

**From Daughter to Soldier: Analysis of Gender Subversion in  
Mulan Comic through Judith Butler's Feminism**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study explores how gender identity informs female empowerment in the comic book *Mulan* (2020), analyzed through Judith Butler's theory of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Using a qualitative approach, the research examines both extrinsic elements (visual style, dialogue bubbles, and coloring techniques) and intrinsic aspects (plot, character development, and themes). The analysis reveals the findings. **1)** *Mulan's* struggles are framed by traditional Chinese values of devotion and duty, which she redefines against patriarchal constraints. **2)** The comic employs themes of resilience and transformation, portraying *Mulan's* resistance to restrictive gender norms. **3)** *Mulan's* journey illustrates that gender roles are not inherently tied to masculinity or femininity, but can be subverted to embrace autonomy and self-worth. These findings highlight the relevance of children's comics as cultural texts that challenge stereotypes and highlight social issues, offering readers a deeper understanding of gender, empowerment, and identity.

**Keywords:** *gender performativity, empowerment, tradition, patriarchy, gender inequality*

**INTRODUCTION**

Women's empowerment is often undermined by most societies today. Women empowerment is the promotion of women's human rights to take part in social issues, make choices, and eliminate gender inequality "*Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts.*" (Butler, p. 519, 1988). (that gender identities are not innate but are imposed through repeated societal acts and expectations) This paper focuses on exploring the aspects of feminism; female empowerment, gender performativity, female intersectionality that are found in the comic/children story titled, "*Mulan*" as an object of the analysis. Children's books play an important role in early development, fostering broad thinking and quick reasoning without forcing difficult choices. Choosing high-quality and appropriate books is

crucial, as the stories and lessons in them shape children's future behavior, helping them lead more meaningful and joyful lives. “*Eagly’s social role theory demonstrates how culturally embedded labor divisions shape gendered behavior and stereotyping*” (Eagly, 2002). Taking on the issue of feminism in children's comics will instill non-stereotypical thinking towards a gender, changing children's view of a world full of poisonous patriarchy. Her journey, from a young woman disguised as a man to becoming a leader, reflects significant social and cultural constructs. “*Women’s own agency—acting with purpose—has been linked with reduced mental distress, even when physical health challenges are reported*” (Das & Tampubolon, 2022). Mulan's narrative, characterized by physical and mental training, offers valuable lessons in resilience, courage, and empowerment.

In the real world, men still view women as if women have to work as housewives while men have to work in offices. 60% of women admitted that they did more chores as compared to housemates or partners. Just 6% score checked in against spouses that completed more of the household duties than their counterparts. On the other hand, 46% of men said they believed that household chores were equally distributed (Pew Research Center, 2021). But women can work in offices too, women can do things that men do too. The feminist theory of the story of Mulan is how Mulan can go beyond her maximum limit. Mulan proves that women can do anything. Mulan proves strength and courage do not depend on gender. Here, Mulan also breaks the rules and traditions that are set in her country to defend it. This shows just how brave Mulan is and how the story encourages girls around the world to be brave and stand up for what's right.

The famous Disney princess story titled *Mulan*, is a story published by *Disney Publishing Worldwide* in June 2020. While the 1998 movie received numerous awards, with a total of 10 awards from 12 nominations, the comic book adaptation has not yet received any. *Mulan* is an action, war, and historical fiction children’s book that represents *feminism*. (Disneydetail, n.d. 2015) Gender performativity refers to the idea that gender is not someone who was born with, rather something one does. This gender performativity explains how each individual should “perform” through acts, gestures, and behaviors that are according to social expectations. The examples from *Mulan* can be reflected in real life. This paper studies the hard proof that feminism actually plays a huge role in the story *Mulan*. Realizing women's empowerment, women can play a helpful role in many aspects of social and state affairs. Women will be able to help defend their country's pride, join the battlefield and make their country proud.

