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ONCE UPON A REMIX

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ONCE UPON A REMIX:
RACE, REPRESENTATION, AND DISNEY'S
MODERN FAIRYTALES

A Master's Thesis

by
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July 2025

To my future self

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FAIRYTALES

The Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences
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July 2025

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ABSTRACT

ONCE UPON A REMIX: RACE, REPRESENTATION, AND DISNEY'S MODERN FAIRYTALES

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M.A. in Media and Visual Studies

Advisor: Asst. Prof. Özen Baş

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This thesis explores how Disney's recent live-action remakes (The Little Mermaid [2023], Aladdin [2019], and Mulan [2020]) engage with themes of race, ethnicity, and cultural identity, particularly in comparison to their animated predecessors from the Disney Renaissance era. As global conversations around diversity and inclusion evolve, Disney has become a focal point for praise and criticism. It stands at the intersection of nostalgia and influence. It is a cherished part of many childhoods and a powerful corporation that helps shape dominant narratives about identity, difference, and belonging. Rather than assuming these adaptations represent either superficial gestures or profound transformations, this study critically examines the representational shifts they introduce. Using qualitative textual analysis, it considers casting decisions, character development, visual aesthetics, and cultural settings to

assess how mainstream storytelling constructs inclusion. These films offer particularly compelling case studies due to their international visibility, commercial success, and the public debates they sparked concerning race, authenticity, and performative inclusivity. The findings indicate that while these remakes present a more diverse visual landscape and incorporate language of empowerment, they often leave underlying ideological structures intact. This thesis contributes to broader discussions about how media institutions negotiate race and culture, revealing how inclusion can be offered in form but not always in substance.

Keywords: Disney, race, ethnicity, representation, performative wokeness.

ÖZET

BİR VARMIŞ BİR YOKMUŞ: IRK, TEMSİL VE DİSNEY'İN MODERN MASALLARI

Güven, Rüya

Yüksek Lisans, Medya ve Görsel Çalışmalar

Tez Danışmanı: Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Özen Baş

Temmuz 2025

Bu tez, Disney'in son dönem canlı aksiyon uyarlamaları (*The Little Mermaid* [2023], *Aladdin* [2019] ve *Mulan* [2020]) üzerinden ırk, etnisite ve kültürel kimlik temsillerini, özellikle Disney Rönesansı dönemine ait animasyon öncülleriyle karşılaştırmalı olarak ele almaktadır. Küresel ölçekte çeşitlilik ve kapsayıcılık üzerine yürütülen tartışmalar gelişirken, Disney bu söylemlerin merkezinde övgü ve eleştiriye açık bir figür hâline gelmiştir. Şirket, bir yandan pek çok kişi için nostaljik bir çocukluk parçasıyken, diğer yandan kimlik, ötekilik ve aidiyet gibi konularda baskın anlatıları şekillendiren güçlü bir kültürel aktördür. Bu çalışma, söz konusu uyarlamaların yüzeysel bir jest mi yoksa radikal bir dönüşüm mü sunduğunu varsaymak yerine, temsil biçimlerindeki değişimleri eleştirel bir bakışla

incelemektedir. Nitel metin çözümlemesi yöntemiyle yapılan analiz; oyuncu seçimleri, karakter gelişimi, görsel estetik ve kültürel mekânlar gibi unsurları değerlendirerek ana akım hikâye anlatıcılığında kapsayıcılığın nasıl inşa edildiğini sorgulamaktadır. Uluslararası görünürlükleri, ticari başarıları ve ırk, özgünlük ve performatif kapsayıcılık üzerine tetikledikleri tartışmalar sebebiyle bu üç film özel olarak incelenmeye değerdir. Bulgular, bu yeniden yapımların daha çeşitli bir görsel dünya sunduğunu ve güçlenme dilini benimsediğini; ancak çoğu zaman altta yatan ideolojik yapıları olduğu gibi koruduğunu göstermektedir. Bu tez, medya kurumlarının ırk ve kültürü nasıl müzakere ettiğine dair genel tartışmalara katkı sunmakta; biçimsel kapsayıcılığın her zaman içeriksel bir dönüşüm anlamına gelmediğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Disney, ırk, etnisite, temsil, performatif uyanış.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In today's culture, it is uncommon to encounter someone unfamiliar with names like Walt Disney, Snow White, Cinderella, or Mickey Mouse. The Walt Disney Company has controlled the animation business since Steamboat Willie's 1928 premiere. For more than a century, Disney's characters and films have captivated children and adults worldwide. Disney, an American business with almost 200,000 employees and operations in over 40 countries, sees itself as a "leading diversified international family entertainment and media enterprise" (*The Walt Disney Company*, 2018, para. 1). In addition to creating animated movies, The Walt Disney Company also owns theme parks, merchandise, and television networks, such as ESPN and the American Broadcasting Company. The firm has expanded to include companies such as 20th Century Fox, Marvel companies, Lucasfilm, and Pixar Animation Studios since the year 2000. It is safe to say that The Walt Disney Company operates in a variety of ways.

