

## Challenging Gender Binaries in A 'Journey to Honor': A Feminist Critique of Performativity in *Mulan* (2020) Movie

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*"There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free,  
nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."  
- Galatians 3:28 NIV*

### ABSTRACT

This study examines the portrayal of gender roles of the characters and the social expectations in '*Mulan*,' (2020) the live-action movie, using the feminist theory of *gender performativity* by Butler, J. (1990). The research focuses on how *Mulan*'s character challenges traditional gender roles in Chinese society, the significance of "*chi*" as a metaphor for inner strength and its gendered portrayal, and the societal consequences of defying gender expectations. By applying a qualitative approach, the study explores key aspects such as female stereotypes, empowerment, and cultural symbols within the movie, while connecting them to feminist theory. The research reveals that **1)** *Mulan*'s character actively subverts the gender binary of masculinity versus femininity by assuming roles traditionally reserved for men, thereby challenging stereotypes about female weakness. **2)** The metaphor of "*chi*" is analyzed as a representation of inner strength, with *Mulan*'s mastery of it breaking gendered associations of power with masculinity. **3)** The movie highlights the societal risks women face when defying gender norms, as well as the rewards of embracing individuality and agency. The movie offers a nuanced depiction of gender roles, blending Confucian values with feminist ideals. *Mulan*'s journey not only represents female empowerment but also blurs the lines between traditional masculine and feminine traits, ultimately questioning the fixedness of gender identity. This study aims to contribute to feminist discussions in literary analysis through movies as media and offer insight into how globalized interpretations of cultural narratives can reflect evolving perspectives on gender equality.

**Keyword:** *Mulan, Feminism, Gender Performativity, Patriarchy, Gender Roles*

### INTRODUCTION

Literature is important for various reasons, including its exploration of different levels of human experience and societal structures. As Eagleton (2008) notes, "*Literature, in the sense of a body of written works, offers us a unique way of seeing the world.*" (p. 16) Through literature, knowledge about contrasting viewpoints, social issues, and experiences and beyond can be observed and learned. It provides readers with stories from different cultural perspectives, time periods, and life experiences, fostering empathy by broadening people's horizons. Literature reflects the values, beliefs, and social issues of any period, capturing the essence of the

human condition. Hence, literature "*puts life into words*" and can awaken deep-seated emotions which mirrors the real-life human condition, helping to form connections between the reader and the art form.

According to the World Economic Forum (2024), Global Gender Gap Index, *68.5% of the global gender gap has been narrowed*. However, this statistic highlights that women still encounter significant social inequalities and injustices. As noted by Butler (1990), "*Gender is not something one is, but something one does—an act,*" (p. 33) and the struggles of women to achieve equity reflect the broader societal dynamics at play. Although Mulan is a fictional narrative, its underlying message about gender roles resonates deeply with real-world social structures and should continue to be reflected in conversations about gender equality. These significant statistics show that society still marginalizes women, often overlooking their true capabilities: a theme central to the Mulan narrative.

The perception of gender roles in a society often constructed by the strong ideology of patriarchy that eventually creates structures of hierarchy. By reason of the disparity; Feminism, a movement which promotes equal rights for all genders, stresses the importance of viewing gender equality as a foundation for building a harmonious, resilient and integrated society. Yet, achieving this equality is not straightforward, as societal beliefs often uphold patriarchal values. As Woolf (1929) expressed, "*For most of history, Anonymous was a woman,*" (p. 43) emphasizing the historic marginalization of women's voices. These patriarchal beliefs result in issues related to active gender construction versus passive gender absorption, as well as conflicts between women and society.

Previous research by Tisnawijaya, C., & Tano, A. (2017), this study examined the societal roles attributed to males and females within Chinese culture, especially through the perspective of Confucian thought, and scrutinized the issue of gender disparity as represented in the animated film Mulan (1998). It revealed that society expects more traditional roles from females than from males. However, the current study shifts focus to the live-action movie Mulan (2020), examining feminist theory through the lens of Judith Butler's gender performativity. As Butler (1993) asserts, "*The body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated over time.*" (p. 59) The research explores how active gender construction and passive gender absorption are portrayed in the 2020 movie, released on September 4, 2020.