Extrinsic elements are an important aspect to have in books, they are the core aspects of a book to support its storytelling and value. There are 5 main elements that every comic book has: Art style/image style, panels, dialogue, colors, and layout. In the comic book adaptation: *Mulan*, those

main elements can be found as well! Here are the 5 important elements in the comic book adaptation: *Mulan*, along with their explanation and examples; Visual aspects in a comic book is very important, as it represents the aesthetic of a comic book throughout the whole series/chapter. The visual style in *Mulan* such as character designs, backgrounds, art styles, and others. Are very similar, almost identical to the 1998 movie. This shows consistency in the *Mulan* series, both in the comic book and in the movie. So the role of *Mulan's* story is that she tells about her being queen and their social and cultural construction is very characteristic, like they have to train with their physical style. It can also be shown that in the *Mulan* story the girl can be a good leader, she can also protect her own parents and in the *Mulan* story it also tells that she is brave and honest.

The flow of a panel in a comic book represents the pace of the story. The panels in the *Mulan* comic book are designed to follow the pace of the story and its action. Therefore making the story fast-paced for readers when it gets to action parts. When we compare the comic book to the movie, the dialogue and narration are almost the same. Since the comic book is released a few years after the movie was released, that makes the narration/dialogue of the comic reflecting the movie's script. This also shows consistency that Disney has kept throughout the comic. Colors are one of the most important factors in a comic book. Colors convey emotions to readers, colors also have a huge impact on the illustration of a comic. It is important to make sure the scheme matches with the color. If the situation is sad, then the colors are usually bland and unlively. If the color and the mood of the story does not match, then readers are going to have a hard time feeling the true emotion the author wants to convey. In the *Mulan* comic book, when *Mulan* is training in the army, the colors are fairly bright to convey the action going on in the story.

The comic book *Mulan*, tells the story of a young teenage girl called *Mulan* and her journey to saving China. *Mulan* is a brave and courageous woman, she does not fear doing what is right. The story starts with the villain: Shan-yu, leader of the Huns, breaking through the great wall of China. Hearing that information from the guards, the Emperor of China decided that one man from every family must go to war. *Mulan* is the only child in her family, meaning that her elderly father is the one to go to war. *Mulan* objects and tells her father that he cannot go, but her father insists that he goes, saying that he'll die doing what's right. *Mulan*, saddened by this, cuts her hair with a sword and puts on her father's armor. She ran away from home to the training camp disguised fully as a man. Gender identity and its roles do not only come from one's assigned sex, but from the person themselves; *"The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of "identities" cannot "exist"—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex*

and those in which the practices of desire do not “follow” from either sex or gender” (J. Butler, 1990, p.24).

By all means, women's empowerment means women gaining the freedom to do their tasks without having to change their identity and doing their tasks with pride. It means women can intervene in social issues and can be free to help society in warfare without being restricted by their gender. She trained with other fellow soldiers day and night, even though Shang, the army Captain, told her to give up and go home. She kept training and eventually earned respect from both her Captain and fellow soldiers. After a serious battle between the Huns and China’s army, Mulan was injured. She was soon taken to the medic’s tent to be healed, but just when things started to look good, her identity was exposed and she was revealed to be a woman.

Therefore, as mentioned in the storyline above, this research will explore in detail the social issues related to women’s empowerment ideology and gender identity, the importance of traditional pride that must continue to grow, and the twists and turns of self-discovery and authentic identity. From this research, we will understand the complex issues hidden behind the children's story "Mulan" from many perspectives of the story. It is expected that this study will analyze starting from the themes and symbolism contained in the story, and by assessing how the comic aligns with or challenges these theoretical perspectives. From this analysis, we can find out how the role of women in the story of "Mulan", as well as the role of men, and the differences in their roles reflect the issue of gender inequality in this story. Also, the purpose of this research is to explore the comic "Mulan" through the visual graphics, plot and flow contained in this story from the point of view of women's empowerment and the issue of the idea of patriarchy. The key binary opposition that will be shown below serves to contrast the concepts contained in this story to help us understand this issue comprehensively:

Traditional	Subversive
<p>Playing the traditional role, women are often visualized surrounded by confined surroundings, depicting that they will always be controlled and their lives will be run according to traditional rules as the "ideal" woman. The early parts where Mulan first disguises as a man in the training show that she still has a sense of delicacy and still looks elegant. <i>“There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are</i></p>	<p>Men, playing an active role in warfare, are depicted as always being in a large and chaotic field. This represents the realm of self-determination, to do anything they want at war, as long as they return home victorious. As time goes by, the reader may see that Mulan is no longer reluctant to be a forceful and bold soldier. Mulan has understood the subversive role of men in warfare. <i>"Acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the</i></p>

Traditional	Subversive
<i>said to be its results.</i> " (J. Butler, 1990, p.25).	<i>body.</i> " (J. Butler, 1990, p.136).

**METHOD**

This analysis of "Mulan" used qualitative methods to examine the gender inequality issues hidden within the story. By using qualitative methods (specifically thematic), we could examine complex issues such as gender inequality and similar issues such as gender performativity. By examining multiple viewpoints from different sources, a qualitative method adopted a more thorough approach that enables a deeper and more complex understanding of a particular event. This approach significantly examines humanlike experiences, perceptions, and contextual aspects in the comic rather than merely depending on numerical data. Thematic analysis was conducted through the lens of Butler’s theory (1990), identifying the implied messages in the graphics, symbolism displayed in the comic, and dialogues. The themes were named, sorted, and organized according to the problem analysis.

Thematic analysis was conducted by identifying recurring themes in Mulan's visual and textual elements, including graphics, symbolic representations, and character interactions. Perspectives from various sources were also utilized to better understand how gender roles are interpreted in Mulan's story. Notwithstanding the in-depth analysis that will be conducted with this qualitative method, this research does not thoroughly utilize quantitative methods and cannot rely on numerical analysis data to deepen the impact of Mulan's story on gender roles. This research focused on textual research and did not involve audience reception. To strengthen the analysis, quotations from the story's conversations are used, and the symbolism in the writing and graphics, character development, and human attitudes are analyzed. To the research, we also analyzed Chinese traditions (specifically from the perspective of gender traditions) that influenced the actions taken by Mulan. In conclusion, this study reaffirms Mulan's importance as a cultural work that questions conventional gender roles and shows how storytelling can be a potent tool for challenging and transforming social conventions. (the scope of the study is literature specifically feminism & the focus is limited to how mulan challenges traditional gender norms, societal expectations of women in Mulan, intersectionality)

**DISCUSSION**

The comic begins with the story of the Great Wall of China being attacked by the Huns, and immediately transitions to Mulan tattooing her wrist. In this specific panel, it can be seen that the color panel used is a calm color palette, depicting a calm atmosphere and depicting the calmness of Mulan's life before being surrounded by her negative thoughts and the conflicts she went through.

Mulan's current gesture is tattooing her hands, depicting her traditional life before entering her subversive days. "Quiet.. demure.. graceful.. polite.. punctual.." It is a form of foreshadowing, giving a hint of the character expected of women in China. Butler asserts, "*Gender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act... a 'doing' rather than a 'being'*" (J. Butler, 1990, p.33). Mulan's rejection of societal expectations demonstrates this performative nature of gender, showing how she defies the passive femininity expected of her.



