

Walt disney's mulan and the issue of non- existent feminism

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Mulan's Bad Feminist

The portrayal of feministic ideals within visual media has been a prolonged topic in relation to the perception of women in general. The 1998 Disney film *Mulan*, brings upon an intriguing emphasis upon a strong female lead role and thus inquiry upon the power and role of feminism. The film revolves around the protagonist, Mulan, who secretly joins the Chinese Imperial army disguised as her non-existent brother so that her elderly father may remain at home in time of war. She quickly joins a battalion under the command of Shang, an unembellished and intrepid warrior, and subsequently befriends various male side characters Ling, Chien-Po and Yao. This paper seeks to exemplify how the relationships and social representations within the film embodies within itself characteristics that resonate the ideals and notions of Roxanne Gay's "Bad Feminism". At the same time, the audience this paper seeks to speak to are both the conventional feminist, and the bad feminist to which Gay alludes to. Gay's "Bad Feminism" seeks to showcase the conflict between upholding one's true personality and the feminist identity they seek to embody, which can ultimately lead to actions or decisions that may be seen as contrary to conventional feministic ideals. The film, *Mulan*, resonates with "Bad Feminism" principles by employing an unfamiliar and ethic character, showing nuances of female inferiority, and identifying Mulan as a male in order to carry out her ultimate goal.

First, Mulan's employment of a non-Caucasian, ethnic protagonist exemplifies some of Gay's arguments within her bad feminism article. The film takes place in ancient China, a particular location and time period that

could be described as novel and obscure for a Disney film at the time of its release. The introduction of this ethnic character, in conjunction with the fact that Mulan is a strong female lead, provides a medium for portraying not only feministic ideals but ideals that Gay covers within "Bad Feminism". Gay states that beyond the quintessential white and female feminist, "Women of color...need to be better included in the feminist project". Revolving around a character of East Asian descent and ethnicity, it is clear that Mulan can be seen as to create universality within the feminist community. Race can be overlooked as even someone of Chinese origin is able to break the barriers of a conventional feminine lifestyle. For example, the beginning of the film covers Mulan following the traditional ancient Chinese female's path of having to be approved by the village Matchmaker. Yet, Mulan is portrayed as more of a clumsy tomboy, and eventually fails the task due to her inelegance, ultimately being called "a disgrace...you will never bring honor to your family". Gay would most certainly applaud the film itself for raising light to the issue that feminism extends beyond ethnicity and is a universal grounds for progression. At the same time, Gay would most likely approve of Mulan's capacity to break apart from the imposed cultural restrictions that seek to inhibit women within a certain path and societal role. By having Mulan automatically introduced and characterized as not the conventionally elegant and graceful Chinese woman, the film is able to bring into light the notion of feminism transcending the limitations of race and geography. As Gay mentions that feminism today is often seen from the narrow lens of the white, American woman, the fact that a Chinese woman undergoes the same struggles and conflict as her western counterpart's creates a common

ground. This effect allows the audience to view how the revolving movement of feminism can be identified as innate and universal. The conventional feminist view seeks to break women apart from any form of standard role or task within society, and having Mulan be able to break away and keep her individuality is an influential showing of feminism. Thus, the Disney decision to extend its line of female protagonists into the Far East sparks an interesting relation with Gay's feministic ideals by showing that feminism needs to broaden its scopes.

Next, Mulan breaks apart from standard feminist ideals and embodies Gay's principles of bad feminism by having to maintain inferiority to the other male characters of the film. Throughout the film, Mulan is led to train as a man, and so be treated as one. Roxanne Gay states in "Why I am a Bad Feminist" that as a bad feminist, it is ok to "sometimes plays dumb with repairmen because it's just easier to let them feel macho than it is to stand on the moral high ground." Despite Mulan's empowerment through training in the identity of a masculine soldier, she still follows every advice and training under Shang, often being pressured to forget any sense of individuality in order to obey his commands. Mulan, being an arduous and diligent worker, attempts to impress the likes of Shang for a majority of the film, a weakness that hints at the sight of bad feminist principles, in which a feministic character still exhibits traits or actions that may not be completely feministic. At the same time, Mulan carries upon a false identity of being clueless to her peers, pretending to not know much and even adopts a new identity as "Ping". One of the most famous songs of the entire film is the

