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Embracing Diversity: An Analysis of Multiculturalism and Gender
Roles in *Raya and the Last Dragon*

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1. Introduction

Walt Disney Studios is one of the biggest entertainment industries at the moment, delivering a wide variety of fantasy worlds and beloved characters. Disney plays a crucial cultural role, especially seen in the impact of its princesses on society throughout the decades. This has provoked a debate on their use of gender stereotypes. While Disney princesses may be defined as iconic female characters, they have been criticized for reinforcing traditional gender roles, especially in the case of classic princesses, who were usually presented as helpless passive characters with unrealistic beauty standards who need the presence of a male figure to save them and feel accomplished.

Nowadays, Disney has made an effort to create a more diverse range of female heroines with releases such as *Frozen* (Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, 2013) and *Brave* (Mark Andrews and Brenda Chapman, 2012) and especially with its most recent release *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021). *Raya and the Last Dragon* is an animated film from Walt Disney Studios directed by Don Hall and Carlos López Estrada and produced by Osnat Shurer and Peter Del Vecho. The movie takes place in the fantasy world of Kumandra, which is inspired and created by the influence of Southeast Asian cultures. The story follows Raya, a young warrior who starts a journey to find the last dragon and restore her homeland. During her quest, she encounters numerous difficulties that teach her the importance of trust and unity. In the world of Kumandra, dragons and humans coexisted harmoniously until the ancient evil known as the Druun threatened the dragons' existence. The land became fragmented into different regions, and the tribes showed rivalry towards each other.

The film is notable for including Southeast Asian (SEA) communities and their traditions. This was considered a milestone, as it was the first time a Southeast Asian princess was ever created. This was something new since Disney rarely chooses a non-white character as its main protagonist. Additionally, non-white characters in Disney's early productions were identified as savages or evil with secondary roles, often classified as the other (Akita and Kenney, 2013). *Raya and the Last Dragon* not only portrays a diverse new heroine, but it offers a stunning and culturally diverse world full of allusions to different countries in SEA. Moreover, Raya breaks with the traditional Disney princess narrative, as she is portrayed as a skilful and independent warrior that shows no sign of love interest, something that challenges the traditional fairy tale stereotype. This also may be influential for the younger generations, as they tend to encounter the opposite stereotypes of female heroines. Women in these films are frequently represented as being vulnerable and dependent on men in patriarchal societies. Raya defies this belief by gathering her strength and relying on values such as unity and multicultural cooperation. In addition, Raya is not the only empowered female character we encounter throughout the film, as there is a predominance of female leaders over male characters, emphasizing this sense of female empowerment.

In this dissertation, I am going to explore the representation of multiculturalism and traditional gender roles presented in past Disney productions to support the analysis of the film *Raya and the Last Dragon* as a modern multicultural and feminist text. To achieve this, I will be using different Disney films to exemplify how Raya breaks with Disney standards. I also aim to take a closer look at the world of Kumandra and its distinctive regions and how their relationship shapes their characters, as Raya and her

allies will join forces despite their differences, offering a deeper understanding of community values and women's relations.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Racial Representation and Multiculturalism in Disney Films

In the early Disney animated films, the representation of non-white characters was narrowed to a few racially stereotyped characters. Before the 1990s, as Akita and Kenney discuss (2013), in Disney's animated shorts, those characters were perceived as dangerous, comic, ridiculous, inferior and always classified as "the other". There are numerous examples of stereotyped characters throughout Disney's cinematic path, such as the wicked stepmother in *Cinderella* (Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson y Hamilton Luske, 1950). Nonetheless, several distinctive features included exaggerated physical attributes which reinforced buffoonery and actions that made them seem ridiculous or threatening to the Western order (Akita and Kenney 2013: 62).

