

GENDER STEREOTYPES AND ITS PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT PORTRAYED IN MULAN (1998) MOVIE

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Abstract

Gender stereotypes are beliefs about individuals' traits and behaviors based on gender. These preconceptions of gender stereotypes influenced society and shaped individual beliefs, attitudes, and experiences. This study examines the psychological impact of gender stereotypes towards Mulan as reflected in the Mulan (1998) movie. More specifically, this study aims to determine the psychological impact of negative stereotypes on women that are embedded in the beliefs of a patriarchal society. This research applies Erik Erikson's developmental psychology theory to examine the psychological impact of gender stereotypes on Mulan as an adolescent girl. This study analyzed the data consisting of words, sentences, and dialogues using a qualitative approach. The data was collected through several steps, such as watching and reading the movie script, identifying, and classifying. Based on the findings of this study, Mulan's psychological development is impacted by gender stereotypes in several aspects, including low self-esteem, future career, and social roles.

Keywords: Psychological Impact, Adolescent, Gender Stereotype, Patriarchal Society

INTRODUCTION

Literature often depicts social phenomena that are happening in our lives. The literary phenomenon related to real social life can be in the form of political, cultural, psychological and other social problems (Vianingrum & Winarti, 2024). Therefore, literature is defined as human expression based on individual experiences and conveyed through language (Mahardika, 2016). Literature is interrelated with numerous disciplines, including psychology, in terms of conveying their emotions, directing the reader to the psychological aspects of the literary work, and clearly portraying the characters that contribute to the psychological value of the literary work. Consequently, literature and psychology share a mutually beneficial interaction, where psychology could successfully presenting characters and bringing the readers into psychological dimension of human reality (Yimer, 2019).

Societies that adhere to a patriarchal ideology show significant gaps in terms of gender equality. Women and men play different roles in various contexts, including the family, workplace, and society. Traditional gender roles in the family often limit women's roles within the domestic role, resulting in inequality and marginalization in society. To be a faithful wife, women have responsibility for household roles, namely taking care of household chores, their husbands, and children. Men have traditionally fulfilled the role of breadwinner by working outside the home to meet the material needs of the household; as stated by Sultana, patriarchy refers to male domination in both the public and private spheres (Sultana). Gender roles result from constructions formed by a patriarchal society, which upholds the belief that men hold authority in the family and occupy a higher position than women.

Social conceptions that stereotypically divide men and women into different roles have their roots in the patriarchal system, which elevates men to a higher status. In this case, women tend to be disadvantaged and society is culturally trapped in patriarchy, which supports male privilege (Johnson, 2015). A patriarchal culture is characterized by the belief that men should hold leadership positions within their families or societies, exerting greater authority than women. It

demonstrates that women will never be treated fairly in society or the household, leading to the stereotypes that make women second-class citizens and unequal to men (Sedayu, 2018).

China is one of the societies that adhere to the patriarchal system. As explained by Xiaoyan Peng, Chinese society views men and women as Qian and Kun, respectively, which identifies to Heaven for men and Earth for women, and this way of thinking has been firmly ingrained in the general mindset of Chinese society for thousands of years. (Peng, 2014). These patriarchal systems give rise to societal stereotypes, which in turn impact the restrictions that are placed on the roles that each gender is expected to play and the behaviors they are expected to exhibit.

Furthermore, gender stereotypes encompass psychological attributes and behaviors that are perceived to emerge in different frequencies among the two gender categories (Ember, 2004). For instance, it is commonly believed that men exhibit more significant levels of aggression while women tend to display heightened emotional tendencies. To be subjected to gender stereotypes in the context of roles beneath the family, real women are often expected to take responsibility relating to the household (Arifatin, 2019). Gender stereotypes are not only depicted in society but also often depicted in Disney princess movies by showing femininity and masculinity traits in each character. Therefore, the depiction of gender stereotypes in the movie may influence the audience's perceptions of gender. The appearance of the princesses influences some girls who watch the movie and begin to imitate them, while some boys may wish to be courageous and strong like the prince (Ramadhan, 2019). Like most young girl wishing to be a lucky one of having the chance of becoming a princess and young boy dreaming of being a super hero prince.

Gender stereotype leads to negative impacts, particularly on girls in the adolescent stage. This is due to information about the differences in traits between boys, who are perceived as more courageous and strong, and girls, who are perceived as passive and emotional. Both boys and girls experience changes in self-esteem during adolescence. However, girls' self-esteem seems to have a more negative impact during adolescence, while boys seem to have a more positive impact (Quatman and Watson qtd. in Zhao, 2022). Thus, stereotypes limit girls' potential to improve their abilities, pursue career goals, and make life decisions. Therefore, these stereotypes limit the opportunities for adolescent girls to develop their skills, particularly during self-discovery.