Produced by Walt Disney Pictures, the Mulan live-action movie blends action, adventure, and drama, suitable for viewers aged 10 and above. Directed by Niki Caro, screenplay by Rick Jaffa, Amanda Silver, Lauren Hynek, and Elizabeth Martin, the movie is based on the Chinese folktale, The Ballad of Mulan. Then, Disney's 1998 animated movie released as a prequel before this live-action movie, "*Mulan*" (2020). The cast includes Liu Yifei as Mulan, Gong Li as Xianniang, Jason Scott Lee as Bori Khan, Yoson An as Chen Honghui, Cheng Pei-Pei as The Matchmaker, Donnie Yen as Commander Tung, and Tzi Ma as Hua Zhou. The movie has received several awards and nominations such as, an Oscar costume design and visual effects, and a Critics' Choice Award. Liu Yifei, the main character '*Mulan,*' was also nominated for Best Actress, while Donnie Yen received a nomination for Best Supporting Actor, and Niki Caro for Best Director.

The movie's plot revolves around Hua Mulan, who fears her father's conscription into the Chinese military. Despite being ineligible as a girl in a patriarchal society, she takes his place, disguising herself as a man

named Hua Jun. Throughout her journey, she faces numerous challenges, but through honor, bravery, and authenticity, Mulan saves her family and country, gaining recognition from the emperor. The movie captivates audiences with its portrayal of a woman who defies societal constraints and displays persistent self-belief and courage. As Butler (2004) suggests, "*Gender fluidity allows individuals to transcend socially prescribed categories,*" (p. 43) and Mulan's character exemplifies this idea, particularly in its depiction of gender roles within a patriarchal society. The movie offers valuable insights into Chinese culture, despite being presented from a Western perspective.

This analysis highlights several key topics: Gender Roles and Expectations, Representation of Women's Voices, Feminist Symbols, and Female Cultural Aspects. The concept of "*feminine*" often describes not only gender but also personality and characteristics. Similarly, "*masculine*" extends beyond men to encompass behavior and styles. As Judith Butler emphasizes, "*The performativity of gender revolves around repetition*" (Butler, 1990, p. 191), asserting that both feminine and masculine traits are socially constructed and continually reinforced in patriarchal society, rejecting the idea that being masculine means literally men, and feminine means definitely women despite the reproduction.

Patriarchy, the philosophy asserting male superiority over female counterparts, delineates the societal roles of women according to the functional aspects of their reproductive organs pertaining to procreation (Irigaray, 2004). This ideology renders "*motherhood as a taken-for-granted identity for women*" (Woodward, 1999: 242). The feminine mystique, portraying the roles of wife and mother as the inevitable fate of every female, has confined women to the private sphere (Friedan, 1963). Hence, the gender roles assigned to women within society are predominantly restricted to procreation and child-rearing within domestic environments. Conversely, men are afforded greater liberties within the public domain. This ideology, therefore, presumes that being female equates to femininity, while maleness corresponds with masculinity.

The designations masculine and feminine represent stereotypes within the realm of "*sexual politics,*" which pertain to power dynamics wherein the former is regarded as superior to the latter (Millet, 2000: 23). Typical masculine traits include strength, activity, and rationality. In opposition, traits deemed feminine, such as frailty, compliance, and emotional depth, sharply contrast with masculine traits, thus legitimizing the control of women by men. In other words, men dictate the gender roles assigned to women.

Stereotypes, generalized ideas about specific groups, are ingrained in social psychology and are not always accurate. *Gender roles* define societal expectations that are oftentimes determined by the patriarchal system that puts men above women; though, these roles evolve over time. In terms of culture, Confucianism, a Chinese philosophical system dating back to 500 BCE, emphasizes social harmony and etiquette, aligning closely with patriarchal principles. "*Confucianism, a system of philosophical and ethical teachings founded by Confucius around 500 BCE, has deeply influenced Chinese culture and governance, emphasizing morality, social harmony, and proper conduct.*" (Yao, 2000, p. 45).

The opposition is framed around the belief that traits are inherently more capable of wielding power (*masculinity*) compared to (*femininity*), and the movie challenges this notion by showing Mulan defying these

gendered expectations. This study seeks to examine how society treats women differently from men and what drives the perception that females are inherently weaker. Furthermore, it aims to show how women can be powerful and strong, challenging negative stereotypes.