Ironically, for a brand that is linked to purity, joy, and youth, Disney's films have frequently been criticized for their gender depictions, inconsiderate and racist

themes, and lack of ethnic variety in terms of decent characters and protagonists. Both the epic love tale of Pocahontas and John Smith (Pocahontas, 1995) and the jive-talking birds in Dumbo (1941) have undoubtedly delighted and amused millions of spectators, but they have also obviously and simultaneously insulted and disturbed others. Walt Disney has a history of being anti-Semitic (see, for example, Eliot, 1994), and the firm, the man, and the beliefs are what have drawn the attention of several scholars. Some contend that Disney still has a ways to go in promoting diversity and multiculturalism, others assert that the contemporary Walt Disney Company has made progress toward a more culturally aware motion picture business.

Before exploring Disney's past, it's critical to comprehend the cultural values the firm upholds and the reasons it has attracted so much scholarly interest. Disney serves as a potent ideological machine that propagates prevailing narratives about gender, ethnicity, and identity in addition to being a major force in entertainment, as highlighted by Henry Giroux (2010) and Jack Zipes (1997). Scholars such as Bell, Haas, and Sells (1995), Byrne and McQuillan (1999), and Brode (2005) have extensively discussed how Disney films, especially animated classics, serve as socialization instruments by integrating cultural elements into their narratives.

Disney's depictions have drawn criticism for simplifying or misrepresenting non-Western cultures, promoting Eurocentric beauty standards, and maintaining stereotypes. The foundation for this argument is laid by these criticisms, which position Disney as a place of both worldwide fascination and cultural controversy, one that both reflects and influences contemporary ideals. To understand how

Disney's representations of ethnicity and race have evolved over time, it is essential to contextualize its earlier works and critiques. Examining how modern productions, especially live-action remakes, respond to, replicate, or modify these enduring trends will be made easier with this background.

1.1 Historical perspective

On December 5, 1901, Walter Elias Disney was born in Chicago, Illinois. The Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio, which later became the Walt Disney Studio, was founded in 1923 by Walter "Walt" Disney and his brother Roy. Four years later, the well-known Mickey Mouse was produced (Wasko, 2001). Without a question, one of the most important companies of our day is The Walt Disney Company. However, given that instances of its racial and ethnic stereotyping can be seen in all Disney film eras, it may also be regarded as one of the most controversial.

Disney's 1937 debut of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, one of the first animated feature-length films ever produced, completely altered the animation industry. This signals the start of what is commonly referred to as Disney's Golden Age (1937–1942), a five-year span that was characterized by films like the popular 1940 remake of *Pinocchio*, the previously mentioned *Dumbo*, and the sugar-and-tar (sweet and innocent, yet tragic and dark) film *Bambi* (1942). *Fantasia* (1940) is another Golden Age movie that continues to draw criticism for its racial themes. Sunflower, a centaur with the lower body of a donkey and the torso of a black female, was a problematic figure in this specific film. The animation business was revolutionized by Disney's 1937 release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, one of the first animated feature-length movies ever made. This marks the beginning of the five

years known as Disney's Golden Age (1937–1942), which was marked by movies such as the well-liked 1940 Pinocchio remake, the previously mentioned Dumbo, and the sugar-and-tar picture Bambi (1942). Another classic film that is still criticized for its racial undertones is Fantasia (1940). In this particular movie, Sunflower, a centaur with the torso of a black woman and the lower body of a donkey, was a problematic character. Following severe criticism for its satirical look and function as a servant to the other "white" centaurs, Disney eventually removed this character (Byrne & McQuillan, 1999). Nevertheless, despite some controversial themes, most Golden Age films continued to make money.