During Walt Disney's Golden Age (1937-1942), which included films such as *Pinocchio* (Robert Zemeckis, 1940), *Dumbo* (Ben Sharpsteen and Wilfred Jackson, 1985) and *Bambi* (Clyde Geronimi, 1942), there was another production that was greatly criticised for its racist content, the well-known *Fantasia* (James Algar, Samuel Armstrong, 1940). The controversy was about a character named Sunflower, a centaur with the torso of a black girl and the lower body of a donkey, who was highly criticised for its caricatured and animalistic features (Byrne & McQuillan, 1999)

According to Eve Benhamou (2014) in her study of the representation of race relations in Disney Animated Features, the film *Aladdin* (John Musker, 1992) was a milestone. For the very first time, ethnic characters other than white people were presented as the main protagonists. Nevertheless, the Arab leads (Aladdin and Jasmine) were strongly

Anglicised if we compare them with the villain Jafar, who was portrayed in a markedly stereotypical way, with strong physical features such as the caricatured hooked nose, darker skin and almond-shaped eyes. Since the beginning of Disney, those characters who tend to represent other ethnicities often play the role of villains or evil characters, as is the case of Jafar. Edward Said (1978) wrote about this tactic of how American Media racializes villains in his book *Orientalism*. Said explains that Orientalism is a patterned way to represent Arabs and Muslims as a unified group and less civilised than Europeans and Americans, often presented as violent, terrorists and a danger to society.

The same occurs with the representation of Asians, for instance with the Siamese cats in *Lady and the Tramp* (Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, and Hamilton Luske 1955), which are associated with racist stereotypes of East-Asian people such as split eyes and yellow-tinted skin. Asian people were often represented in these films as “inscrutable”, villainous and threatening to Westerners (Lindgren, 2020).

Despite the negative connotations ascribed to non-white ethnic groups within Disney’s animation, there was an advent of multiculturalism in the 1990s, and diversity started to be celebrated instead of denigrated or ridiculed. The term “multiculturalism”, coined by the sociologist Stuart Hall who is considered the “Godfather of Multiculturalism” (Butler, 2014), refers to the view that cultures, races and ethnicities, particularly the ones from minority groups, deserve special acknowledgement and equal treatment. Moreover, this general increase in the awareness of ethnic diversity accelerated the emergence of new animated films that dealt with the theme of multiculturalism. The first animated movie which deals with this topic openly is *Pocahontas* (Eric Goldberg and Mike Gabriel, 1995), one of the most successful Disney productions. Leigh H. Edwards's article “The United Colors of Pocahontas” (1999: 148) mentions how the

animated film did not focus on the original narrative behind the story (English colonisation) but rather on multiculturalism and the convergence between race and culture.

Moreover, due to the increasing awareness of multiculturalism and racial diversity, the Disney industry started to include different ethnic identities as protagonists in their films, and this is seen in productions such as the successful *Mulan* (Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook 1998), *The Princess and the Frog* (John Musker and Ron Clements, 2009) and *Moana* (John Musker and Ron Clements, 2016), both directed by John Musker and Ron Clements. Disney has attempted to widen its reach by including non-white characters, and especially non-white Disney princesses: an Asian female heroine, an African American and a Polynesian princess, respectively. Nevertheless, a study revealed that these non-white protagonists did not reach the popularity of other princesses. In their article “Reel Royal Diversity? The Glass Ceiling in Disney’s *Mulan* and *Princess and the Frog*” (2016), Lauren Dundes and Madeline Streiff discuss how Amazon’s sales showed a preference for white princesses and as a result, *Mulan* and *Tiana* were excluded from several merchandise products. Although these new princesses may stand as strong role models for those girls belonging to minority groups, white female protagonists are still the most popular among the younger girls according to a search of “Disney princesses” products on Amazon.com, with the Disney Princess’s best seller clothing on Amazon being a three-pack tee-shirt consisting of Ariel, Belle and Rapunzel. In addition, princesses of colour were placed at the bottom of a list of princesses on eBay (2013-2014)—Jasmine and *Tiana* were at the bottom while *Mulan* and *Pocahontas* did not even appear.

Since the release of *The Princess and the Frog*, the character of the white princess has regained popularity. This popularity is exemplified by hits such as *Tangled* (Nathan Greno and Byron Howard, 2010), *Brave* and the well-known *Frozen*. These recent films have returned to whiteness as the fairy tale norm. However, at the same time, Disney has continued to represent multiculturalism, as they developed new diverse and multicultural productions such as *Big Hero 6* (Chris Williams and Don Hall, 2014), the Polynesian princess Moana, the Colombian female protagonist of *Encanto* (Jared Bush, Byron Howard, Charise Castro Smith, 2021) and the most recent and first Southeast Asian princess, Raya. Nonetheless, Alexander Lindgren (2020) concludes in his study on animated stereotypes that it remains unclear whether these new culturally sensitive measures taken by Disney are an attempt to become more diverse in their productions or just a way to avoid being criticised and accused of stereotyping.