### Binary Opposition

MASCULINITY	FEMININITY
<p>In <i>Mulan</i>, masculinity symbolizes not just power and strength but societal dominance, where men are seen as the natural defenders of honor through physical combat. Judith Butler challenges this, asserting that “gender is not something one is, but something one does, an act” (Butler, 1990, p. 33). The movie questions the fixedness of masculinity by showing how it is performed, rather than inherently possessed.</p>	<p>Femininity in <i>Mulan</i> is framed as passive, where women are expected to achieve honor through subservience and obedience. Yet, Mulan disrupts this binary by stepping into a space traditionally reserved for men, defying the illusion that power belongs solely to masculinity. Butler argues that “the performativity of gender revolves around repetition... norms create the illusion of a stable gender identity” (Butler, 1990, p. 191). Mulan’s journey reveals the fluidity of gender, proving that resilience and strength are human qualities, not gendered ones.</p>

### METHOD

This analysis employs a qualitative approach to explore the critical issues presented in the *Mulan (2020)* live-action movie, using Judith Butler’s theory of *gender performativity* (1990). Butler argues that gender is not inherent but socially constructed through repeated actions and societal norms. The focus of this analysis is on how gender performativity is portrayed in *Mulan* through Active Gender Construction and Passive Gender Absorption, examining how characters either challenge or conform to societal expectations of gender. Key aspects of feminism explored in the movie include: Female Stereotypes: Addressing socially perpetuated stereotypes about women's perceived weaknesses, Female Solidarity and Empowerment: Highlighting the portrayal of women’s voices and actions as they strive to challenge negative gendered expectations, Female Cultural Aspects and Symbols: Analyzing how Confucian values of social harmony and etiquette interact with the movie's feminist themes.

The research specifically focuses on gender performativity by analyzing how characters either resist or adhere to traditional gender norms. *Mulan (2020)* was chosen for its portrayal of Mulan’s determination in overcoming societal limitations. Despite the limitations imposed by traditional gender roles, Mulan challenges societal expectations, disguises herself as a man, and successfully accomplishes her mission. This journey of self-belief and defiance provides a compelling basis for feminist analysis. Additionally, as a famous character in Chinese folklore, Mulan's story gives a great chance to look at how it has been retold for a worldwide audience, blending both Western and Chinese cultural elements.

This analysis collected data by examining key elements in the movie, such as cinematography, dialogue, visual imagery, and plot, focusing on how societal expectations for women are depicted. The study connects these aspects to feminist theory, especially Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity, which challenges the usual belief that gender is fixed and highlights how it is shaped by actions and behavior.

## DISCUSSION

### 1. Challenging Traditional Gender Roles through Mulan's Character

In *Mulan* (2020), traditional Chinese expectations about women's roles are portrayed through various scenes that reflect societal limitations. One such scene features Mulan failing to perform a task of serving tea, a skill historically associated with femininity in Chinese culture. This moment illustrates how women are expected to adhere to specific domestic roles, such as gracefully managing household duties. Mulan's failure to meet this expectation shows her rebellious nature, questioning the idea that a woman's value depends on following traditional roles. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity underscores this, as Butler (1990) explains, "*Gender is not something one is; it is something one does*" (p. 25). Mulan's behavior, defying her gender role, emphasizes the fluidity of gender identity, suggesting that identity is shaped by actions rather than inherent traits. Through the depiction of Mulan's rebellion, the movie critiques limiting gender conventions and demonstrates the potential for women to surpass societal anticipations, ultimately affirming that a woman's value is independent of conforming to designated social roles.

