her relationship with the main character and her love interest. (Matyas 26) The film follows the story of the young thief Aladdin as he begins a romantic relationship with the sultan's daughter Jasmine. Most of the issues in the film revolve around the fact that Jasmine must marry a prince according to law and around Aladdin's conflicts with the villain Jaffar, who wishes to marry the princess and become sultan.

What is often criticized about the representation of the main female characters, and all other female characters, in this film is the sexualized and exoticized portrayal of Middle Eastern women (Venkat 36), as well as the stereotypical portrayal of Arabs and the Middle East in general.

The second non-white princess was Pocahontas from the animated film of the same name. Pocahontas is the Native American princess and the story follows her romantic relationship with one of the English colonizers named John Smith, as the Englishmen come to conquer to New World. The film also puts an emphasis on the differences between the two cultures and the issues that the arrival of the colonizers brings to the native people.

The portrayal of Pocahontas bears certain problematic elements. Disney portrayal of Native

American women in this film is over-sexualized and emphasizes exotic elements. (Matyas 16) The film is also criticized for portraying Native Americans as stereotypically nature oriented and as 'noble savages.' (Blankestijn 29-30) Pocahontas was also the first princess to have an interracial relationship.

Mulan is Disney's first and only Eastern Asian (Chinese) princess and third non-white princess. *Mulan* challenges stereotypical gender role portrayal since Mulan pretends to be a man for most of the film (Blankestijn 6; Matyas 34) in order to save her father. The story follows Mulan from her struggles with fitting into her culture and community. In the beginning of the film we see her not fitting into her community as she has a disastrous meeting with a matchmaker who is supposed to find her a husband. Mulan feels frustrated since she does not look or act the way it is expected from her but soon decides to pretend to be a man and go to war in order to spare her old and sick father. After her secret is discovered she is punished and expelled from the army, however she manages to save China from the Huns and find a love connection with her general Shang.

Disney was also criticized for certain elements, such as the Americanized portrayal of the main characters and the stereotypical negative portrayal of the villains. (Matyas 39)

The first and only African American princess Tiana was portrayed in 2009. film *The Princess and the Frog*. The film is set in New Orleans in the 1920s and shows the story of Tiana, a young girl from a poor family who wishes to open her restaurant, which was also the dream of her late father. She works multiple jobs, one of which is for the rich LaBouffe family and their daughter Charlotte, who is also her friend. When a prince comes to town, him and Tiana get turned into frogs by voodoo magic, wander the bayou, fall in love and at the end defeat the villain, turn back into human, get married and open a restaurant.

Tiana was portrayed as career oriented and ambitious, yet what is still problematic is that she is the first Black princess but also, the first princess after a long time to be portrayed doing

domestic labor (England, Descartes & Collier-Meek 563-564) and the fact that Tiana and her love interest were portrayed as frogs for most of the length of the film.

The latest Disney princess is Moana, a Polynesian princess. The film *Moana*, unlike others mentioned was made with 3D technology and was released in 2016 and it follows the journey of a young teenage girl, a daughter of the chief of the Motunui island. Moana is chosen from the ocean to find the demi-god called Maui who stole the stone heart a thousand years ago of the goddess Te Fiti as he wanted to bring power to the people. After losing her heart Te Fiti becomes wild and evil. When a plant disease strikes her island, Moana sails to find Maui in order to bring Te Fiti her heart back, despite her father's warnings but with her grandmother's approval. Moana finds Maui, and although with many difficulties they find Te Fiti and give her back her heart and the natural order is restored.

In this film, Disney brought certain changes, the princess has no romantic interest, she has more realistic features and proportions and the culture and tradition of the Polynesian people is portrayed more realistically. However, there are still certain issues, which I will address in the following paragraphs.

#### *4.1.Romance and Race*

Since the films that portrayed princesses of color were made in the time period from the 1990s to the 2010s, the romantic relationships were portrayed in a more modern way and the princesses were portrayed as more independent than the ones prior to them. Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan and Tiana were all portrayed as independent and with more autonomy than the earlier princesses, however, all of them still find happiness and a sense of purpose in a romantic relationship (Matyas 27)

Pocahontas is the only princess of the mentioned which does not end up in a happy relationship with her romantic interest. The film was first to show an interracial romantic

relationship between two people of different ethnic backgrounds. However, at the end, Pocahontas was shown choosing her family and her culture instead of her romantic relationship with John Smith. This can be seen as a message that a woman who chooses her own goal and interest cannot have a successful relationship as well (Matyas 36). Furthermore, being the Native American princess, Pocahontas was represented as having a stronger bond with her family, culture and very nature oriented. (Blankestijn 29) We can draw this type of portrayal back to the noble savage concept. Although a part of Pocahontas wishes to follow John Smith, she chooses to remain with her family and her people (which is historically inaccurate). In this way, Disney preserves the image of a Native American princess with an unbreakable bond to nature and wildlife.

Another, supposedly interracial couple was shown in the film *The Princess and the Frog*, since it is not explicitly explained what is prince Naveen's ethnic background, 'he is a racially ambiguous character, with an olive complexion and a mild Spanish accent.' (Matyas 39) Disney is often criticized for not using the chance to portray a positive main black male character, but instead making prince Naveen racially ambiguous. Furthermore, Dundes and Streiff mention how female Black viewers expressed their frustration in interviews concerning the fact the standards for a partner for Tiana were lower than for other princesses. Naveen often treats her unfairly and he holds no extraordinary qualities like some of the other princes. Another fact which is debatable is the fact that Naveen is shown working with Tiana at the end. It is a positive element that Disney portrayed a male and royal character that has no issue with working and supporting his wife in her business, however, there were also certain critics claiming how these elements were also shown as lower standards for a Black princess, since her husband does not have an occupation of his own, but relies on her.