2.2 Gender Roles of Female Characters within the Disney Industry

According to Henke, Umble and Smith (1996), Disney princesses are the clear exemplification of the “perfect girl” stereotype. Wood (1992) argues that women have been and still are treated as “the other” and “outsiders” in patriarchal societies. Girls are forced to pay attention to their “looks” and the gaze of others, becoming an object of beauty. Moreover, speaking up can be disruptive and dangerous for women, as they have traditionally been taught to remain silent and obedient. Wood identifies the different ways women’s voices are muted and how women can rise their voices to become empowered, as there is a need for a reinvention of the female self. This imposed gender stereotype is also featured within the film industry, and it is especially reflected in Disney.

Some of these Disney princesses are always represented as helpless and dependent on a male figure who will save them from disgrace. Classical princesses such as Aurora and Cinderella repeat the same pattern—a weak woman in need of protection struggles with an evil villain, typically another woman (Maleficent, among others). These white princesses were portrayed as young, blonde, blue-eyed virgins but later productions, from the 1990s onwards, shifted from this traditional portrayal to more rebellious and mature women. Pocahontas, Ariel and Belle from *The Beauty and the Beast* (Bill Condon, 1991) are characters with more freedom, a sense of self, independence and a voice, partially opposed to the image of the “perfect girl” of other Disney heroines such as Aurora. Even these 1990s Disney films provide ambiguous postfeminist messages for the youngest viewers, as some of the princesses wait for the “happily ever after” with their protective white princes. Nevertheless, the portrayal of female heroines has changed with time, and the most recent ones pursue their dreams, which do not include a male figure and a castle. The new heroines of Disney, heroines such as Elsa in *Frozen*, Merida in *Brave*, Moana and Raya show a sense of selfhood and strength that may serve as models to future generations.

Moreover, *Frozen* embodies this redefinition of gender stereotypes, as the protagonists of the film are two women and in this case sisters, Elsa and Anna. This is also quite challenging for the Disney animation industry since they emphasised the character of Elsa as having a strong personality and sense of independence, which often carries negative connotations for women. She is a princess with magical powers who cannot control her powers and may harm others. She is portrayed as an outsider and the focus changes to her sister Anna, who presents a brighter personality. We are warned that a woman with power can be dangerous. Elsa is somehow characterised as rare, an

outsider and a threat—she needs to isolate herself to protect others from her magical force. Luttrell mentions that “it is not until her power is exposed and she runs away that she finds beauty in herself and her power” (2014). In the film, female power is emphasised as a substitute for romance. Whereas Anna is still the embodiment of the traditional lady in distress, Elsa is a clear depiction of self-discovery and self-acceptance, which can provide a large impact on younger viewers. From this point onwards, the animation industry started to reshape its conception of female protagonists exemplified by other characters such as Merida, Moana and Raya.

According to Wood (1992), the patriarchal system controls the construction of the female self of these Disney princesses. Only in *Pocahontas* does the female heroine maintain her sense of selfhood throughout the film. She does not exemplify the image of the “perfect girl”, as she behaves and acts independently, her sense of power coming from within. This was an oddity and an exception from the other female heroines at the time and in a world where women still struggle to be heard. In conclusion, the overall image of Disney heroines is problematic due to the dichotomy between early princesses and the more recent independent female heroines starting from *Pocahontas* and *Mulan* to the newest Disney productions where female leads are no longer waiting for their prince and their castle. The following section is devoted to the close analysis of *Raya and the Last Dragon* both from a multicultural and feminist perspective.

3. RAYA AND THE LAST DRAGON

3.1 The World of Kumandra and Multiculturalism

As Kat Moon states, the film itself is a landmark moment for Southeast Asian representation in Hollywood. Raya is Disney's first Southeast Asian princess and is voiced by Kelly Marie Tran, the first Southeast Asian actor to lead an animated feature from the studio. The film is set in the fantasy world of Kumandra, which Disney has said is inspired by the cultures of Southeast Asian countries, as the production team members travelled to Laos, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia and Singapore to learn about their cultures for the film's research (Moon, 2021). The plot follows our heroine Raya as she searches for the fabled dragon Sisu in order to restore the broken land of Kumandra. Qui Nguyen, American playwright, screenwriter, director and co-writer of *Raya and the Last Dragon*, says "It was a great opportunity to create a fascinating fantasy world that kids would love to engross themselves in". The land of this fantasy world consists of five distinctive regions: Heart, Tail, Talon, Spine and Fang, all connected by the vital Dragon River. In each of these lands, the filmmakers incorporated elements from different areas across Southeast Asia. They mentioned that each region is inspired by a country in Southeast Asia.