However, Disney nearly went bankrupt in 1941, and to stay afloat, it began making propaganda short films for the US government. These short films often starred well-known Disney characters, such as Donald Duck, who battles his dreams about living in Nazi Germany (Der Fuehrer's Face, 1940), and the seven dwarfs who go into town to exchange their newly found diamonds for war bonds (7 Wise Dwarfs, 1941). It should come as no surprise that this era of Disney animation has frequently been referred to as the Wartime Era (1943-1949). Disney's financial difficulties during this period also led to the production of live-action and animated feature films (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018). The 1946 box office hit Song of the South was one of these movies; it was another Disney production that received much flak for portraying African Americans and African-American history. Richard M. Breaux describes the post-slavery America shown in *Song of the South* as "a sanitizing of African-American history and denial of its and our nation's racist past" (2010, p. 399), where racism seems to be nonexistent and everyone is happy regardless of skin color or social standing. According to Breaux (2010), this underlying bias is still

visible in many of Disney's films, even though the overt issues may have vanished over the years as Western culture has become more diverse and culturally conscious.

Disney's third filmmaking era, the Silver Age (1950–1967), produced several films that are still problematic, even if many of them are regarded as superior to the studio's Second World War offerings. Many Disney controversies still center on issues like *Peter Pan's* (1953) highly caricatured Native Americans and its prominent song, "What Made the Red Man Red." Disney's animated animal characters have also been the subject of controversy during the Silver Age. For example, the aggressive Siamese cats in *Lady and the Tramp* (1955) are based on negative preconceptions about East Asians, while the monkeys in *The Jungle Book* (1967) are the only animals in the film with African-American accents. Additionally, the orangutan King Louie (voiced by the white American singer Louis Prima) sings the song "I Wan'na Be Like You," which expresses the monkeys' desire to become more human. This has been problematic for many critics because of the stereotypical characteristics the monkeys are targeted for (see, for example, Giroux, 2010). Walt Disney oversaw *The Jungle Book*, the final animated feature picture. His passing in 1966 is typically considered the catalyst for the end of the Silver Age.

Disney's Bronze Age still had a lot of the issues mentioned before. The slanted-eyed Siamese cat in *Aristocats* (1970) who plays a variety of instruments with his chopsticks and the stereotypical Latino Chihuahua in *Oliver & Company* (1988), Ignacio Alonzo Julio Federico de Tito, who steals a car among other undesirable matters, are two examples of this. Despite the criticism, animal stereotypes are common in more recent Disney eras, most likely as a humorous relief.

One of Disney's most profitable filmmaking periods, known as the Disney Renaissance (1989–1999), began with the 1989 release of *The Little Mermaid*. During this time, many films usually included non-Western people or settings. Because of this, some have become somewhat controversial, even if they are still quite popular. This thesis will mostly concentrate on this period of Disney animation and the Revival Era (2009–present) and Post-Renaissance (2000–2008). Now, utilizing this brief historical overview as a foundation, I can elaborate on the specific objectives, purpose, and justification for my master's thesis.

1.2 Market Reach & Contextual Background

Before examining this study's specific aims and research questions, it is essential to situate the selected films within the broader terrain of commercial imperatives, ideological shifts, and political-economic structures. This section looks at how *The Little Mermaid* (2023), *Aladdin* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020) not only showcase evolving approaches to race and cultural identity but also illustrate how these shifts are tightly interwoven with global market strategies, audience reception patterns, and the bottom-line logic of corporate profit. These three titles—each a remake of a Disney Renaissance classic—were chosen for their divergent representation methods, distinctive global release strategies, and uneven box office trajectories.

Disney, as a global media behemoth, functions not just as a purveyor of entertainment but as a formidable ideological force deeply embedded in the structures of the political economy. As Mosco (2009) contends, media industries do not operate in a vacuum; they often mirror their time's dominant political and

economic logics. With that in mind, Disney's decisions around these live-action remakes—from casting choices to narrative reconfigurations—can be read less as purely artistic endeavors and more as finely tuned responses to market demands and brand management concerns internationally.