In *Mulan* (2020), the main character challenges traditional gender roles in Chinese society, which is a key focus of the movie and connects closely with Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity. Butler argues that gender is not an inherent or stable identity but rather a series of repeated acts that conform to societal expectations. Mulan's odyssey of liberating herself from the limitations imposed by traditional femininity to adopt characteristics typically associated with masculinity serves as a paradigm for the contestation and reconfiguration of gender roles. The film illustrates Mulan's subversion of these established gender conventions, interrogating the validity of rigidly defined gender roles and emphasizing the dynamic essence of identity. "*Could you tell her that only a son could wield chi? That a daughter would risk shame, dishonor, exile?*" (00:11:25) This quote occurs early in the movie when Mulan's father is speaking to her mother about the expectations of women in their society. The conversation highlights that, traditionally, only a son can wield *chi*, a powerful force representing inner strength and combat ability. Women, on the other hand, are not expected to possess *chi*, and attempting to wield it would bring shame, dishonor, or even exile to the family. This pivotal moment in the movie addresses the societal belief that only men can wield "*chi*," symbolizing strength, power, and bravery, while women are discouraged from displaying such qualities. The warning that a daughter who shows *chi* risks shame and exile underscores the rigid gender roles that dictate how women must behave. Butler (1990) asserts, "*Gender is performative, and it is through repeated acts that social norms, especially regarding gender, are reinforced and challenged*" (p. 33). Mulan's decision to step into a male role and defy these norms by disguising herself as a man disrupts this performative reinforcement. Her actions illustrate how gender roles are not innate but constructed through societal repetition, and by stepping outside of these expectations, she challenges the binary distinctions of strength assigned to men and weakness assigned to women.

In this scene from *Mulan* (2020), the cinematography emphasizes the traditional values of traditional society, as well as the disappointment directed toward Mulan for failing to meet those expectations. The dim,

warm lighting creates an intimate, judgmental atmosphere, while the rich color palette of purples, reds, and golds symbolizes the elegance and rigid societal standards these women uphold. The framing positions the matchmaker at the center of the group, reinforcing her authority and the collective scrutiny Mulan faces. The tight composition around the tea ceremony, a symbol of grace and femininity; it contrasts with Mulan's perceived failure. The women's



body language, particularly their stiff posture and disapproving expressions, further conveys their dissatisfaction. This visual tension is complemented by the spoken line, *"We see in a good wife,"* (00:19:35) *"They have failed to raise a good daughter"* (00:19:50), which stresses on the societal pressure on Mulan to conform to traditional gender roles signify the societal expectations placed on women, particularly within the context of traditional values. In this scene, the matchmaker and the women surrounding her are evaluating Mulan's behavior, implicitly comparing her to the ideal qualities expected of a wife: grace, obedience, and modesty. The phrase reflects the deeply ingrained gender roles in traditional Chinese culture, where a woman's worth is often tied to her ability to fulfill domestic duties and embody the characteristics of a *"good wife."* It reinforces the rigid social framework that Mulan is expected to fit into, and it serves as a direct contrast to Mulan's own desires and abilities, which do not align with these restrictive ideals. The line sets the stage for the disappointment that follows when Mulan fails to meet these standards, further emphasizing the tension between individual identity and societal expectations in the movie.

By the order of the emperor, Mulan's father must accept it to join the army, Mulan steps in and tries to stop him from going to war. Her father insists that she must accept her role as a daughter and woman, staying behind to care for the household. He believes her place is not on the battlefield, but in the home, where societal norms dictate women should remain. *"I know my place. It is time you learned yours."* (00:27:10) This statement reflects the deeply ingrained hierarchy of gender roles in traditional society, where women are expected to "know their place" as subservient and obedient, particularly within the domestic sphere. Mulan, however, defies these limitations, stepping into a role of leadership and strength, one that society has traditionally reserved for men. Butler's (1990) asserted that *"gender is not a stable identity but a fluid expression"* (p. 15) is exemplified in Mulan's defiance of the *"place"* society has assigned her. Rather than conforming to prescribed gender norms, Mulan chooses a path defined by her own abilities and aspirations, challenging the static nature of femininity. Her actions demonstrate that identity is not fixed or determined by gender but is instead shaped by personal agency and choice, illustrating Butler's assertion that gender is fluid and constructed through action.

In the quiet moments after her father's conscription, Mulan is conflicted about her place in society. She feels torn between honoring her family by adhering to societal norms and her desire to protect her father by taking his place in the army. Staring into her reflection, she questions whether the role she is expected to play reflects her true identity. *"When will my reflection show who I am inside?"* (00:36:15) Mulan's internal struggle is captured in this reflective moment, where she questions the role she is expected to perform as a woman and

whether it aligns with her true self. This line highlights the tension between Mulan's personal identity and the societal expectations imposed on her based on her gender. Butler's (1993) argued that *"the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time"* (p. 59) is relevant here. Mulan's ongoing attempts to fit into society's expectations, like trying to fulfill her family's wishes, clash with her personal longing for freedom and self-expression. As she looks at her reflection, it reveals her struggle between the social expectation being a woman and her true self. This shows the tension that happens when someone is forced to follow a gender role that doesn't match who they really are.