The developmental psychology theory by Erik Erikson identifies eight distinct psychosocial stages, which includes, *Infancy*, *Toddlerhood*, *Preschool*, *Elementary school*, *Adolescence*, *Young adulthood*, *Middle adulthood*, and the last is *Late adulthood* (Myers 540). In the adolescent stage is a period of identity vs. role confusion, which becomes a challenge for adolescent development (Zhao, 2022). Consequently adolescents at this stage receive the impact of gender stereotypical information believed in a patriarchal society, especially on girls. Moreover, according to Zhao, gender stereotypes have three impacts on adolescent girls, which leads to low self-esteem, future career tendencies, and social identity in each individual (Zhao, 2022).

From the researches and literature mentioned above, gender stereotype brings some impacts and one of them is psychology. This study focuses on examining the gender stereotypes in the female main character, Mulan. It represents the struggle of Mulan, who lived in a Chinese patriarchal society during her lifetime. This movie illustrates gender stereotypes by depicting women in subordinate positions to dominant males. As an adolescent girl, Mulan experiences unequal roles and is expected to conform to female standards by her society or family. Moreover, this study also analysed the impacts of gender stereotypes on Mulan's psychological development. As a result of the negative impact of gender stereotypes in society, women are more likely to encounter inequality and injustice in this regard.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative research methods, which will be used to report data by describing and conveying it in the form of sentences. According to Patron and Cochran, qualitative research aims to understand several aspects of social life by generating data for analysis (Patton and Cochran, 2).

Qualitative methods will provide an understanding of the aspects to be analysed using descriptive explanations. Therefore, qualitative research methods aim to describe phenomena and social aspects in a movie to be analysed.

The data of this study were in the form of sentences, dialogues, and narratives in movie scripts. The data were collected through several steps; the first is watching a movie and reading a movie script. After collecting the data, the analysis uses the theory underlying this study, which is related to the impact of gender stereotypes. This analysis uses descriptive analysis techniques by explaining and interpreting all data with references so that research problems can be answered.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings in this study found the psychological impacts of gender stereotypes towards Mulan as an adolescent portrayed in the *Mulan* movie. As reflected in the movie, throughout her life, up to the time when she is an adolescent, Mulan received information regarding gender roles and stereotypes in society. She learns about the construction of gender and the cultural norms to which she must adhere. Thus, the information about gender stereotypes influences her development at an adolescence stage, when she starts to establish her role identity. According to Zhao, the impacts of gender stereotypes can be divided into three categories: low self-esteem, a tendency to choose future career paths, and social roles (Zhao, 2022). The following sections present an in-depth explanation of each finding.

Low Self-Esteem

According to Quatman and Watson, during adolescence, both girls and boys will experience changes in self-esteem, but girls appear to have more negative self-esteem in this regard (qtd. in Zhao, 2022). As a consequence of receiving negative information about women, adolescent girls are more likely to experience the impacts of low self-esteem. In Chinese society, adolescent girls are constantly taught to conform to gender norms, which have an effect on how they search for their self-identity. Mulan's low self-esteem makes her anxious, as stated in the quote below:

MULAN:
ANCESTORS HEAR MY PLEA
HELP ME NOT TO MAKE A FOOL OF ME
AND TO NOT UPROOT MY FAMILY TREE
KEEP MY FATHER STANDING TALL
Mulan joins a row of girls approaching the Matchmaker's room.
(Mulan 11)

In the movie, Mulan is portrayed as nervous when she is going to meet the matchmaker. Mulan thought she could not conform to societal norms as a woman who was about to become bride-to-be. Before her conversation with the matchmaker, she feared that she would not pass the test to determine whether she would make a suitable bride. She prays that she will be able to uphold the honor of her father and fulfill the expectations that have been placed upon her by her family and society. Mulan's low self-esteem is shown in the anxiety she feels before meeting the matchmaker to discuss whether or not she is a suitable candidate for the bride.

Mulan is anxious about her meeting with the matchmaker, which causes her a great deal of pressure. According to Harter, an individual with high self-esteem will experience an improvement in life quality. On the other hand, low self-esteem puts a person at risk for various emotional and behavioral disorders, including lack of motivation, suicidal behavior, anxiety, eating disorders, delinquency, conduct disorders, and depression (Quatman and Watson, 2001) As a result of her family's expectations, she feels that her personality is different from that of other women, making it difficult for her to conform to societal norms, as stated in the following quotation.

MULAN:
LOOK AT ME
I WILL NEVER PASS FOR A PERFECT BRIDE

OR A PERFECT DAUGHTER
CAN IT BE
I'M NOT MEANT TO PLAY THIS PART
NOW I SEE
THAT IF I WERE TRULY
TO BE MYSELF
I WOULD BREAK MY FAMILY' S HEART

Throughout, Mulan sees her image in the garden pond, in the family temple ...