Take *Aladdin* (2019), for instance. The film proved to be a blockbuster, raking in over \$1.05 billion worldwide—a stark leap from the original 1992 version's \$504.05 million (Box Office Mojo, n.d.-a; Wikipedia, 2023a). Despite criticism for using ethnically ambiguous casting and orientalist aesthetics (Vanity Fair, 2020), the film leaned into nostalgia while updating Princess Jasmine's role to foreground female agency—an update that seemed to strike a chord globally. *Mulan* (2020), by contrast, stumbled. Although the remake was tailored for the Chinese market—stripping out the original's fantasy elements and aligning more closely with nationalist themes—it pulled in just \$69.97 million against the 1998 version's \$304.32 million (Box Office Mojo, n.d.-b; The Numbers, n.d.). Political controversies, particularly around its filming location in Xinjiang and its perceived alignment with the Chinese government, drew criticism from Chinese and Western audiences (Wikipedia, 2023b).

Then there is *The Little Mermaid* (2023), which grossed roughly \$569.6 million worldwide, outperforming the 1989 original's \$211.34 million (Reddit, 2024; Wikipedia, 2023c). The casting of Halle Bailey, a Black actress, as Ariel sparked a firestorm, at once a cause for celebration among some and a target for racist backlash among others. As such, the film became more than just a remake; it morphed into a litmus test for global conversations on race, representation, and cultural gatekeeping.

Table 1. Disney Remakes – Box Office Performance, Themes, and Market Reception

Film	Original Release (Year)	Original Worldwide Box Office	Live-Action Release (Year)	Live-Action Worldwide Box Office	Gain/Loss
The Little Mermaid	1989	\$211.34 M	2023	\$569.6 M	+\$358 M
Aladdin	1992	\$504.05 M	2019	\$1.051 B	+ \$547 M
Mulan	1998	\$304.32 M	2020	\$69.97 M	– \$234 M

These films highlight how tightly cultural narratives and identity politics have become woven into the fabric of global media strategy. Disney, in particular, has shown that representation is not just a symbolic gesture but a calculated business decision. Casting choices or politically nuanced edits can boost profits or spark backlash, often hinging on where the film lands and who is watching.

Take Aladdin, for instance—it managed to walk the tightrope between nostalgia and modern-day values, offering just enough ideological updating to feel fresh without alienating its core audience. Mulan, on the other hand, is a cautionary tale. Its reception underscored the dangers of misreading political sentiments in international markets. And then there is The Little Mermaid, which tapped into the fervor of socially conscious Gen Z viewers, many of whom drove viral support on platforms

like TikTok. However, that same energy also exposed the ongoing discomfort some global markets still have with racially inclusive storytelling.

What is striking across all three cases is how Disney recalibrated its approach to representation based on what it thought each market would embrace. Sometimes it paid off. Sometimes it did not. The takeaway? Inclusion might trend but does not always guarantee a box office win.

Using these films as case studies lets us go beyond surface-level debates about diversity. It opens a window into the machinery behind modern media—the strategic, often profit-driven decisions that shape which identities get spotlighted and how. The differing outcomes in revenue, public reception, and cultural pushback tell us a lot about the evolving, and at times uneasy, relationship between ideology and entertainment.

This study is also rooted in something deeply personal. Like many from my generation, I grew up enchanted by the world Disney built. Its melodies, characters, and storybook magic felt like a natural part of childhood. However, as I got older and began rewatching those same films through a more critical lens, I noticed the subtler layers beneath the surface. What once felt like harmless fairytales turned out to be carrying potent cultural messages. I became increasingly attuned to how ideas about race, gender, and ethnicity were woven into those narratives, and how these portrayals subtly shape how children, especially those just beginning to form their views of the world, come to understand identity and difference. I realized media does

not just reflect culture; it actively constructs it, filling in those blank slates with signals about who belongs and who does not.

That realization pushed me toward more profound questions about representation, cultural power, and the media's role in reinforcing or challenging social norms.

Rather than simply critiquing Disney as a cultural juggernaut, I wanted to examine how its shifting strategies reflect broader ideological and market transformations.

First, this project contributes to the growing scholarship on how contemporary media reframes race and culture, with a focus on Disney's Renaissance-era remakes. These films strike a unique chord because they blend nostalgia with deliberate modern updates, making them particularly ripe for critical analysis. Second, I explore how Disney navigates neoliberal multiculturalism and performative wokeness. These approaches are not solely acts of inclusion, but also branding strategies tailored to appeal to increasingly diverse yet ideologically fragmented global audiences. This places my research at the intersection of representation and corporate marketing, an under-explored space.