Jasmine, Mulan and Tiana are shown having a happy ending with their romantic interest despite the problems that they encountered over the course of the plot of the film. In the earlier



films, *Aladdin* and *Pocahontas*, the romantic relationships were established over the course of one or two days, while the later pictures, *Mulan* and *The Princess and the Frog* show a much more realistic portrayal in which the characters developed relationships over time. (England, Descartes & Collier-Meek 565)

As mentioned before, the female characters in these films were shown with a higher level of autonomy and independence than older films, yet all of them make great sacrifices for the wellbeing of their romantic interest and their relationship.

In the two first films, *Aladdin* and *Pocahontas*, the romantic relationship was shown as the center of the main female character's life and occupation, whereas, in the later films, the princesses were shown having more autonomy and having goals and interests beyond the romantic storyline. *Mulan's* primary goal was to save her father and bring honor to her country, while *Tiana's* dream and main occupation was to open a restaurant. We can see a shift in the representation of female characters and gender roles. While the romantic relationship was still a great part of the storyline it was not the center of it.

However, the latest film *Moana*, shows a princess character with no romantic interest. *Moana* is the first princess of color without a romantic relationship. (Elsa and Merida also have no romantic interests) By representing a young girl whose storyline does not revolve around a male partner or their relationship, Disney creates new standards. They show that it is possible to represent women and women of color as independent and without a romantic partner as the center of their story.

#### 4.2. *Physical Appearance*

Disney portrayal of the physical appearance of women was very stereotypical since the first film. Almost all of the first princesses were portrayed as very slim, with a fair complexion and with unrealistic features and dimensions.

As mentioned before, princess Jasmine was portrayed with more revealing clothing than any of the other white princesses and as more exotic and attractive. She also had, as well as her romantic interest Aladdin, more European looking features and Americanized accents as oppose to the villain characters.

Unlike all of the other princesses, Jasmine was depicted as overly sexualized and exotic for the Western viewer, as well as all of the other female characters in the film. (*Aladdin* 00:08:19-00:08:30) This representation of women from the Middle East can be connected to Said's concept of Orientalism. Jasmine is shown as exotic and different from the standpoint of the Western audience, a representative of the Other. Although more independent and autonomous than the previous princesses, Jasmine, as the first non-white princesses, is a stereotypical portrayal of Middle Eastern women. Jasmine also uses her appeal and attractiveness to help Aladdin in defeating the villain, Jaffar. (*Aladdin* 1:17:39-1:18:05)

Pocahontas was portrayed wearing revealing and historically inaccurate clothing as well as having physique that resembles super models or Barbie dolls, in order to put emphasis on her athleticism. (Matyas 30) Similarly to Jasmine, Pocahontas' wardrobe was more sexualized than the white princesses' ones that appeared in Disney films before them. (Matyas 41) Matyas quotes LaCroix and writes:

early characters (read White), Ariel and Belle, are weaker, more pristine, and largely incapable of action, whereas the later heroines, all women of color, are depicted in such a way as to emphasize their bodies and physicality. The reader is encouraged, through this privileging of the body and the physical in the rendering of the physique and costuming, to look at Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Esmeralda in different and more voyeuristic manner than the White heroines. They embody the exoticized Other woman— one whose sexualized presence is privileged above all else. (LaCroix 222) (Matyas 16)

What is problematic with this portrayal is the connection between non-white women characters and an exoticized and over-sexualized representation of women of certain ethnicities. Pocahontas, as well as Jasmine was shown as exotic, attractive and 'different' to the Western viewer.

Pocahontas' physique could also be connected to the fact that out of all princesses, she is the one that seems to be the most athletic and physically strong, as well as the one that spends most time in nature and doing physical activities.

*Mulan* is different from all the other films since it shows a female character breaking gender norm by dressing as a man for most of the film (Blankestijn 6). As mentioned before, Mulan and some of the other characters were Americanized and with 'wheat colored skin tone' while the villains (the Huns) were portrayed with a greyer skin tone (Matyas 39). As well as Pocahontas, Mulan was depicted as more athletic and physically active than the other princesses, but also mostly in the period when she is pretending to be a man. However, at the beginning of the film we see Mulan dressed in feminine clothing and wearing strong make up which she was practically made to do by her family in order to impress the matchmaker. (*Mulan* 00:07:50-00:13:14).

After failing to impress her, devastated Mulan wipes off her makeup and looks at her reflection wondering if she will ever be able to be her true self and make her family happy. (*Mulan* 00:13:09-00:13:14) When her father is chosen to go to war, because of his age and health condition Mulan decides to disguise as a man and cuts off her hair and dresses in her father's armor. (*Mulan* 00:18:54) In these scenes we see the process of both Mulan's physical and mental transition. She goes from wearing traditionally feminine clothing and make-up and conforming to standard gender roles to rebelling against her family, tradition and gender norms in order to help her father but also to find her true self. A scene in which Mulan once again changes her physical appearance is after she is wounded in battle and the soldiers find out she

is woman and she was punished and abandoned by the army. (*Mulan* 01:00:13-01:00:28) Through these scenes we see how Disney portrays physical appearance and clothing as an essential part of one's gender performance. We also see how Mulan was treated differently before and after the soldiers find out she was a woman although she was excelling in the army and completing the same tasks as the other warriors and even saved Shang in battle. Disney presents in the idea that despite our actions and activities, we will be viewed and treated differently based on our gender or how society perceives our gender or our gender performance.