Following her reflective moment, Mulan continues to wrestle with her role in society. Looking into her reflection, she wonders whether the person she is on the outside matches her true self on the inside. This marks the beginning of her realization that she can no longer conform to societal expectations if they conflict with her inner identity. *"Who is that girl I see, staring straight back at me?"* (00:36:35) This quote reflects Mulan's journey of self-discovery and identity. She questions both her role in society and how she shows herself to others. Judith Butler's (1993) assertion that *"identity is a process of becoming, not a fixed state of being"* (p. 55) perfectly encapsulates this stage of Mulan's journey. As Mulan questions the identity she presents to the world, she also begins to challenge the expectations that society has placed upon her. This marks a pivotal moment in her character arc, where her internal conflict shifts toward action—an action that will redefine her role in society. This transition from questioning to actively challenging societal norms reflects the evolving complexity of Mulan's character.

After revealing herself as a woman, Mulan faces the consequences of her deception. A character warns her that continuing to live as someone she is not will only lead to disaster. This statement encapsulates the danger Mulan faces in a society that punishes those who defy gender norms. *"You will die pretending to be something you are not."* (01:24:20) This line highlights the dangers Mulan faces for defying societal expectations and breaking gender norms. By pretending to be a man and taking her father's spot in the army, Mulan faces serious risks like being exiled, losing her honor, or even being killed. Judith Butler (1993) explains that *"transgression of gender norms invites punitive responses, as it threatens the stability of the social order"* (p. 72). Mulan's actions have deeply threatened the rigid social structure that upholds male dominance, and this scene illustrates the risk she faces by pretending to be something she is not. Yet, despite these risks, Mulan's courage to continue disguising herself and pushing forward illustrates the potential for breaking these norms. Her success in the end underscores the movie's message that transgressing gender expectations, although dangerous, can ultimately lead to empowerment and change. This moment serves as the culmination of Mulan's journey, reinforcing the movie's critique of rigid gender binaries and societal expectations.

Mulan (2020) offers a significant examination of conventional gender roles and societal expectations. Through her deeds, Mulan contests the stringent dichotomy between masculinity and femininity, exemplifying Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. The movie illustrates that gender identity is not static but rather fluid and shaped by societal norms; however, individuals, such as Mulan, possess the autonomy to challenge and redefine these established conventions. Each act of resistance accumulates, constructing a unified narrative that

interrogates and reinterprets gender roles, while simultaneously empowering individuals to liberate themselves from societal limitations.

## 2. The Symbolism of "Chi" as Gendered Power

Mulan's journey depicts a compelling illustration of women's narratives contesting societal gender norms. A notable scene in which Mulan persuades her fellow warriors to fight for their dynasty, despite previously disguising herself as a man, highlights the transformation of societal views on female strength. Initially, Li Shang dismisses her leadership after discovering her true gender, yet, another warrior, Ling, speaks up in her defense, saying, "*She is braver than any man here*" (01:26:10). This demonstrates the shift in societal perception when confronted with undeniable evidence of female capability. Butler (1990) argues that "*identity is not reflected by gender but by actions*" (p. 10). Mulan's courage and leadership break the binary framework of masculinity and femininity, showing that leadership and bravery are not exclusive to men. Her actions become symbolic of female empowerment, embodying the courage to challenge and redefine societal expectations of gender.

In this scene the cinematography emphasizes Mulan's inner resolve and the significant turning point in her journey. The dim lighting, illuminated by soft, warm torchlight, highlights Mulan's face, drawing attention to her determination. Dressed in a red robe, symbolizing strength and courage, Mulan stands out against the muted background. The close-up framing of her face isolates her from the surroundings, underscoring her individuality and the personal nature of her journey. The shallow depth of field blurs the background, keeping focus on Mulan, while the minimalistic setting and stoic facial expression convey the gravity of the moment as her comrades accept her as Hua Mulan. This combination of elements reinforces the solemnity of the scene and Mulan's transformation into a trusted warrior.