The Land of Heart, which is the main region, as it is the land of our eponymous heroine and home of the magical Dragon Gem, is characterized by its distinctive round rock formation and is inspired by the iconic limestone rocks found in Vietnam's Ha Long Bay and along the Mekong River, the longest river in Southeast Asia (see Figures 1 and 2). The art of Ryan Lang, a visual development artist at Walt Disney Feature Animation Studios, captured the film's striking visual potential early in the production.

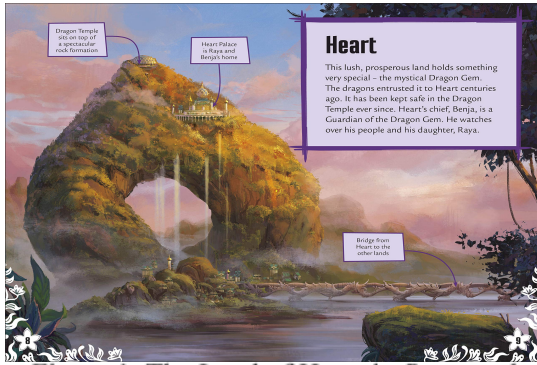


Figure 1. The Land of Heart in *Raya and the Last Dragon* (The art of Ryan Lang)



Figure 2. Ha Long Bay in Vietnam

Another big influence in the creation of the lands in Kumandra was the floating markets in Thailand. The Talon region represents the tradition of trading markets from Thailand (see Figure 3). Sarwindah and Sihombing (2022) mention how those floating markets in Talon were inspired by two of the most famous trading marketplaces in Thailand, both of which are located on riverbank towns in the country's central area. In terms of cultural representation, the appearance of these floating markets in the scene can be interpreted as representing the whole Thai community. Culture is shaped by various factors, not only your geographical surroundings. Identity, values, traditions, people, clothing, food and language are some of the elements that complement the culture of a place. Co-writers Adele Lim and Qui Nguyen stated that they wanted to portray the essence of Southeast Asia, as the production team strived to make the film's details more authentic to South Asia, not only including locations but also traditional clothing and cuisine. Moreover, Rudy, R., Simanjuntak, F. I., & Simanjuntak, Z. P. (2022) commented on the inclusion of traditional dishes in different scenes of the film. The film pictures several Southeast Asian special food such as a Thai spicy soup named Tom Yum (see Figure 4), shrimp congee, and satay as well as other tropical fruits such as

jackfruit, and mango, which is originally from Bangladesh and Myanmar, mangosteen, dragonfruit and durian, among others.



Figure 3. Floating markets scene



Figure 4. Chief Benja cooking Thai soup

Furthermore, the depiction of Southeast Asia can be found in every detail throughout the production, especially in Raya herself, the main female protagonist in the film. As Shienny Megawati Sutanto (2022) explains, the name Raya itself originates from Indonesian and Malay, which means “celebrating” or “great”. Raya is presented as Benja's daughter, one of the five tribal chiefs in Kumandra. Within the history of Disney productions and the advent of multiculturalism, racial diversity started to be included and Raya has established a turning point as the studio’s first Southeast Asian princess. As seen above, the film provides a large list of visual elements that represent different cultures and communities across Southeast Asia. Another reference in that sense is the use of martial arts. At the beginning of the film, Raya uses a weapon which is the signature weapon of the Philippines’ national martial arts named Arnis. According to Qui Nguyen, the scriptwriter of the film, they decided to include two distinct types of martial arts (Arnis, from the Philippines, and Pencak Silat, from Indonesia) in order to give Raya’s character a unique fighting style. Additionally, what clearly demonstrates the culture of a community is their clothing and, in this case, this is exemplified by the costumes used for the characters, especially the ones of our heroine. In semiotic analysis, the way a person dresses is a set of signs that inform others about that