Tiana from the film *The Princess and the Frog* is the first Black and African American Disney Princess. What was often said to be a negative element in this film is the fact that Tiana spends the majority of the film as a frog which erases the visibility of the first Black princess and the Black woman is once again hidden from the spotlight. (Matyas 40)

When in human form, at the beginning of the film, Tiana was mostly dressed in modest clothing or her working clothes (*The Princess and the Frog* 00:07:11), except for at Charlotte's party and in her imagination, which shows her social status and occupation, as oppose to the character of Charlotte and numerous other characters which are portrayed wearing more luxurious clothing.

However, as mentioned, the biggest issue in Tiana's portrayal is the fact that she spends two thirds of the film as frog. (*The Princess and the Frog* 00:29:52-1:27:49) What is problematic is the fact that in one of their only representations of Black women and in the first and only film with a Black princess as the main character Disney chose to transform the princess into a frog and move the Black woman from the spotlight and the audience's eye.

In Disney's manner, even when in their frog form, Tiana and Naveen had very human-like expressions and Tiana was portrayed with traditionally feminine characteristics.

What is similar in all of the four films mentioned is the fact that, like in most Disney princess films, the heroines were portrayed with unrealistic body proportions and features.

Moana, however, was portrayed more realistically than other princesses. She has realistic body proportions and looks more like a young teenage girl unlike other princesses (most of them are in their teen years), although she does have the famous big eyes most that most Disney princesses have. She also sometimes looks messy and dirty, unlike most of the other princesses. (Pramesthi, Wijaya, Habsari 77) She is portrayed tying her hair in a bun when it gets in her way, which is a very realistic element and makes the portrayal more authentic. (*Moana* 01:23:29)

As for the other women portrayed in the film, they also have much more realistic body features than women in other Disney films. They were not portrayed in over-sexualized clothing and their clothes are very authentic to the Polynesian people. (Nauta 37) Moana and her mother differ from other women in certain scenes as they wear head pieces which show their status in the tribe. (Nauta 81)

#### *4.3.Racial and Ethnic Portrayal*

As I mentioned in the previous paragraphs, Jasmine and most of the characters in *Aladdin* were portrayed stereotypically. The main and positive characters were Americanized, with European looking features and with American accents, while the negative characters had different accents and stereotypically Arabic features. What is often mentioned as problematic is the overall representation of the Arabian culture in the film, from the opening song Arabian Nights ("Oh I come from a land. From a faraway place. Where the caravan camels roam. Where they cut off your ear. If they don't like your face. It's barbaric, but hey it's home") to other representations and exoticization of the Middle East. (Matyas 38) This can be connected to the already mentioned Said's theory of Orientalism by which, in the West, the Middle East and its inhabitants are portrayed and perceived as wild, mysterious and exotic, and essentially as different from the Westerners and as the Other. (*Aladdin* 00:01:03)

In the beginning of the film most Arabs are portrayed as very aggressive and dangerous, and

as, oppose to the main actors, with stereotypically Arabic features and accents (*Aladdin* 00:07:46-00:09:40) Furthermore, as mentioned previously, Jasmine is portrayed as exotic and with over-sexualized clothing as oppose to other princesses. (*Aladdin* 00:13:03) What is also important is the element of magic which is present throughout the film and portrays the Middle East as a mystical and exotic place to Western viewer and follows the tradition of Orientalism. (*Aladdin* 00:28:00); (*Aladdin* 01:12:26)

These representations can create harming and dangerous stereotypes. Once the Western viewer perceives the Middle Easterners as different and dangerous, it creates situations in which Middle Easterners and Arabs are discriminated and deprived of the same rights and experiences that Westerners have and, in these cases, we are forced to realize the strength and importance of representation.

*Pocahontas* portrays the main character and all of the Native Americans as stereotypically nature-oriented and as the 'noble savage'. The Noble Savage, as was stated prior, can be defined as a romanticized and exoticized portrayal of indigenous people among Europeans in Romanticism literature. We see elements of this concept throughout the film. From the very beginning there is a distinction made between the white, English colonizers and the 'savage' Indians. Some of the colonizers are portrayed as villains, while other, such as John Smith, as positive characters although clearly uneducated and with prejudices towards the Natives. When meeting Pocahontas, he calls her people 'savages' and uncivilized, and introduces the ideas with which the colonizers tend to 'help' the natives and change their way of life. (*Pocahontas* 00:37:07-00:37:50) After hearing this, Pocahontas decides to teach John about the beauty of her way of life through the song *Colors of the Wind*, in which she describes and celebrates her connection to nature. We see elements of the 'noble savage' concept in the character of Pocahontas as she spiritualizes the white man.