Gender Identity is a person's personal way of identifying themselves gender-wise, based on their life experiences. "*There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results*" (J. Butler, 1990, p.68). Butler reinforces her statement that gender is something we do repeatedly; it has become part of our routine. This "routine" shapes the idea of whether we're male, female, or another gender and is evidenced by our own personality. Knowing the idea of "*gender identity*" from Butler's statement, we realize that female empowerment can only be realized if women realize that women (from the perspective of gender identity) are not always stereotyped with certain requirements. "*Empowerment interventions have measurable positive effects on women's mental well-being, particularly in challenging contexts*" (Lwamba et al., 2022). Female empowerment encourages women to break free from the chains of expectations that come from toxic masculinity, realizing that they are free to perform their identity without judgment. Recognizing gender identity is a crucial role in the topic of women's empowerment. The topic itself aims to make women proud and brave enough to show their identity as a woman and remove any barriers for them to take action or make a decision.

The comic continues with Mulan being groomed for a match with a man. She is taught about



manners as a woman, and their expectations for Mulan to be a graceful and gentle woman. Time and time again, Mulan fails and is criticized for not being the ideal woman. The criticism pierced Mulan's feelings. "*As Butler and later scholars emphasize, gender is constituted through cultural repetition—what may appear as a stable identity is actually continually performed*" (McKinlay, 2010).She

felt she was not being herself by being forced to fulfill the expectations of being a woman. She does not recognize herself, and does not have her own true identity from the traditions instilled by those around her.

Mulan is depicted with a slightly downcast position, signifying the frustration and despair she feels now. Mulan's posture represents the burden of people's expectations of her as a woman. Character illustrations that show the character's dorsal part (like this panel of Mulan) in a comic or visual work have certain meanings depicting feelings of loneliness and despair, representing the feelings that Mulan has from her realization of the difficulty she will have living as a woman. It shows her frustration, how she is confused about her roles as a woman, and how she can overcome all the complicated criteria to fulfill her family's wishes. She doubts her identity as a woman; how to survive, how to stay elegant, and at the same time, how to help her family in difficult times.

*"But who is that girl? Will my reflection ever show who I really am, inside?"* Mulan questioned herself. She realized that the burden she was carrying made her not only stoned, but worried about the role she was supposed to take on. Butler states, *"If the internal truth of gender is a fabrication, this fabrication is sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means"* (J. Butler, 1990, p.136). Mulan's reflection symbolizes societal norms, revealing the conflict between how she is perceived and who she truly feels she is. Earlier it was discussed that gender is how you act, synchronized with your *"routine"*, which makes one create an idea of what gender you are oriented in. In contrast, Mulan, who is overwhelmed by what people around her claim about her role as a woman, proves that she does not really understand the meaning of *"gender identity"*.

In the scene, before Mulan makes the final decision to join the army, she is sitting outside in the rain with a downcast expression. She seemed to doubt her choices, while at the same time worrying about her father. Of course, this issue is weighing heavily on Mulan's mind. She is drowning in a sea of worries, and being swirled by choices. Weather in an illustration symbolizes the emotion of a character at that certain moment.



Rain symbolizes sadness or melancholy, and it rains when Mulan is in distress.

The rainy weather in the panel supports how sad Mulan is because of all the things she is going through right now. All of this happened suddenly, forcing her to decide immediately even though this decision would be detrimental to herself. Mulan knows that her choices will be difficult and she does not know what will be the side effects of the choices she makes, but she does it anyway. Abandoning her true identity as a woman and all her elegance for the safety of her family, she stepped in to defend her nation.



The color palette in the comic panels reflects Mulan's emotional journey and how she has to keep a dual identity. In the scene where Mulan is training in the army, the color choices are bold to show power and strength. As men are depicted and expected to be rough, bold, and fierce. In the scene where Mulan is upset because a village got slain, she shows her true feelings. Color choices are soft and mellow to depict a person's true feelings when their mask falls off.