particular person. Juliana Wijaya, President of the Council for Teaching Southeast Asian Languages in the United States, stated that the creative team of Disney Studios provided guidelines for the visual elements that appear in *Raya* in order not to refer to a specific culture but a combination of them. As a result, *Raya*'s costumes for instance are a fusion of various traditional SEA clothing. Warrior princess *Raya* is presented wearing two different costumes. First, when we are introduced to the land of Heart, we can see how each of the regions in Kumandra is associated with different colours and clothing as a way to portray the essence of each tribe and to represent a part of the dragon's body, which is considered the protector of Kumandra. The colours for the land of Heart are blue and green, which symbolize the importance of water as the centre of life. As she grows up, *Raya* presents a different type of clothing, baggier and plainer, the opposite of traditional princess dresses, as she becomes a warrior princess who is in charge of restoring the broken land. She wears a straw hat similar to the one from Cambodia, Indonesia and Vietnam.



Figure 6. Traditional hat from SEA

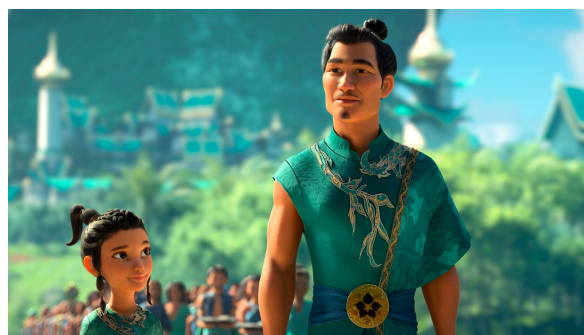


Figure 5. Traditional costume Heart Tribe

Al Wiyanti (2022) defines culture as the set of symbols, language, beliefs, values and artefacts that comprise any civilization, and his findings reveal that 97% of the cultural content in *Raya and the Last Dragon* contains Southeast Asian (SEA) cultural references, with a dominant presence of Indonesian, followed by Thai and Vietnamese (32%). Not only were traditions included in the filmmaking process but also their corresponding moral and social values. Etymologically, the word “moral” comes from the Latin word “moralis”, which means “proper behaviour of a person in society”, coined by Cicero. Karo-Karo and Wardana (2022) studied the different behaviours presented in the film within the tribes in the land of Kumandra. The researchers found that there is a set of individual morals including courage, self-sacrifice, honesty, respect and appreciation. Raya is portrayed as a courageous warrior, as she explores the land alone in search of the dragon gem. Moreover, sacrifice appears at the very beginning when Chief Benja sacrifices himself in order to save his daughter and he trusts Raya to restore the land broken by the Druuns. Throughout the film, respect is seen on numerous occasions as Raya greets other people and shows respect towards her enemies, an attitude that predominates in the Southeast Asian tradition. Discipline and determination are two values that enhance the character of the heroine. Her expedition takes nearly six years, and, in the end, her efforts are not in vain. She does it for her father and the people of Kumandra, which emphasises the sense of community that is significant within the culture of SEA people. Along with these individual values, social morals can be found in the film. Helping is an action that brings goodness or increases the well-being of others in need (Karo-Karo, A. M., & Wardana, M. K. 2022). Helping and cooperation are two of the themes that can be seen in the film, since, in order to achieve her goal Raya travels accompanied by a group of people to find the different gem pieces. Additionally, each of her allies represents one of the divided tribes of

Kumandra. The members of each divided tribe stick together in order to save the world, going from being enemies to forming a cohesive team (Sam Skopp, 2021). Furthermore, the character of Raya is the perfect exemplification of the amalgam of different regions of Southeast Asia. Each country in Southeast Asia presents diverse customs, traditions and beliefs, and some critics found that the creator could not simplify those cultural values by creating a mixture of them. Therefore, for some people, it does not accurately portray the culture of their countries (Moon, 2021). Nevertheless, as Raya is the studio's first Southeast Asian princess and the production team made a great effort to create a fantasy world based on the mythology, values and traditions of those countries, a vast majority of the audience from SEA were satisfied with the depiction of their people. As Carolina Do says, "We see how amazing and successful this is, let's have more of it". Filmmaking contributed to the emergence of new multicultural animated films so that more communities can feel identified with such empowered characters as Raya.