Third, by applying theoretical frameworks such as Edward Said's Orientalism, Rosalind Gill's postfeminism, and theorists who critique colorblind casting like Kristen Warner, I aim to bridge foundational theory with real-world media trends.

Finally, my findings suggest that while surface-level representation has become more visible, the deeper cultural power and exclusion structures remain largely intact. In this way, the project critiques and complicates the notion of progress in media inclusivity.

This is why my thesis matters. It is not just a scholarly investigation into Disney or film studies. It reflects my evolving awareness, my grappling with the media that shaped me, and my hope to contribute thoughtfully to understanding identity, power, and representation in an increasingly globalized media landscape.

The following section sharpens the focus by building on this mix of cultural context and commercial insight. It lays out the core aims, scope, and guiding questions that drive this thesis. By zeroing in on the three selected films, the analysis will unpack how Disney's evolving approach to representation plays out across different markets and moments, revealing what changes and why those changes matter.

The way audiences have responded to Disney's live-action remakes is shaped not just by nostalgia or changing ideas about representation, but also by how these films are situated within an increasingly competitive global entertainment market. Remakes like *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin*, and *Mulan* sparked wide-ranging conversations across news outlets, social media, and review platforms, often revealing a stark divide between those applauding increased diversity and those decrying what they see as political correctness gone too far. For instance, the 2023 version of *The Little Mermaid* triggered a wave of racist backlash after Halle Bailey was cast as Ariel, with the film's trailer receiving hundreds of thousands of dislikes shortly after its release (Lattanzio, 2022). On the other hand, outlets such as Vox and The Guardian commended the casting as a meaningful step forward for visibility and representation among historically marginalized viewers (Romano, 2023; Bradshaw, 2023). *Mulan* (2020) faced its share of controversy when lead actress Liu Yifei publicly supported the Hong Kong police during pro-democracy protests, leading to boycotts across

several countries (BBC, 2020). Meanwhile, *Aladdin* (2019) drew criticism for adding Prince Anders, a new white character who served as comic relief, prompting some to argue that Disney was subtly re-centering whiteness even as it diversified its cast (Abad-Santos, 2019). These public debates clarify that remaking iconic stories is a fraught endeavor, particularly in shifting cultural values. The reception of these films ultimately highlights the complex interplay between economic strategy, representational politics, and audience expectations in the global media landscape.

1.3 Aims, scope, and justification

With a focus on problems of ethnicity, race, gender, and cultural representation, I will examine the world of Disney animation in my thesis. By examining several Disney animated films, I will investigate and argue about how the company portrays ethnicity and race in its modern animated films. I also examine whether and how these depictions have evolved. Although these concerns touch on more general subjects like gender, sexuality, and identity, my major area of interest is still how casting, visual representation, and narrative changes are used to negotiate race and multiculturalism.

These topics have gained significant public attention in addition to being at the center of scholarly discussion. Numerous discussions on social media, news sites, and fandom communities have been sparked by Disney's casting choices, cultural representations, and alleged "woke" changes. Media representation is now at the center of cultural politics, as seen by the controversy surrounding *Mulan* (2020) and *Aladdin* (2019) or the outrage surrounding *The Little Mermaid* (2023).

These questions expand on previous research that portrays Disney as a cultural educator and a source of nostalgia (Giroux & Pollock, 2010; Zipes, 1997). According to Byrne & McQuillan (1999), Disney movies influence how the general public views race and diversity while also serving as reflectors of dominant ideological ideals. This thesis examines whether current diversity initiatives represent significant ideological shifts or serve as performative tactics under neoliberal multiculturalism by concentrating on live-action reimaginings of Disney Renaissance movies.

Two main research questions lead this study::

RQ1: How do the live-action adaptations of *The Little Mermaid* (2023), *Aladdin* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020) redefine race, ethnicity, and cultural identity in comparison to their original versions?

RQ2: How far do these retellings indicate significant change in the representational politics of Disney?

This thesis extends my general scholarly interest in Disney's storytelling's racial, ideological, and cultural foundations. In this thesis I focus on how race, ethnic identity, and cultural identity work in live-action adaptations of Disney animation classics—especially in the era of the Disney Renaissance. These films are not visual overhauls but are influenced by the socio-political climate of the times and the demands of contemporary culture. They thus provide rich fields to study the changing approaches of a global entertainment conglomerate in response to the rising public concerns of race, gender, and diversity.