What is more, there are many elements in the film which portray the Native Americans as

extremely spiritual, to the point where it becomes exotic to the audience, such as in the scenes with tribal dancing and singing or when Pocahontas communicates with Grandma Willow. (*Pocahontas* 00:47:05); (*Pocahontas* 01:04:50) It is important to mention once again that this is the only Disney princess film that portrays an interracial relationship and in which different races of the romantic partners create some kinds of issues. The opposition between the two races is not visible only in their relationship, but also on a bigger scale. Towards the end of the film there is a scene in which both groups call the other one savages and ask are they even human (*Pocahontas* 01:05:15). Although the colonizers were portrayed as villains in certain scenes, at the end most of them were portrayed as positive characters yet of different cultures and traditions. We can see that Disney's intentions were probably to put forward the message that all people are the same and that communication and co-existence of two different ethnic groups is possible. The message is positive, yet Disney could also be criticized for historical inaccuracy and simplifying the history of native people.

All of these elements show that the concept of a 'noble savage' can also be used in filmmaking and animated pictures. The film creates a representation of Native Americans as extremely spiritual and in harmony with nature which is almost fairy-tale-like for the White man and promotes the representation that was established previously in literature. Furthermore, the story of Pocahontas that was shown in this film is known to be inaccurate and a romanticized version of the historical events. (Blankenstijn 26)

Pocahontas, as Jasmine in *Aladdin*, is also portrayed wearing revealing clothes which was also historically inaccurate. (Blankenstijn 29) She was also modeled after an Asian American actress. (Matyas 40)

In *Mulan*, which took inspiration from the character Hua Mulan from the Chinese *The Ballad of Mulan*, as the case was in *Aladdin*, certain characters were Americanized and portrayed with an American accent, whereas the villains were portrayed differently. For example, Mulan is

portrayed with European-like features, and her and Shang have American accents.

China is portrayed as a very conservative country in which women must look a certain way as well as cook and clean in order to find a husband and Mulan breaks away from these kind expectations in order to protect her father. (Blankestijn 34) However, in the end she is honored and respected by the members of her nations for showing loyalty and courage in times of trouble. In scenes in which Mulan is judged as well as praised, we see honor and respect as a crucial element of Chinese culture represented in the Disney film.

The portrayal of Mulan and her Chinese culture can also be connected to Orientalism. The Chinese culture, habits and characters were portrayed as very stereotypical and exotic for the Western viewer. Throughout the film we see scenes in which Chinese religion and spiritual traditions are simplified and adapted in order to bring entertainment for Western audience. The best example is the scene with Mulan's ancestors and Mu Shu the dragon in which they are portrayed more as caricatures and characters that bring comic relief. (*Mulan* 00:21:00-00:24:00)

The first African American princess was featured in the 2009. film *The Princess and the Frog*. As mentioned above the creators were heavily criticized for, even after consulting NAACP<sup>1</sup>, Oprah Winfrey and different focus groups, turning Tiana into a frog for the majority of the film, and once again minimizing the appearance of a Black woman. The creators changed the main character's original name Maddy because of its resemblance to the word 'mammy'. (Kee and Grant, 74) The filmmakers also failed to address the Jim Crow era<sup>2</sup>, in which the film likely takes place as well as all the racial and political struggles of the African American communities of the time. The film was made as an 'hommage' to the Jazz era while

---

<sup>1</sup> NAACP- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the largest and most pre-eminent civil rights organization in the US.

<sup>2</sup> "Jim Crow laws were a collection of state and local statutes that legalized racial segregation. Named after a [Black minstrel show](#) character, the laws—which existed for about 100 years, from the post-[Civil War](#) era until 1968—were meant to marginalize African Americans by denying them the right to vote, hold jobs, get an education or other opportunities. Those who attempted to defy Jim Crow laws often faced arrest, fines, jail sentences, violence and death." (<https://www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/jim-crow-laws>)



incorporating voodoo elements of the Caribbean and Creole communities. (Kee & Grant 75) The voodoo is practiced by the film's main villain which can also be perceived as negative stereotyping. (Matyas 39) Firstly, the only Black main character in the film is Dr. Facilier, a villain, and secondly the voodoo use is portrayed as very dark, mystical and exotic, which creates negative stereotypes both of Black communities and their tradition and of the voodoo religion. (*The Princess and the Frog* 00:20:00)

Tiana was also portrayed as the only Disney princess of color doing domestic work, and one of the few portrayed doing a fair amount of domestic labor since the period of the first generation of princesses. Although Tiana is a hard-working and ambitious character that works in order to achieve her goals and open her own restaurant, it was debatable if it was a right decision to portray the first African American princess doing domestic labor, housework and cooking, although she did learn how to cook from her father and taught her husband how to cook. (England, Descartes & Collier-Meek 564)

What was also criticized is the fact that prince Naveen is portrayed as rather lazy, incompetent and overly relaxed. Critics stated their negative opinions about the fact that a Black princess has a partner with so many negative traits, as well as being racially ambiguous and the fact that Disney failed to use the chance to portray a positive Black African American male character without the negative stereotypes that are often present.