(Mulan 16)

Because she cannot adhere to gender norms and become a suitable bride in her society, Mulan expresses great sadness and regret throughout the story. When compared to the other adolescents shown, she has a personality that stands out as unique. Her culture expects women to be gentle and submissive, yet she defies those expectations by being proactive. After all of the conflict Mulan had been through, she concluded that she could not possibly fulfill society's and the matchmaker's expectations of a suitable bride. Mulan desires to be herself, which differs from the stereotypical expectations of women in society. Therefore, Mulan felt sad and feared she would once again destroy the hopes and feelings of her family.

According to Bolognini (1996) in early adolescence, women have lower self-esteem than men, according to a number of studies examining gender disparities in self-esteem. Adolescent girls, who have been taught about the norms that exist in society as a form of influence from gender stereotypes, tend to have low self-esteem. As in the quote below:

MULAN: Stop—I'm sorry, I'm sorry!

(then; setting him down)

I'm just ... nervous. I've never done this before.

And I could certainly use your help.

MUSHU: (CONT'D) Then you're gonna have to trust me.

And keep your hands to yourself. We clear on that?

(Mulan 34)

In the quotation, Mulan appears to be experiencing great deal of anxiety as she is about to enter the military camp, where she will be disguised as 'Ping'. Her anxiety arises before entering the military, illustrating that Mulan does not have significant self-confidence despite being aware that doing so could assist her in locating her actual self. She makes the decision to rely on Mushu for assistance rather than on herself as she is undergoing training to become a soldier. In addition, Mulan could join the military and keep her career there due to the support she received from Mushu.

Moreover, before joining the military training, Mulan experienced a lack of self-confidence and struggled with insecurity about her. As in the quote from the conversation, "MULAN: It's going to take a miracle to get me into the army" (Mulan 31). Mulan, a woman disguised as a man so she can join the military, has an unsettling feeling that the military is more suited for men. Consequently, she prays for a miracle and puts in much effort to prepare for her career in the military. Instead of having confidence in her and trusting her abilities, Mulan believes that a miracle helps her to join the army.

Future Career

In addition to the impact on the level of self-esteem, gender stereotypes also have an impact on the future career choices of each adolescent girl. Low self-esteem impacts a girl's confidence in their abilities, resulting in low competitiveness between girls and boys. According to Buser, statements that the differences in self-confidence between girls and boys contribute to some gender differences in competitiveness (Buser et al, 2014). The self-confidence and self-esteem of adolescents influence their career choices. Therefore, adolescent girls' and boys' confidence in their future competitiveness is affected by the gender-related information they frequently receive

from society. As described by Mulan in the following quote:

MUSHU: No, they're men.

And you're gonna have to act just like them, so pay attention. (Mulan 35)

MULAN: (eyes wide) I don't think I can do this. (Mulan 35)

As experienced by Mulan, she felt less confident about her future career because she often received negative information from the community. Before entering the military, she felt unsure about her ability. It is a new step for Mulan to start her career. At first, Mulan was confident in replacing her father's position by entering the military, but she was afraid that, as a woman, she could not do the same tasks as men. Moreover, throughout her life, she had always been taught the norms of each gender in society and the information that women have a gentle and graceful demeanour and have different careers from men. As a result, Mulan felt worried about her ability to perform tasks usually done by men in the male-dominated military environment.

The cultural beliefs of adolescents and society as a whole regarding gender roles have become one of the factors that can affect the selection of the proper career path (Kimaro and Lawuo, 2014). Therefore it has an impact that is detrimental to the self-worth development of adolescents, particularly adolescent girls. Women will choose careers that conform to societal expectations and existing norms. In line with Zhao's opinion, women tend to choose careers that correspond to the stereotypes they obtain in school (Zhao, 2022). It is depicted in the *Mulan* (1998) movie, where Mulan sacrifices her future career to return to Fa's family, as in the quote below:

EMPEROR: See to it that this woman is made a member of my council.

Chi Fu can hardly contain his shock.

MULAN: With all due respect, Your Excellency, I think I've been away from home long enough. (Mulan 96)

In the quote above, Mulan demonstrates that she has to return to her family because she believes that her role as a soldier is not in keeping with the standards that are upheld in society. The Emperor invited Mulan to join his council, but she refused. She had earned the opportunity due to her amazing abilities, which had been successful in defeating the Huns and saving the empire. Despite this, Mulan returned to her family at their house. Mulan demonstrates that as a woman who frequently receives negative information about gender stereotypes, she chooses a career that conforms to the gender roles ingrained in societal culture.