Despite the values shared by the different communities, the regions in Kumandra present different appearances as well as behaviours. In this film, each tribe presents characteristic features to distinguish them from the others. In terms of behaviour, Muflikhah Ulya and Muhammad Altaf Rezaian (2022) discuss that these differences make each tribe have a different response to dealing with problems. All these regions were once united and lived harmoniously until an ancient evil, the Druun, threatened their existence. Raya says that Kumandra has five unique regions of the tribe: Tail, the desert which symbolizes destruction; Talon, with its notorious and vibrant floating market; Spine, a frigid bamboo forest; Fang, protected by angry and authoritarian members, home of one of the protagonists; and finally, Heart, the main area, home of the dragon gem. This dragon gem is a magical spirit assembled by the essence dragon to

make Kumandra safe. The conflict emerges due to the appearance of the Druun, provoked by the rupture of the dragon gem and by the lack of trust and the struggle for power. The dragon gem shattered due to the greediness of man and Kumandra split into warring tribes. Raya tries to stop the Druun after their kingdoms are turned into stone (Renaldo Matadeen, 2021). As a result, the Druun is depicted as a symbol of human greed and destruction.

At the beginning of the film, it is seen how the different tribes gather in Heart to establish a peaceful agreement. Nonetheless, the rest of the tribes are driven by the ravenous desire of possessing the last remnant of the dragon gem. Irma Imroatina, Ari Setyorini and Pramudana Ihsan (2022) comment on how all the efforts made on nature by the dragons in order to preserve peace were in vain, as humans were driven by their personal interests without thinking about the negative impact on their surroundings and their people. Instead of gathering as a harmonious kingdom, they become enemies. Muflikhah Ulya and Muhammad Altaf Rezaian (2022) mention how water is depicted as a symbol of peace and how Sisu, the dragon of water, symbolises welfare and union. The breaking of the gem is also a representation of the destruction that comes from selfishness and betrayal. The film explores themes of forgiveness, understanding and rupture, promoting the idea that unity and cooperation are essential for the greater good, values that people from SEA communities have been learning and establishing for generations (Anggreni Milenia Karo-Karo and Muhammad Kiki Wardana, 2022)



Figure 7. The different tribes gathered in Heart

3.2 Womanhood in *Raya and the Last Dragon*

Nowadays, Disney films have become an established symbol of female empowerment, and this is exemplified by Raya and the rest of the female characters in the film. According to Mo Xu (2021), the film creates a world full of powerful women and centres its story on relationships between multiple female characters, something we had never seen in past productions. The development of this film was not only a crucial moment in multiculturalism and racial representation of Southeast Asian communities but also within gender representation.

Nevertheless, it is still unclear whether female characters in Disney are still identified as princesses. Benjamin Hine, Katarina Ivanovic and Dawn England reported that more than 45% of the children interviewed responded that Moana did not meet the conditions of a princess, while Snow White, Aurora or Cinderella scored highly due to their traditional princess dresses or social status. Disney films are popular around the globe, and children may internalise the values that are present within the movies. Karen

Wohlwend (2012) mentions that while playing with toys from the Disney princesses, children re-enact those expected gender identities associated with the characters in the films. They tend to perform gender unconsciously while playing, as they associate different features and behaviours with each gender. As a result, the portrayal of Disney's characters may provoke an impact on the adoption of gender roles. In addition, some of their favourite princesses are presented as housewives and passive characters defined by their beauty, waiting for a prince to arrive and save them from their conditions. Those conditions are often presented in the form of evil stepmothers or women who seem to be a threat to the protagonist as they are independent and courageous, making them look evil, gloomy and witchy, as, for instance, Ursula or Maleficent. Nonetheless, newer Disney productions have proven that being an empowered female character does not make you a villain. Female heroines such as Mulan, Pocahontas, Merida, Moana and, lastly, Raya are also classified as princesses regardless of their unusual behaviour with respect to earlier fairy-tale princesses.

Raya's world is filled with dominant women soldiers, leaders, queens and dragons. The physical appearance of characters clashes with stereotypes, presenting characters with different styles and clothing (Mo Xu, 2021). *Raya and the Last Dragon* The film is notable for its inclusion of three main female protagonists: Raya, Sisu and Namaari. According to Jeva Lange (2021), "Raya breaks with even the most progressive princess movies that Disney has made so far, *Brave* and *Frozen*, where marriage and love are still significant parts of the plot". Raya's gender is never the focus of the story but the restoration of peace in the world of Kumandra and how the bonds are established between different characters. No one doubts her abilities even if she is a girl, and she has both female and male friends without presenting any love interest, which is

something that makes Raya different from the newest productions. The film portrays two unconventional princesses, Raya and Namaari. They both wear simple pants and belts and Namaari presents a masculinised style, an intimidating short side cut (Mo Xu, 2021), and tight muscles, which is something we have barely seen in any female Disney protagonists. Yuze Liu and Mo Yang (2021) comment that it represents the core of the third-wave feminist movement, which focuses on the power of differentiated and diverse women.