In *Mulan* (2020), 'chi' serves as a metaphor for inner strength, traditionally reserved for men in Chinese culture. The narrative establishes 'chi' as a power tied to masculine roles, but Mulan's ability to wield it challenges the rigid gender boundaries around strength and capability. Judith Butler's theories on gender fluidity and performativity offer a framework for understanding how the movie uses 'chi' to deconstruct the binary associations of gender and power. "*Her chi, the boundless energy of life itself... speaking through her every motion.*" (00:10:30) This line is spoken by the narrator as Mulan's incredible abilities are showcased in various scenes. Her natural agility, quick thinking, and physical prowess are highlighted as expressions of chi, a force that gives life and power to every action. This line acknowledges that 'chi,' traditionally seen as a masculine force, flows through Mulan, suggesting that strength and power are not limited to men. Butler (2004) asserts that "*the fluidity of gender means it can transcend its binary framework, with individuals embodying traits beyond socially prescribed categories*" (p. 43). In the context of *Mulan*, the concept of 'chi' is beyond the gender binary, with Mulan embodying traditionally masculine traits of strength and combat ability. By doing so, she disrupts the



societal notion that *'chi'* and power are exclusively male attributes, demonstrating that gender is not a fixed boundary but a fluid expression of human potential.

The part when Mulan's father says, *"A warrior's chi is powerful, but only a son can wield it."* (00:13:45) who reiterates the cultural belief that only men, particularly sons, are fit to control and utilize *'chi.'* This line sets the stage for the gendered expectations of who can wield power in society. The gendered restriction of *'chi'* serves as a societal norm that Mulan challenges through her actions. Her father's belief that only men can wield *'chi'* reflects the rigid cultural norms that confine women to passive roles. Judith Butler (1990) explains that *"cultural norms construct gendered attributes, but those norms can be resisted through subversive acts"* (p. 45). Mulan's decision to harness her *'chi'* and disguise herself as a man to fight in her father's place represents a subversive act that directly challenges the gendered limitations placed on power and strength. In proving herself capable of wielding *'chi,'* Mulan resists and transcends the cultural expectations that confine women, embodying Butler's concept of resisting societal norms through defiance. *"Confucianism reinforces a patriarchal order in which men are seen as the natural leaders, while women are relegated to domestic roles."* (Rosenlee, L. H. L., 2006, p. 17) It aligns with Confucianism's patriarchal view that men, specifically sons, hold leadership roles and the capacity for strength. Mulan defies this by demonstrating that she can wield chi, thus rejecting the notion that power is an inherently male trait.

In the scene when Mulan's father tells her about the phoenix, it is a powerful, yet elegant symbol in Chinese mythology. The phoenix is described as both beautiful and strong, blending traditionally feminine and masculine qualities, and is considered a guardian figure. *"Do you know why the phoenix sits on the emperor's right hand? She is his guardian, his protector. She's both beautiful and strong."* (01:15:30) The phoenix in this scene serves as a symbol of the balance between strength and beauty, qualities that are often gendered as masculine and feminine, respectively. Judith Butler (1993) asserted that *"symbols in narratives often serve to both reflect and challenge gender norms"* (p. 62). The phoenix embodies both masculine and feminine traits, representing a rejection of binary gender categorizations. Similarly, Mulan, like the phoenix, blends these qualities, showing that beauty and strength are not mutually exclusive. Through the phoenix, the movie challenges the societal norms that strictly associate strength with men and beauty with women, suggesting that these attributes can coexist in a single individual, regardless of gender. Mulan's character mirrors this blend, further defying the binary framework of gender.

The movie uses *'chi'* as a metaphor for inner strength and power while challenging its traditional association with masculinity. Through her defiance of gender norms, Mulan proves that *'chi'* and strength are not limited by gender. Judith Butler's theories on gender fluidity and the subversion of norms provide a lens through which we can understand how Mulan's journey deconstructs the gendered expectations surrounding power, showing that strength transcends societal boundaries and can be embodied by anyone, regardless of gender.

### 3. Defying Gender Expectations in Patriarchal Societies

The presentation of feminist symbols is highlighted; while traditionally, women in patriarchal societies were confined to roles within the home, Mulan breaks away from this limitation by taking on the responsibilities of a warrior. This subversion of expected roles aligns with Butler's (1990) assertion that *"the category 'woman' is constructed and performed in various ways"* (p. 10), indicating that Mulan's identity and strength go beyond societal norms and cultural expectations. The movie shows that gender is not rigid and that women can take on roles usually meant for men, providing a strong message about women's ability to challenge gender restrictions.