This thesis's objective is to critically examine how the live-action adaptations of *The Little Mermaid* (2023), *Aladdin* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020) redefine and negotiate race, ethnicity, and cultural identity in comparison to their original animated versions. These films, which were chosen because they have globally diverse locations and stark divergence from Euro-centric fairy tales, act as case studies to investigate if the changes from Disney reflect genuine developments in regards to representation or only superficial nods to diversity.

This is a timely and needed topic. Discussions of diversity in media have become more heated in recent years, and most often, Disney found itself at the center of such discussions—sometimes as a leader, other times as a target of criticism (Giroux & Pollock, 2010). Similarly to other researchers in the area, I see the double nature of Disney: on the one hand, as a nostalgic part of global childhoods, and on the other, as a corporation that shapes and perpetuates hegemonic popular discourse. Analyzing what is added, omitted, and changed in these new adaptations enables better insight into how global audiences learn to perceive difference, the other, and belonging.

Notably, this thesis does not assume that everything that has Disney has changed recently is done so in a phony. Instead, this study questions how the representation is composed, the reasoning behind the casting choices, and the types of cultural "correctives" made and for whom. This work is particularly significant considering the casting controversy, the application of colorblind approaches, and the reinterpretation of the original works written in white, Western perspectives.

The project has a narrow scope to permit more in-depth critical discussion. I will only discuss *The Little Mermaid* (2023), *Aladdin* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020) and contrast them to their respective Renaissance-age animation originals. They are the perfect films to contrast as they have globalized settings (Middle Eastern, Chinese, and underwater kingdom in the imagination with a Caribbean flair), their commercial and cultural success, and the passionate debate they have created over race, gender, and authenticity.

This thesis uses a qualitative textual analysis approach to compare the live-action adaptations of *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin*, and *Mulan* with their original animated versions. This approach enables a more thorough examination of the representation and negotiation of race, ethnicity, and cultural identity in the movies. The research uncovers the underlying ideological alterations or continuities in Disney's representation of ethnic topics by looking at casting decisions, character development, narrative developments, and visual aesthetics.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical and critical framework for the study is established in this chapter through an analysis of pertinent works and ideas about Disney's portrayal of race, ethnicity, and cultural identity. It examines how academic studies have addressed Disney animated and live-action movies, emphasizing media representation, socialization, and ideological narratives. This explains how this thesis seeks to contribute to ongoing debates and draws attention to the gaps in the current literature, especially the dearth of in-depth critique of Disney's Revival Era films. The chapter also discusses why *The Little Mermaid* (2023), *Aladdin* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020) were chosen as case studies due to their cultural significance and the public discussion surrounding casting and representation. Lastly, it presents the theoretical frameworks—such as colorblind casting, Orientalism, and postcolonial theory—that will guide the research.

2.1 Concepts and Theory

This thesis uses important ideas from media and cultural studies to analyze how race, ethnicity, and cultural identity are portrayed in Disney's live-action remakes. These

theoretical instruments offer the analytical framework that will be used to evaluate each movie and shed light on the ideological undertones present in Disney's representational techniques.

This research focuses on ideas essential to comprehending how media texts create and communicate meanings about difference, including representation, identity, cultural appropriation, and colorblind casting. The way racial and ethnic identities are portrayed, hidden, or reinterpreted in the examined films will be assessed using these terms. Although the research design and framework, as well as the layout of the study, are now determined, the theoretical tools and concepts to make sense of the films remain to be conceptualized. Because this thesis focuses on representing race, ethnicity, and cultural identity in globally disseminated Western media, several central concepts must be elaborated in greater length. Concepts such as representation, identity, cultural appropriation, and colorblind casting need to be defined, as well as more overarching frameworks such as Orientalism, postfeminism, and neoliberal multiculturalism. These theories will investigate how race and difference are represented and negotiated in the contemporary remakes of Disney and how these representations challenge or reinforce dominant ideological frameworks. The following subchapter will thus demarcate the theoretical lens through which the films will be approached and how these concepts relate to the critical cultural studies approach that frames this project.