Not only is there a diverse representation of women throughout the film but they are also presented as leaders and not just princesses. This emphasises the idea of female empowerment and also shapes the sense of self seen in the protagonist as she develops and grows a new sense of female identity during the film. This is not the first time the studio presents a double female protagonist, as they did the same with *Frozen* in 2013. However, they presented a different bond, and the plot revolves around their sisterhood, with men playing a secondary role in the film. On the other hand, Raya and Namaari both seek the same thing, the dragon gem, and their relationship is based on betrayal, as Namaari makes Raya believe they are friends so that her tribe can get access to the gem and steal it. Another feature we see in the film is the absence of Raya's father, Chief Benja, as he is converted into stone due to the revival of the Druuns. This implies a weakening of the male influence on the fate of women (Liu and Yang, 2021). As a result, this enriches the character of Raya, and it also provides a different view of women's relations during the film. As there is a lack of male leadership, other characters such as the mother of Namaari, Virana, chief of Fang, carry this role, as her strength complements the idea of female authority. Disney finally deviates from their generic and stereotypical female characters, as characters such as Raya, Namaari and Virana

present different attitudes and physical appearances such as short undercut hairstyles and a more athletic figure (see Figures 8 and 9).



Figure 8. Virana Chief of Fang



Figure 9. Namaari prepared to fight

Warrior princesses have lately become popular characters within the Disney canon. These female heroines are often depicted as physically strong, with a strong sense of justice and highly skilled in combat. This popularity emerged with the release of *Mulan* in 1998, which broke down gender stereotypes but also emphasised the importance of courage and determination, ratifying that women can be warriors too. *Mulan* explores themes of gender, as she disguises herself as a soldier and must present masculine behaviour in order to avoid being discovered. She rejects the traditional female role when she wipes off her makeup early in the movie as a symbol of rejection of gender roles, reinforced when she becomes a soldier (Dundes and Streiff, 2016). Nevertheless, even if the film may encourage younger girls to embrace their inner strength, there is still a presence of romance throughout the film. Additionally, all these warrior princesses seek a journey of self-discovery but are driven by personal goals, something that is different from the values we encounter in *Raya and The Last Dragon*.

In this film, from the beginning, there is no presence of a love interest between male and female characters. Instead, friendship is emphasised over romance. The story focuses on the relationship between Raya and Namaari and other friends from different regions of Kumandra. According to Salsabila Kamila Wardah and Rina Sari Kusuma (2021), the absence of a romance sub-plot in this film indicates that women do not always seek and need a man who is usually manifested as a lover to help them solve problems. They also mention how the role of men in this film is minimal, which reinforces the idea of the female friendship between the protagonists. Moreover, the film also embraces womanhood, as women are the protagonists of the whole production. Characters such as Namaari, her mother Virana (General Atitaya), who is presented as a strong leader, the old grandmother, head of Dang Hu, who ruled the Talon country and even the little baby named Little Noi, as she presents skilled fighting abilities. This is something we did not see in other productions such as *Mulan* with the depiction of Mushu and the absence of female characters. In *Raya and the Last Dragon*, the plot revolves around the relationship between the two princesses, a relationship considered to be a complex and tortuous one, from initial trust to betrayal, provoking a fear of trusting people in the protagonist, as she sets out into a journey of redemption alone, only accompanied by Tuk Tuk, her pet. Their relationship evolves from friends to enemies, their bond is affected by the war between the tribes, driven by the avaricious sense of power which places them on opposite sides, reframing the film's self-consciousness in its dealing with female subjects, showing a deeper concern about women reflected in Raya's wisdom and bravery (Liu and Yang, 2021)



Figure 10. From friends to enemies, Raya's relationship with Namaari

While Disney princess movies try to emphasize the power of their heroines, *Raya and the Last Dragon* does so using a slightly different approach. According to Madeline Matsumoto-Duyan (2021), *Raya* takes a step further by creating an entire world full of powerful women and centring its story on relationships between multiple female characters. Moreover, each region of Kumandra presents warriors who can be either male or female, something we have never encountered before. The film normalizes the idea of female leadership and warriors, as Matsumoto-Duyan mentions in her article. As a result, children have a wider variety of possible characters they can identify with. The financial success of recent titles which feature female characters who are both strong and fragile, autonomous and loving, demonstrates that children do enjoy viewing and ultimately identify with role models who represent the pace and nature of change occurring in the world around them (Hine, Ivanovic and England, 2018). Additionally, there is an increase in the popularity of these recent titles among young boys, possibly due to the “masculine” behaviour of these characters.