In *Mulan* (2020), the movie vividly portrays the consequences that Mulan faces for defying traditional societal expectations about gender roles. Her journey is full of dangers, both socially and physically, as she steps away from the traditional role expected of women in her culture. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and its consequences is essential to understanding how Mulan showcases the dangers and rewards of challenging gender norms. *"A daughter would risk shame, dishonor, exile."* (00:11:25) This quote is delivered during a conversation where Mulan's father explains the consequences Mulan could face for stepping out of her traditional gender role. It highlights the heavy social penalties that await women who do not conform to societal norms. Mulan risks exile and dishonor for stepping outside of her gender role, illustrating the severe consequences of defying societal expectations. *"transgressing the boundaries of gender roles threatens the very structure of society, often resulting in exclusion or punishment"* (Butler, 1993, p. 45) is reflected here. The strict separation of male and female roles is important for keeping society stable, and those who push against these limits, like Mulan, risk being punished. Mulan's actions reveal the rigidity of these norms and the costs associated with defying them. *"Filial piety, the central virtue in Confucianism, places an obligation on children, especially sons, to care for their parents and maintain family honor."* (Eno, R., 2015, p. 92) In Confucianism, it is typically the son's role to protect and serve the family. Mulan's act of taking her father's place in the army shows her adherence to filial piety, but it challenges the gender expectations in Confucianism that usually prevent daughters from fulfilling such duties. Her act of service breaks the gendered limitations placed on filial duty.

When Mulan's identity as a woman is revealed. She risks harsh punishment for pretending to be a man, and the character who says this warns her about the consequences of continuing to hide her true identity. *"You will die pretending to be something you are not."* (01:24:20) This quote highlights the physical and social dangers Mulan faces by disguising herself as a man. *"The risks involved in gender nonconformity are both social and physical, as individuals face dangers for defying the roles imposed on them"* (Butler, 2004, p. 58) fits perfectly with Mulan's situation. Her life is in danger because she chooses to go beyond the traditional roles expected of her gender. This illustrates the extreme measures society takes to maintain these rigid roles, and how those who cross these lines, like Mulan, must confront not only social exclusion but also potential harm.

Upon preparation for Mulan's meeting with the matchmaker, her family hopes that her adherence to traditional roles will bring honor to the family. It represents the pressure placed on women to conform to societal expectations to uphold family honor. *"Bring honor to us all."* (00:08:50) This statement reflects the pressure

Mulan faces to adhere to traditional gender roles in order to bring honor to her family. *"Honor and social status are tied to the successful performance of gendered roles"* (Butler, 2004, p. 67) is relevant here. Mulan is expected to fulfill her role as a woman through marriage and domestic duties, as society equates such roles with family honor. However, Mulan's desire to bring honor through her own path as a warrior challenges this association, showing that gendered expectations of honor can be redefined. In the framework of Confucian philosophy, the family unit is regarded as the fundamental component of society, and the responsibilities of women are intricately linked to the preservation of familial harmony and the execution of their prescribed obligations. (Berling, J. A., 2000, p. 45) It reflects the Confucian expectation that women bring honor to the family through domestic roles and traditional gender behavior. Mulan's journey challenges these norms, as she chooses to bring honor by protecting her family in a non-traditional way, rather than through marriage or household duties.

During a scene where Mulan is preparing for the matchmaker's evaluation, the women comment on her appearance. Makeup is used to represent femininity and following traditional gender expectations. *"The fiercest winter storm could not destroy this makeup."* (00:19:10) Mulan uses makeup to disguise herself, showing how superficial aspects of femininity are employed to enforce gender expectations. *"Appearance and behavior are regulated according to gender norms"* (Butler, 1990, p. 25) applies here, as the makeup represents how society regulates women's behavior and appearance to fit traditional standards. However, as Mulan later breaks away from this superficial presentation, it demonstrates her rejection of these externally imposed norms and the limits of outward conformity.

*"There have been many tales of the great warrior, Mulan... But, ancestors, this one is mine."* (01:42:00) is spoken toward the end of the movie, as Mulan's legend as a warrior is told. The narrator reflects on how Mulan's story, although widely known, carries personal significance to the speaker. Mulan's depiction as a legendary warrior challenges the usual idea of heroism, where men are often viewed as the main heroes. Judith Butler (1990) stated that *"the category of 'woman' is not a fixed identity but one that is contingent upon historical and social context"* (p. 10). Mulan's heroism redefines the notion of a warrior, traditionally a male role, and expands it to include female strength. By doing so, the movie suggests that heroism is not a trait limited to one gender, challenging the historical context that often excludes women from such roles.