When making the film *Moana*, the filmmakers involved spent time on Polynesian islands and consulted a group called The Oceanic Story Trust which had members of different occupation from the Polynesian island in order to portray the Pacific communities authentically. The successfully portrayed the way Polynesian people view the ocean (which in some languages is called Moana) as a living being which connects the islands and gives them life. (Nauta 8) They

also successfully portrayed certain Polynesian dances and the greeting gesture Hongi<sup>3</sup>. (Nauta 27) The films also present some songs in the native language (*Moana* 00:06:30); (*Moana* 00:24:30)

As for some of the negative parts of the representation, Polynesian people found it offensive the way Maui was portrayed. They stated that his physique reinforced the stereotype of obesity of the Polynesian people and that he does not look the way demigod Maui is described in the legends. (Nauta 6) Maui is also Americanized, as well as Moana, as they talk an American accent (although the actors which gave voice to their characters are all of Polynesian descent), and have certain gestures and phrases which are typical for the American culture (e.g. fist bump)

What critics also mentioned as problematic in the representation of Polynesian people is the fact that the number of tattoos which the members of these nations usually have is reduced (Nauta 31) and the fact that an evil group of coconuts attack Moana and Maui since the word 'coconut' is usually used as a racial slur for the Pacific people (Nauta 8)

#### *4.4. Personal Goals*

Jasmine, and the princesses of her generation, are portrayed as more independent and with a greater level of autonomy than princesses of older generations. She rebels against her father and the norms of her tradition and culture and fights for her right to marry who she wants instead of agreeing on an arranged marriage. (*Aladdin* 00:13:24) At the end of the film she is given the right to become Sultana without marrying.

Pocahontas was portrayed with a great connection to both nature and her family and heritage. One the one side she is the first princess to be portrayed in an interracial relationship but also

---

<sup>3</sup> "The 'Hongi' is a traditional Maori greeting in New Zealand used by the Maori people. To hongi you press your nose and forehead together with the nose and forehead of the person you are greeting. Many people of Maori decent prefer to hongi, instead of shaking hands." (<https://www.nzmanukagroup.com/find-out-more/news/archive/hongi-maori-greeting/>)

the first without the 'happy ending' in which she marries the prince. Pocahontas was also portrayed as assertive and a leader, yet, at the end, she still remains home with her family instead of possibly following her personal goals.

Mulan also rebelled against her culture's norms and rules firstly in order to help her father but when the army finds out that she is a woman, she says that she joined the army not only to save her father but to prove that she could do things right and be proud of herself. (01:02:50) In this scene we see that Mulan was also eager to find personal growth and her own path, and not just help her father or her country. She was shown looking and acting differently than other women of her age and fearing the judgment of her family and community. However, by challenging gender norms she helps both her family and her country for which she was honored yet, at the end, Mulan returns to classic gender norms and find a happy ending with her romantic interest. (Matyas 24)

Tiana, unlike the other princesses mentioned, was portrayed having a precise goal and business ambitions. She worked on her future goal despite everybody criticizing her for never 'having fun' or not having a boyfriend (*The Princess and the Frog* 00:15:00) However, what the film's critics name as problematic is the fact that the first Black princess is portrayed doing domestic labor. Matyas even deepened the commentary on this issue and states that Tiana chose her relationship with Naveen over her dream: 'Tiana is also quick to choose her brief romance with Prince Naveen over her lifelong dream to open a restaurant, making the distinction that the restaurant is just something she wants, while Naveen is something she needs.' (Matyas 24) In one scene, Tiana even states that her dream would not be complete without Naveen. (*The Princess and the Frog* 01:23:24)

Out of all the princesses, Tiana is the one portrayed with a most specific personal goal and ambition that is not specifically connected to her culture, family or heritage.

However, the representation of a Black woman in this film may be connected to the Strong

Black woman stereotype. As oppose to white or male characters, such a prince Naveen, she does not show any signs of ‘goofiness’ in her character and is criticized for her work ethics. *The Princess and the Frog* continues to reinforce the stereotype that hard work and sacrifice is the main characteristic of a Black woman, without addressing racial issue, struggles and discrimination that women of color need to face by all means of repression.

When it comes to *Moana*, she was portrayed as being autonomous and independent from a young age with an adventurous spirit. She also becomes very accountable from a young age since she already has certain obligations in the tribe as the daughter of the chief. (*Moana* 00:13:00) Although Moana shows a personal desire to explore the ocean and sail, she begins her adventure in order to help her people and not for her own reasons.

#### 4.5. 'Male' and 'Female' Traits and Gender Norms

In several studies researched have drawn the conclusion that certain princesses of color were portrayed with more stereotypically masculine traits than the white princesses that appeared in Disney films prior to them. Traits that can be defined as traditionally masculine are eagerness to explore, being athletic, unemotional, independent and brave, while feminine ones are nurturing and helpfulness, physical weakness, being sensitive, troublesome and fearful. (England, Descartes & Collier-Meek 556)

Over the years, the princesses started having more of a combined personality with both masculine and feminine traits. (England, Descartes & Collier-Meek 562)

In *Aladdin*, princess Jasmine showed many more feminine traits than male ones, however, the main character, Aladdin, showed more traditionally feminine characteristics than princes in the previous films. He showed sensitivity and helpfulness, which are traditionally feminine traits, as well as masculine ones, such as assertiveness and physical strength. Princess Jasmine showed assertiveness and fearfulness as well as 'overt sexuality' and 'exaggerated femininity'.

(England, Descartes & Collier-Meek 564)

With films that were made in the 1990s, Disney started producing characters that challenged gender norms that were present in previous films. We see this from the example of Aladdin, in which the characters have more complex personalities and carry characteristics that were, in older films, only assigned to the other gender.

In *Pocahontas*, the main character showed traits that were absent in previous princess films and that are stereotypically thought to be more masculine, such as being athletic and having physical strength and she was also in the 'position of power in the final rescue.' (England, Descartes & Collier-Meek 561) Pocahontas participated in what are thought as stereotypically male activities such as diplomacy and war, but still in the end participated in typically female activities and remained with her family and community. She also used intellect and strength in her actions.