The reader can clearly see the transition of the color chart from the previous panel (where Mulan is still being trained to be a proper woman), and the comparison when she is already in training as a warrior. The colors chosen in the later pages are made to show how subversive men are in the training field and the coloring in the earlier pages focuses on showing how traditional women are in China. In this specific panel, the sharp and bold colors melt away, showing Mulan's old nature as a gentle woman. Unknowingly, this color change transition represents that it is difficult for women to express themselves in a place surrounded by subversive men. Butler stated; "*The social reifications of sex can be understood to mask or distort a prior ontological reality, that reality being the equal opportunity of all persons, prior to the marking by sex, to exercise language in the assertion of subjectivity*" (J. Butler, 1990, p.136). Butler states that everyone has the right to expression regardless of their gender and the roles they take on; which includes that women should remain free to express themselves without feeling insecure in a patriarchal-dominated environment.

Before Mulan goes to the matchmaker for her trial, Mulan puts on makeup, a hairdo, and other adornments. One of the salon lady's dialogues is, "*A man wants a wife with a very small waist!*". Along with the matchmaker's saying on how Mulan will never bring honor to her family. This shows that women in China are expected to be married and to have the "ideal" characteristics and body of a woman.

The scenes also show that if a woman does not get married, they bring *dishonor* to their family. The quotation marks on the word ideal is to emphasize the weight of expectations society gives to a woman to have the so-called ideal character and body. While in reality, no one has the same mind and body,

let alone be perfect. By making women an object to bring honor to a family and increasing the burden of expectations a woman has to bear, is unconsciously ruining society itself as a whole. As identity crisis and depression might occur amongst women. Mainly caused by the "ideal"



characteristics and body of a woman and what women are expected to be or do. Men are depicted as rough, careless, and fierce, while women are depicted AND expected to be soft, submissive, and neat. It emphasizes on who women truly are vs who they are expected to be.

Based on the analysis, women in general are more likely to get depression than men. From the analysis, the percentage of women with depression is almost double the percentage of men with



depression. (Johns Hopkins Medicine, n.d). The reason for the presence of depression in women based on the survey is one of them; the pressure they get from their environment. Expectations/standards that are a result of toxic patriarchy are pressures that they have to endure in their daily lives. This is a testament to the reality of the world, that there are many burdens

that they have to bear up until now, and it will be difficult for them to be free if this healthy thinking is not instilled from childhood.

This panel shows a fellow soldier approaching Mulan to give her some encouragement. Mulan's fellow commander mentions that in order to win this war, Mulan should think of a “woman” as the “prize” that will repay all her hard work. This proves that for a long time, the objectification of women is already rampant, whose job is to fulfill men's interests. Women were considered “goods” that were only used to motivate men and always had to be conquered with their power. The value of women in this panel is only depicted to the extent of the “male gaze”.

*“For that masculine subject of desire, trouble became a scandal with the sudden intrusion, the unanticipated agency, of a female “object” who inexplicably returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position”* (J. Butler, 1990. p.28). Butler states that women who are usually used as “objects” for men's gaze and pleasure do not rule out the possibility that women can reverse that objectification as well. From the very first pages of this comic book, women have been trained continuously to be perfect and fit the mold. These requirements come from men's desire for the perfect woman, who can please their eyes and be the best “gift” for them.

Post-war, Mulan's beliefs became murky. She began to doubt whether she was doing this entirely for her father or to free herself from the fences that restricted her freedom. At



first, her reason for doing this is because her father is unable to and because of that she secretly joins the camp and becomes a soldier. But later on, She begins to realize that she is doing this to uncover who she really is, and to prove to herself how far she can go regardless of what her environment has taught her.

One piece of evidence that reinforces the existence of female empowerment in comics lies in Mushu's line: *"Hey, at least you risked your life to help people you love."* Mushu's dialogue recalls the sacrifices made by Mulan for the victory and safety of her loved ones. She goes through brutal and subversive warfare, a far cry from her old environment surrounded by traditional expectations of women. Her bravery is not diminished by her doubts, it is enhanced by them. She remains fearless and willingly does whatever she can to claim victory. Mulan's actions prove that in a world that does not value female strength, women still have the opportunity to elevate themselves and prove that they can.