In this scene, the close-up shot of Mulan's sword, engraved with the words *"Loyal, Brave, True"*, emphasizes the core values that define her character and journey. The focus on the sword, with its intricate design and sharp details, symbolizes Mulan's strength and honor as a warrior. The use of shallow depth of field keeps the background blurred, ensuring that all attention is drawn to the engraved words, which are central to both her identity and the message of the film. The gold detailing on the sword contrasts with the darker background, further highlighting its significance as a symbol of her courage and unwavering commitment to these values. This moment visually reinforces the qualities that Mulan embodies, aligning her personal traits with the values traditionally associated with heroism and honor in Chinese culture.



As Mulan is recognized for her bravery and loyalty at the end of the movie, Mulan is given a sword inscribed with the words *"Loyal, Brave, True, and Devotion to Family"* (01:40:15). These values encompass Mulan's character and journey, demonstrating that her actions transcend gender roles. The importance of family loyalty strongly influences Mulan's choice to take her father's place in battle. These traits, which are traditionally associated with male warriors, are attributed to Mulan as a female warrior. Mulan embodies traits such as loyalty, bravery, and truth, which are traditionally associated with male warriors. *"Cultural norms assign traits such as bravery and loyalty as masculine qualities, but they can be equally embodied by women"* (Butler, 1990, p. 19) applies here. Mulan's character challenges the gendering of these traits, demonstrating that bravery and loyalty are not inherently masculine qualities but can be embraced by anyone, regardless of gender. This reconfiguration of gendered traits reflects a broader shift in the movie's portrayal of heroism, as it opens up these qualities to both men and women.

Mulan (2020) vividly portrays the consequences of defying societal expectations based on gender. Through her journey, Mulan faces social and physical risks for breaking gender norms, yet her ultimate success challenges these rigid roles. Judith Butler's ideas about how gender is performed and how societal rules can be challenged help explain how Mulan's actions not only go against what society expects, but also change the way we see the roles women can have in both society and history.

## **CONCLUSION**

Mulan (2020) movie challenges traditional ideas about gender roles and what society expects, providing a deep look at gender identity using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Throughout the movie, Mulan breaks away from strict gender norms, whether by using 'chi,' which is usually seen as a male power, or by refusing to follow the passive role that women are typically expected to play. Butler's theories help us understand how Mulan's actions subvert these norms, pushing beyond the limits imposed on her by society.

The first aspect, focusing on Mulan's defiance of gender roles, highlights how her journey challenges the binary view of gender, showing that traits like strength and leadership are not inherently masculine. In doing so, Mulan reveals the fluidity of gender, as Butler describes, and proves that identity is shaped by action rather than the fixed roles assigned by society. The second aspect, addressing chi as a metaphor for inner strength, further illustrates how power transcends gendered boundaries. Mulan's mastery of chi, a force believed to be the domain of men, demonstrates that strength and capability are not restricted by gender. Butler's concept of resisting societal norms is mirrored in Mulan's actions, as she proves that gender is not a limitation on power or success. The third aspect, focusing on the consequences of defying societal expectations, shows how Mulan faces both social and physical dangers for challenging gender norms. Yet, her ultimate success redefines heroism and honor, traditionally viewed through a masculine lens, by attributing these qualities to a female warrior. Mulan's actions show that women can have various roles in society and history, supporting Butler's idea that gender is flexible and changes with different social and historical circumstances.

Mulan (2020) redefines the boundaries of gender roles, emphasizing that *identity, strength, and heroism* are not tied to societal expectations of gender. The movie aligns with Judith Butler's theories, illustrating how individuals can resist and transcend restrictive norms, offering a new narrative of what it means to be a woman in both society and history. Revealing the challenges of the traditional gender roles using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the study explores how the movie redefines concepts like *strength* and *heroism* for female characters, expanding the roles women can play in society and history. The research is expected to add to broader discussion about gender identity and how literature media helps to promote a more open and adaptable understanding of gender roles. The research also highlights the power of movies in challenging societal norms and promoting progressive cultural narratives.

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