Social Roles

Patriarchal society constructs gender roles that impact every adolescent at their stage of psychological development. Significant differences in roles often create injustice to each gender, especially women who should get equality in their roles. This impact occurs in adolescents who are learning from their social observations. Adolescents gain knowledge from their interactions and experiences in society, influenced by gender expectations that have been deeply created in a patriarchal society. Consequently, adolescents tend to conform to societal norms. As Eagly and Wood stated that "Children and adolescents learn through observation that there are societal gender roles, and by internalizing these observations, adolescents develop attitudes towards these gender roles" (Ullrich et al, 2022).

As portrayed in the movie, when Mulan's disguise as a man was revealed, she was humiliated by Chi Fu and then the whole troops left her alone, as in the quote, "MULAN: I should never have left home" (Mulan 78). The failure of her disguise hurts Mulan, and she also expresses regret for leaving her home. Mulan, during her developmental period, learnt about the provisions of societal norms and culture that she had to abide by has shaped her identity to fulfil the gender roles expected by society. So she said to go home immediately and meet her father, "MULAN: I guess we go home now. I'll have to face my father sooner or later" (Mulan 80). The term 'home' refers to the duties as a woman who is expected to be at home and perform various domestic responsibilities. Thus, Mulan, who regrets leaving home and experiencing failure, realizes that her actions were inappropriate and contrary to societal norms.

Mulan joined the army not only because she wanted to replace her sick father, but also to prove that she was capable of providing a happy and honorable life for her family. However, when Mulan finally understands her position in society, she is overwhelmed with feelings of guilt and shame. Her true identity as a soldier was eventually discovered, resulting in her troops abandoning her, as in the quote below:

MULAN: Maybe I didn't go for my father ...
Maybe what I really wanted was to prove I could do things right ...
so when I looked in the mirror-(picking up her helmet)
I'd see someone worthwhile.
She looks at her reflection in the helmet.
MULAN: But I was wrong. . . I see nothing.
(Mulan 79)

Since Mulan is a girl and holds no significant role in society, her opportunities are extremely restricted. Because of this, Mulan believes she is a failure due to the restrictions limiting her goals. As a result, Mulan feels bitter and sad. The depicted gender characteristics reinforce stereotypical gender roles; consequently, students associate these characteristics with their gender identity (Sekhar Pm and Jayaraman). The characteristics of each gender portrayed by Chinese society in the movie affect Mulan's perception of the role she intends to perform. Considering this, she concludes that she must adhere to society's standards.

In addition, women have always been prevented from enhancing their skills and pursuing their desired professions. It leads to the misinterpretation of women in the social environment, daily discussions, and educational settings that reflect societal attitudes towards women (Zhao, 2022). Thus, the environment has a significant impact on adolescent girls' process of self-discovery. In the following quote:

MULAN: So you'll die for honor?
FA ZHOU: (voice rising) I will die doing what's right!
MULAN: But if you—
FA ZHOU: I know my place! (then) It is time you learned yours.
(Mulan 20)

Mulan opposes her father going to the military due to his poor health, but her father gets angry and points out that he has a role to obey. Mulan growing up in an environment that embraces male culture; makes it difficult for her to express the role she wants or be herself ultimately; she has to follow the norms that have been set by society. Thus, gender bias in society often prevents individuals from achieving their dreams. As Sekhar PM and Jayaraman stated that, as societal norms dictate the appropriate position for each gender, prejudice based on gender can prevent individuals from achieving their goals (Sekhar Pm and Jayaraman, 2020). When it comes to the different roles that each gender plays, there are frequently boundaries that dictate what can occur and what is not acceptable. Therefore, misrepresenting women in a patriarchal society distorts Mulan's perspective on her social identity. A stereotypical gender causes her to feel inferior, which prevents her from growing as an individual and causes her to conform to societal norms.

CONCLUSION

The negative information Mulan receives in a patriarchal society impacts her psychological development as an adolescent. The impact is characterized by low self-esteem, future career choices, and social roles. Mulan's low self-esteem is a consequence of the negative information of societal gender stereotypes. As a result, Mulan feels nervous and lacks confidence in her abilities. Her lack of confidence also impacted on her future career. Mulan could have been a council member, but refused the offer and choose to returned to her family as a daughter instead. Social roles influence adolescent girls' comprehension of their social identity and their realization of societal norms. It depicted by the character Mulan that she was responsible to the whole family since she was the first child.

Therefore, gender stereotypes that depicted in Chinese society have a negative impact on Mulan at the significant developmental time of adolescence. In contrast, Chinese boys are in a better favorable position due to the positive impact. Therefore, by bringing out these issues to the attention of adolescent girls, they can become aware of the impact that gender stereotypes have on their psychological development and challenge these stereotypes to promote gender equality as well as create a more inclusive society.

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