Mulan showed similar characteristics to Pocahontas, such as athletic characteristics and power and strength in battles and disputes. (England, Descartes & Collier-Meek 564) The fact that Mulan has several masculine traits can be explained also with the fact that she pretends to be a man for most of the film. (Blankestijn 45) However, she also often shows more feminine characteristics, such as submissiveness, second only to Cinderella. (England, Descartes & Collier-Meek 565)

Mulan can be described as the first film in which Disney challenged established gender norms and roles. For most of the film, Mulan pretends to be a man in order to save her father from going to war. She faces difficulties but yet manages to conquer all of the troubles she faces in the army and in battle, which are typically perceived as male surroundings. Through this film, Disney put forwards the message that 'girls can do anything boys can do'.

This attitude and the irony of the fact that Mulan is a girl pretending to be a male warrior, as well as her own internal battle with her identity is best seen in some of the songs in the film. In

the song *Reflection*, (*Mulan* 00:11:58-00:13:28) Mulan states in the first verse 'Look at me, I will never pass for a perfect bride, or a perfect daughter.' She states her disappointment she feels with herself since she believes that she does not or is not able to perform the traditional role of the daughter or wife in a good way. She continues by saying '..if I were truly to be myself, I would break my family's heart', in which we see that it is not only her who has certain ideas of gender roles but also her family and her culture who have certain expectations of her as well.

Later in the film, once she joins the army, we see Mulan and some of the other soldiers performing the song *A Girl Worth Fighting for*. (*Mulan* 00:47:39-00:49:50) In the song the soldiers describe their 'ideal' woman with verses such as 'I want her paler than the; Moon with eyes that; Shine like stars', and ' My girl will marvel at; My strength, adore my; Battle scars', as well as 'I couldn't care less what she'll; Wear or what she looks like; It all depends on what; She cooks like'. We see that all of the characters have their stereotypical idea of what characteristics should their partner have. When Mulan states 'How 'bout a girl who's got a brain; Who always speaks her mind?', they all ridicule her statement, which shows that Disney represents the Chinese, or even all men, with very stereotypical and traditional ideas of how a woman should look and behave.

The song *I'll Make a Man out of You*, (*Mulan* 00:38:02-00:41:06) perhaps best shows the traditional view of what 'a man should be' and Mulan breaking traditional gender norms. During this song, the film shows Mulan's future love interest Shang training the soldiers. In the beginning of the song Shang says 'Did they send me daughters, when I asked for sons?', in order to criticize the soldiers. Disney here shows Shang's, and perhaps the attitude of society, towards women and the perception that they would not be good warriors.

In the rest of the song, Shang repeatedly says the verses 'I'll make a man out of you' and 'Be a man', which implies that being a man implies being a brave and strong warrior, suitable for combat. He also states several characteristics which a man should have such as, 'We must be

swift as the coursing river'; ' With all the force of a great typhoon' and ' With all the strength of a raging fire; Mysterious as the dark side of the moon'. Throughout the scenes Mulan is shown not being able to perform certain activities or having extreme difficulty, yet by the end of the song through hard work and practice, she excels in all of them, even though she is not a man.

Through the films and the songs mentioned, Disney shows that there are certain stereotypical views on how men and women should act and what are they capable of doing, yet Mulan breaks all of the stereotypes and traditional gender norms since her interest and abilities are different from what society expected of her.

However, once the war is finished, Mulan is portrayed in a traditionally feminine way. She is submissive to the male characters and show a more calm, gentle and 'feminine' physique and attitude.

Tiana showed more feminine characteristics although, her ambition and work ethics would have been perceived as more 'stereotypically male' characteristics, for which she was judged for. (England, Descartes & Collier-Meek 563) However, prince Naveen showed more traits that would typically be perceived as feminine such as naivety and sensitivity, as well as more characteristics that are usually seen as negative such as 'goofyness' and laziness. Throughout the whole movie Tiana is stricter and more serious while Naveen has a more 'laid back' attitude. At the end of the movie we see a non-traditional representation of gender roles. After the pair turns into humans again and gets married, Tiana rents the location with her own money and Naveen helps her with the renovation and physical work, and with waitering and playing music once the restaurant is finished. Here we see not only Disney portraying a young Black woman starting her own business but also her husband helping her. (*The Princess and the Frog* 01:28:57-01:29:41)

Moana was portrayed with several traditionally considered male characteristics and interests. As mentioned before, she is very courageous and adventurous. In a scene in which

she is talking to her father, he says that she will become the chief after several generations of male rulers (his father, grandfather...) which shows that it is not important if the ruler of their nation is a man or a woman. (*Moana* 00:10:30) However, in a song she states 'I wish I could be the perfect daughter' (*Moana* 00:16:30) and we see that she fears that she does not fit into the traditional role of a daughter because of her wild and adventurous spirit.