piece, " I'll make a man out of you". The premise of the song revolves around Shang attempting to train his battalion to be ready for combat against the approaching Hun army, and hence coins the phrase " make a man out of you". Gay would view this song as an ideal form of bad feminism as it exemplifies how Mulan must subdue herself to the masculine authority more because she wants to than has to. For example, during the intense training sequence of Mulan's battalion, a montage shows Mulan laboriously training dusk to dawn in order to impress Shang. Shang had presented the battalion with an almost impossible task of climbing a wooden pole while wearing weights and retrieving an arrow from the top. Mulan is seen as weak and clumsy until she successfully trains herself to climb the tower to show Shang of her capabilities. Gay would most likely understand and agree with Mulan's perspective in this scenario. Despite Shang being excessive and aggressive, Mulan subdues and attempts to play alongside as just another powerless part of the battalion. Gay outlines this form of bad feminism as one that she even encapsulates in her own daily affairs. Gay describes this as a sort of momentum that occurs when sometimes a female willingly lets a male exert or flaunt their masculinity. This is a form of bad feminism as in principle it goes against one of the main feministic ideals in which women should not be specified to certain gender roles and placements in an imaginary gender hierarchy, and thus seen as inferior in knowledge or capabilities. Gay goes further in explaining the implications of this form of bad feminism, to which she allows her own personal wishes and wants to overwrite the underlying feministic principles she seeks to uphold. The general notion that reigns is that sometimes, humans must be humans, and

Mulan is no exception to that case. The western reaction to this notion within the film would most likely view this as a stereotypical depiction of a woman in media yielding to a man as if she were inferior or less knowledgeable and capable within the world. The difference is that Mulan does so willingly as to not only preserve her true identity but overall because of her inevitable interest in Shang and want to impress him by showing her improvements.

Lastly, Mulan encompasses Gay's explications of bad feminism due to the fact that Mulan must pose and act as a man in order to carry out her goals comfortably. The explicit outline to the film is that Mulan has to take on the fake identity of Ping in order to join the army and subsequently defend the Chinese empire. Mulan's ultimate goals can be outlined as defending her family's honor, helping uphold the realm, and also discovering her true capabilities. In general, feministic principles would state that Mulan should be comfortable and able to achieve these through feministic outlets and not having to pretend to be a male figure. This can be further exemplified by the artistic depictions between male and female characters within the film, culminating with the hybrid creation of Ping, Mulan's male identity. The adaptation of the Chinese women within the film displays them as the typical graceful figures in traditional wear and almost no distinction exists between any two women. The men on the other hand are often displayed as much more diverse and varied, as if they possessed more identities and free will. The men are differed depending on which side of the war they belong to, and often possess distinct characteristics such as Lien-po's obese body and Yao being short and possessing bullish facial features. Mulan before she joins the

army looks exactly like any of the other women. When she transforms to Ping, she seems to develop her own individual identity, easily becoming identifiable from all the other men. At the same time, being Ping is the only way that Mulan is allowed to develop her own identity through physical training and understanding the world outside of her small village. Gay would most likely see this as a form of bad feminism and be understanding, but overall disapprove. Mulan does in fact stick to bad feministic principles by caving in to the idea that to possess individuality and grow oneself, one must be a man. Gay explores this idea within her article as she states that she might " get angry but I understand and hope someday we will live in a culture where we don't need to distance ourselves from the feminist label, where the label doesn't make us afraid of being alone, of being too different, of wanting too much... Feminism is a choice, and if a woman does not want to be a feminist, that is her right. I believe feminism is grounded in supporting the choices of women even if we wouldn't make certain choices for ourselves". Gay had mentioned that she had previously disavowed feminism as a movement but now comes to understand what it means to be a feminist, despite the confictions that may occur between bad feminism and good. The fact that Mulan is only able to uphold her honor and tradition by having to conform as a man and not be able to be a different label within society goes on to show the nuance of bad feminism that appears here. The audience would most likely be able to understand from the perspective of Mulan why she did so, but also understand why this is an example of bad feminism and how Gay espouses free will of a feminist. This is an impending issue that seeks to define a key issue within feminism,

outlined by Gay, in which it is still difficult for a woman to freely express their individuality and true nature as a woman of society. “ But the film’s apparent advocacy of individuality is no more than window dressing. True individuality threatens the commercial rules governing popular culture.,. Mulan may tempt postmodern critics to praise its celebration of border crossing...but in the end, it re-establishes all the borders it breaks down” (p. 5, Cheu). This excerpt finds that after all that Mulan has accomplished under her identity as a man, she returns home with a medal to show her father, who simply states he cares more about having his daughter return. The reality within the ending of the film shows that Mulan’s feminist statement has been concluded, and no longer carries any significance. The establishment of gender reinforces knowledge that despite the fact that the film transcends this concept of individuality by eventually having Mulan discovered as a woman that is able to save the Chinese empire and bring honor to her family, in the end her achievement is almost downplayed due to the fact that she is re-established as a woman.