Among all the women presented throughout the film, Raya, Sisu and Namaari are the most complex, and their relationship complements the heart of the narrative. Raya and Namaari start from friends to enemies, and this influences Raya's attitude, as it shapes her view about others, reinforcing this sense of mistrust. Then, there is the key character

of the film, Sisu, the divine dragon of water. Despite being a dragon, she is presented as female, which ratifies the significant presence of women, leaving male characters to a secondary role. Sisu accompanies Raya on a journey, a journey that teaches Raya to regain faith in humans despite her expectations. As a dragon with a different perspective, Sisu is able to recognize Namaari's humanity and her desire to do the right thing and restore Kumandra. Due to this, Sisu becomes a bridge between Raya and Namaari, a key element to re-establish their union as they come together to save their world (Matsumoto-Duyan, 2021). Moreover, this sense of community and the bond between the lead characters is what makes this film different from other modern releases.

Furthermore, *Raya and the Last Dragon* also emphasizes the relationship between women and nature. The film primarily focuses on themes of trust, unity and the importance of healing a divided world. As a result, viewers may observe an ecofeminist approach presented in the film. "Ecofeminism makes a central place for values of care, love, friendship, trust and appropriate reciprocity-values that presuppose that our relationships to others are central to our understanding of who we are" (Imroatina, I., Setyorini, A., & Ihsan, P. 2022). For this reason, those values presented in characters such as Raya, make a considerable contribution to unifying women's power. The dominance experienced by women and nature shows a vital relationship position in the perspective of feminism and environmental ethics (Warren, 1990). Imroatina, Setyorini, and Ihsan analyse (2022) how the ecofeminist figures (Raya, Sisu and Namaari) join forces in order to save their homeland from the Druun. The Druun are presented as a plague that turns everything into a stone, and they stand as a symbol of human greed. Raya and Namaari, despite being different, share the same interests in the mythology of

Kumandra and especially their love and admiration for Sisu, the dragon of water. Their goal to restore their home is what brings them together in the end, reinforcing this idea of trust and mutual cooperation that is a tradition between the cultures of Southeast Asian communities, based on relationships that are practical in nature (Anggreni Milenia Karo-Karo, Muhammad Kiki Wardana, 2022). Overall, while *Raya and the Last Dragon* may not engage directly with ecofeminism as a concept, it includes themes and messages that resonate with the recognition of women's agency, empowerment and environmental control.

4. Conclusion

Disney's princess films have impacted its audience through the decades. This influence somehow shaped the notion of stereotypes and gender roles people already had. Nonetheless, racial stereotypes such as the malicious depiction of the Middle East and the passive damsel in distress began to evolve, as Disney was put in the spotlight due to its stereotyped portrayal of characters and sought a more innovative approach whereby a wider audience could feel identified with. Additionally, the later films have gained a more feminist representation, as is the case of *Raya and the Last Dragon*, where female leads are in an active position with respect to male roles.

Raya embraces diversity, as the fantasy world of Kumandra is based on different countries of Southeast Asia and each of its regions depicts a different tribe with different cultures. Furthermore, the character of Raya was classified as the first Southeast Asian princess which marks a landmark within SEA history. As a result, it reinforces the uniqueness of the protagonist, a warrior princess who does not present an interest in men and only focuses on her journey to restore her homeland and her people.

The relationship between female characters is one of the film's main themes: the bond established between Raya and Namaari who started from enemies to friends, as Sisu, the dragon of water, serves as a bridge unifying them and the rest of Kumandra. Raya presents empowerment and leadership, and other female characters of the film such as the Chief of Fang and the old lady from Talon are the embodiments of female authority. The film proves that unity and cooperation are values that are necessary to overcome the barriers between the tribes, and it also ratifies the necessary support between women as they gather their strengths to beat the Druun, emphasising the need for harmony between women and nature.

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