Mulan's search for self-esteem reflects Butler's idea that identity is formed through the tension between personal desires and society; *"The identity categories... tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes... such categories can also serve as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation"* (J. Butler, 1990, p.14). Butler's quote reflects Mulan questioning her identity, doubting the roles of each gender and whether she has finally found herself now. Gender roles come from people's ideologies; that women should be like this, men should be like that. It is this identity and its regulatory grimes that make Mulan feel that she wants to be free. She wants to prove how far she can go despite all the limits that come from these gender identity regulations.

Mulan began to realize that there should be no barrier that women should do this or that, as well as men also have the freedom to do anything. Shang counts *"Ping"* (Mulan's fake male name) as a trusted comrade. Mulan is dubious; if Ping can be trusted, why can't Mulan? After all, it is now revealed that they are the same person. Mulan is a woman, and she is able to prove that she is as strong and even stronger than some of the other soldiers.



This proves the point of female empowerment; that women have the freedom to be themselves. Destroying the stereotype that women are *"weak"* and incapable. Butler quoted; *"Beauvoir proposes that the female body ought to be the situation and instrumentality of women's freedom, not a defining and limiting essence."* (J. Butler, 1990, p.52) Women should be *FREE*. A woman's body should be a concrete proof that women are capable, and not a proof that their capabilities are limited. A woman should not fall into stereotypes, and use her maximum capacity for

her own desires without the pressure of environmental expectations. There is no barrier to women being independent, just like men. They all have the opportunity to develop their own potential and take part in roles that are not “normal” or “not supposed to be their role”.

At the end of the storyline, Mulan triumphs and receives a medal of honor as a brave warrior. Her efforts have paid off, and she has finally found her true self. So, the highlight of the process and the correlation between gender identity and female empowerment: finding one's own gender identity, finding one's true self, until when it illustrates female empowerment. *“Doing gender is not merely an internal identity; it's a social act contextualized and reinforced by everyday interactions”* (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Looking at the storyline of the Mulan comic and the themes that hide this deep meaning highlights the important role of gender identity in the issue of women's empowerment. Digging deeper into this storyline, we can understand how social issues can be depicted and illustrated in children's comic books. The findings from our analysis can make it clear how fatal the role of women is in world issues, and that women have the right to act as well.

## **CONCLUSION**

The comic book *“Mulan”* focuses on uncovering the deep meaning of gender identity, as well as the values of female empowerment. Specifically, gender identity is explored using Judith Butler's framework, unveiling the true meaning of gender identity and its role in society. The transition of Mulan's life journey from traditional to subversive, aligned with Judith Butler's theories, reinforces the actions Mulan takes against the traditional desires and expectations of women in her environment and how she finally realizes the true meaning of gender identity. In this comic, Mulan is seen daring to challenge traditional gender roles in a patriarchal society. She takes risks by disguising herself as a man and joins the war. The Chinese tradition states that women are only required to stay at home and take care of their families. Mulan's actions prove that women are just as strong and reliable as men. Aside from her quest for her true identity, filial piety is one of the reasons why Mulan took her actions. She forgets her identity and duty as a traditional woman and chooses to revolt in order to protect the family she loves. She chooses to rebel rather than obey, successfully proving that she is also capable of protecting her family. Mulan's story also proves that gender identity is not the same as assigned sex, but rather how one acts and how people perceive them gender-wise; proving Judith Butler's points in her theoretical framework. Even though Mulan is a woman, she proves to do what people say only men can do, which is to join the army and become a soldier. In the end, Mulan gets a medal of appreciation because she saved all of China and saved the emperor from the Huns. Hence, Mulan's actions proved that women are capable of doing what men can do. Even the ones that “only” men can

do. That is why women can do what men do even if women like to wash dishes or something but women can do everything like in the story of Mulan who is brave and overcomes obstacles.

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