In the rest of the films we see Moana, sailing and (*Moana* 01:23:00), fighting (*Moana* 00:48:20) and showing physical strength and ability. (*Moana* 00:42:00) She even angrily objects to Maui when he calls her a princess (*Moana* 00:52:19)

The more recent princesses (and princesses of color) were portrayed with more of a mixture of male and female characteristics and it 'suggests a movement towards a more androgynous princess.' (England, Descartes & Collier-Meek 562) We see that creators are moving towards a representation that shows princesses as characters with both traits that are thought to be more stereotypically masculine such as assertiveness, athletic abilities and physical strength as well as what are thought to be feminine traits such as sensitivity, closeness to family, naivety, etc. This is a shift from the first princesses which had a greater number of 'feminine' traits and gravitated more towards 'feminine activities'.

#### *4.6. The Importance of the Father Figure*

In most of the Disney princess films, fathers or father figures played a great role in the lives of the main characters. Mother figures were often either absent (*Cinderella*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *Pocahontas*) or portrayed as villains (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Rapunzel*). Even in films in which characters had both a mother and a father figure, the father was often portrayed as more important and influential for the life and decisions of the main character.

Starting with *Aladdin*, princess Jasmine is defined by her relationship to her father. She rebels



against her father and the tradition of her culture on the matter of who she should marry. Most of Jasmine's character is centered around either this issue or her romantic relationship to Aladdin. Although she rebels against her father, she still seeks his advice and approval for her choices. (Matyas 35) The Sultan and Jasmine often dispute because of his wish that Jasmine marries prince. He also states that this is not only because of the law but because he wants Jasmine 'taken care of' once he is gone. (*Aladdin* 00:13:42) Despite their misunderstandings, Jasmine father is a positive character and he listens to Jasmine's wishes in the end.

Pocahontas' father has an important role in the film as well. Her father, Chief Powhatan wanted for her to marry the best warrior Koccoum; however, similarly to Jasmine, she, in a way, rebelled against her father, and even more controversial than Jasmine, chose to engage in a romantic relationship with a white Englishman. (Blankestijn 25) At the end of the film, instead of killing John Smith after an incident in which Koccoum was killed, the chief listens to Pocahontas and supports the idea of peace between the two nations. (*Pocahontas* 01:08:40)

Mulan, unlike the previously mentioned non-white princesses, had both a mother and a father figure; however, her father had a much more important influence on Mulan and the story. Mulan secretly disguises as a man and joins the army and goes to war in the place of her father who is old and has trouble walking. Although Mulan, in a way, also rebels against her father and her family, she does it out of love and fear for her father's well-being. Unlike most of the other princess films, the initiator of the story in *Mulan* is not a romantic connection, but father-daughter love and sacrifice.

As well as Mulan, Tiana in *The Princess and the Frog* also had a mother but the character was not represented as influential as the father. Although her father passed away before the main storyline started, he had a great influence on Tiana's life and the story. It was Tiana's dream to open her own place for which she was inspired by her father's dreams for her. Her father also taught her how to cook and inspired her love for cooking and idea of opening a

restaurant.

Similarly, to most of the other films, Moana and her father have a complicated relationship in which she first rebels against his strict rules which serve to protect her, but at the end they find mutual understanding. The chief believes in Moana and her abilities to lead the people but she wishes to sail and explore the ocean. Moana finds also great support in her grandmother and mother.

We see that in all of the films mentioned, mother figures were either absent or did not have as big a role in the main character's life and the development of the storyline.

In the first two films, the princesses' mothers were absent and the daughter's rebellion against the father's rules yet great respect and love towards the father are one of the most important elements in the films.

In the other three films, we see that even with a mother figure present, the father is more influential, even after passing way. The father's role in Disney films is represented as very important and even crucial in the lives of children while the mother's role is often not as emphasized as much. In three of the four films (Tiana's father passed away when she was young) the princesses are in some kind of misunderstanding with their father or they rebel against their rules, however, they always find a peaceful agreement in the end. We see that Disney represents the father-daughter relationship as complicated yet with mutual love. They also emphasize the influence father's have on their daughters' lives, even portraying the cultures that were represented in the film as patriarchal, as it was expected from the daughters to listen to their fathers and obey their rules.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Disney's portrayal of women has changed and evolved throughout the years and with different generations of princesses as they started creating characters with more complex personalities and which challenge standard gender roles as they also started creating more non-white princess characters.

The first Disney non-white princesses were shift from the classic Eurocentric representation of women Disney practiced until then. However, they brought different issues such as a stereotypical portrayal of different races and ethnicities and an exoticized portrayal of women but also their cultures and traditions.

Furthermore, as princesses started having more complex personalities with both traditionally viewed male and female characteristics, traits and interests, there were still certain elements that were viewed as problematic such as centering the story around a romantic relationship and having the heroines sacrifice their happiness for their male partners, as well the fact that the princesses still had unrealistic body features and promoted unrealistic beauty standards.

However, in recent Disney films we witness a change in the representation of women and their stories. A few Disney princesses such as Merida and Elsa, as well as the most recent non-white princess Moana, did not have a romantic partner and did not show interest in finding one. Furthermore, Moana was portrayed much more realistically as oppose to the older portrayals of women in Disney films, with more resemblance to a young teenage girl and with a realistic body image. The filmmakers have also managed to make a progress and give a more realistic and truthful depiction of the traditions and way of life of the people portrayed the film.

To conclude, Disney has shown progress in the way they depict women as well as women of color in their animated films. This kind of representation is important due to the influence Disney has on both children worldwide but also on popular culture. However, we are yet to see Disney include more ethnicities and races in their animated films in general, but also in their

princess series, such as Latin American people, members of the LGBTIQ+ community as well as people with disabilities.

A more adequate representation of all groups of people, regardless of their race, age, gender, sexuality or ability is important in today's society since it influences not only popular culture but society in general.

## Works cited:

1. "About the NAACP." *NAACP*, [www.naacp.org/about-us/](http://www.naacp.org/about-us/).
2. "The Jezebel Stereotype." *The Jezebel Stereotype - Anti-Black Imagery - Jim Crow Museum - Ferris State University*, [www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/jezebel/](http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/jezebel/).
3. "The World Standard in Knowledge since 1768." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., [www.britannica.com/](http://www.britannica.com/).
4. Baker Kee, Jessica, and Alphonso Walter Grant. "Disney's (Post?)-Racial Gaze: Film, Pedagogy, and the Construction of Racial Identities." *Teaching with Disney*, by Julie C. Garlen and Jennifer A. Sandlin, Peter Lang, 2016.
5. Blankestijn, Lianne. "From Snow White to Pitch Black: Gender and Racial Stereotyping of the Disney Princess." *Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen*, 2015.
6. Castañeda, Mari, "The Power of (Mis)Representation: Why Racial and Ethnic Stereotypes in the Media Matter" (2018). *Challenging Inequalities: Readings in Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration*. 60. Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.umass.edu/communication\\_faculty\\_pubs/60](https://scholarworks.umass.edu/communication_faculty_pubs/60)
7. Dundes, Lauren, and Madeline Streiff. "Reel Royal Diversity? The Glass Ceiling in Disney's *Mulan* and *Princess and the Frog*." *Societies*, 2016.
8. England, Dawn Elizabeth, et al. "Gender Role Portrayal and the Disney Princesses." *Sex Roles*, vol. 64, no. 7-8, 2011, pp. 555–567., doi:10.1007/s11199-011-9930-7.
9. Gill, Isabelle. "Feminist Figures or Damsels in Distress." *Young Scholars in Writing*, 2016.

10. Hall, Stuart. "Representation and Media." 1997, Amherst, University of Massachusetts .
11. Hall, Stuart. *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices*. Milton Keynes, Los Angeles, Calif., 2013.
12. History.com Editors. "Jim Crow Laws." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 28 Feb. 2018, [www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/jim-crow-laws](http://www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/jim-crow-laws).
13. <https://www.nzmanukagroup.com/find-out-more/news/archive/hongi-maori-greeting/>
14. Matyas, Vanessa. "Tale as Old as Time: A Textual Analysis of Race and Gender in Disney Princess Films." McMaster University, 2010.
15. Nauta, Melanie. "Walt Disney's Moana 'We Are Polynesia.'" *Jönköping University*, 2018.
16. Reilly, Cole. "An Encouraging Evolution Among Disney Princesses? A Critical Feminist Analysis ." *Teaching with Disney*, by Julie C. Garlen and Jennifer A. Sandlin, Peter Lang, 2016.
17. Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Vintage Books, 2004.
18. Stewart, Cailyn Petrona. "The Mule of the World: The Strong Black Woman and The Woes of Being 'Independent' ." *University of Toronto*, 2018.
19. Venkat, Vishaka. "A Feminist Inception in Disney Movies." *Editor's Note*, 2015.
20. Versluys, Eveline. "Stereotypes of African American Women in US Television Analysis of Scandal and Hawthorne." *University of Gent*, 2014.
21. West, Candace, and Don H. Zimmerman. "Doing Gender." *Gender & Society*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1987, pp. 125–151., doi:10.1177/0891243287001002002.

Films:

1. *Aladdin*. Directed by John Musker et al., Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, Inc., 1992.
2. *Moana*. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker, Walt Disney Animations Studio, 2016
3. *Mulan*. Directed by Barry Cook and Tony Bancroft, Buena Vista Pictures, 1998
4. *Pocahontas*. Directed by Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg, Buena Vista Pictures, 1995
5. *The Princess and the Frog*. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker, Walt Disney Studios Motion Picture, 2009

## **Representation of Gender and Race in Disney's Non-White Princess Films**

### Summary

Disney's animated films have been popular among young viewers all over the world for almost a century and have had a great influence on popular culture. One of the most successful characters Disney has produced are their princesses. For several decades Disney has created only white princesses, however, in 1990s Disney began to portray women of color in their princess films. In my thesis I analyzed the way Disney represented gender and race in films with non-white Disney character. I also analyzed whether the representation changed over the years and compared the films based on how race and gender were represented in them.

Key words: Disney, women, Hall, representation, race, gender, non-white characters, stereotypes, Orientalism.

### **Prikaz roda i rase kod Disneyevih nebijelih princeza**

#### Sažetak

Disneyevi animirani filmovi popularnih su među djecom već gotovo stoljeće, a isto tako imaju i veliki utjecaj na popularnu kulturu. Jedni od napoznatijih likova koje je studio u Disney stvorio su princeze. Nekoliko desetljeća u Disneyu su stvarali samo bijele princeze, no u 1990tima počeli su s animiranim filmovima u kojima su glavne uloge imale žene drugih rasa. U svom radu sam analizirala način na koji je Disney prikazao rod i rasu u tim filmovima. Isto tako sam analizirala je li se prikaz mijenjao tokom godina i međusobno usporedila filmove na temelju njihovog prikaza roda i rase.

Ključne riječi: Disney, žene, Hall, prikaz, rasa, rod, nebijeli likovi, stereotipi, Orijentalizam