Colorblind casting, neoliberal multiculturalism, and postfeminism are frequently associated with what academics refer to as "woke branding" or "performative wokeness." This idea describes media corporations' flimsy or symbolic actions to

maintain prevailing ideas while projecting an image of social progress (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Yoon, 2021). Such branding techniques sometimes use inclusion myths for commercial development rather than fostering significant structural change. When used performatively, wokeness thus turns into a means of "selling diversity" while avoiding more in-depth institutional criticisms. In this sense, it serves more as an aesthetic aimed at consumers than a revolutionary political position.

2.1.1 Orientalism as a Western Framework of Representation

Within international media scholarship, the Other's depiction, specifically in Western cultural production, has repeatedly been subject to analysis as a tool of public understanding and performatively consecrating power relations. Orientalism, a word coined by Edward Said in 1978 to describe the tendency of Western discourse to portray the East as strange, inferior, and drastically different, is one of the most persistent models in this respect. Orientalist imagery and character throughout Western film, commercials, and popular culture tend to compress enormous and diverse regions into cultural caricatures. As scholars argue, such discursive construction functions not only as a narrative but as a legitimating tool of colonial and imperial ideology (Shohat & Stam, 1994; Hall, 1997). Film, in particular, has become a location of immense power wherein visual signifiers, linguistic markers, and character clichés function to reinscribe these very relations. The recurrent use and combination of such markers of aesthetics, accent, costume, skin color, soundtrack, and backdrop produce a syntax of foreignness that buttresses the normatively hegemonic gaze of the West. As cultural theorist Homi Bhabha (1994) demonstrates, such representations oscillate between fear and admiration and

produce the Other as desirable and terrifying. This section shows where these Orientalist clichés are buried and rewritten in one of the most visible examples of children's mainstream media: Disney's *Aladdin*.

In his 1978 book, Said coined the term "Orientalism" to describe the relationship between the "West" and the "East." Disney's 1992 *Aladdin* reinforces Western views of the Middle East, which Said's arguments help put in perspective. In the latter part of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, the concept of the Orient changed (Said, 1978). "Orient" was the name used to describe the region inhabited by people from China to the Mediterranean. Orientalism both supported and legitimized colonization. As Said puts it, such efforts were spurred by "widespread interest in the alien and unusual" (1978, pp. 39–40). Europeans thought all Orients belonged to a lower race and needed to be saved by a higher race that knew best, according to Said (1978). European colonial rule over the Orient entailed annexing territories and controlling their resources and internal affairs. This political ideology created the "us" vs. "them" division. The former was Europe, often called the "West," while the latter was the "East," sometimes called the immobile, all-encompassing Orient. Westerners were viewed as "rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values," according to Said (1978, p. 49). On the other hand, none of these characteristics were present in Arab Orientals. Orientalism "often involves seeing Arab culture as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and at times dangerous," as stated in the Arab American National Museum (2011, para. 1). Said (1978) asserts that this distinction has become so ubiquitous that it is now acknowledged as accurate in the prevailing language of the West—scholars like as Shaheen have advanced their studies by utilizing Said's idea of Orientalism.

Shaheen (2009) is a renowned expert on how Arabs and Muslims are portrayed in the media. In 2001, he released *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Villifies a People*. In 2006, a companion documentary was published. The restrictive and frequently unfavorable portrayal of Arabs in Hollywood movies was the subject of both the book and the documentary. In his book's second edition, Shaheen examined about 1,100 movies.

Additionally, Shaheen made a concerted effort to advance nuanced portrayals of Arabs (Marble, 2017). He gave global advice to directors, performers, and studio executives. His most notable contribution is Disney's lyrical alteration to the song "Arabian Nights" in *Aladdin* (1992). Similar to Said, Shaheen explained that centuries before, the French and British developed a notion of the Arab as the Oriental Other (Jhally, 2006). Using "images of desolate deserts, corrupt palaces, and slimy souks inhabited by [...] the lazy, bearded heathen Arab Muslim," the Europeans condensed the vast region into a single colony (Shaheen, 2009, p. 13). Shaheen called this recurring, consistent vision "Arab-land." His primary concern was the demonization of Arabs by Hollywood companies. He clarified that "almost all Hollywood depictions of Arabs are bad ones" rather than the fact that Arabs are occasionally the villain (Shaheen, 2009, p. 17). He clarified that because these pictures are so common, viewers can start to believe that the Arabs on TV are genuine.

Some scholars, including Shaheen (2009) and Giroux and Pollock (2010), have criticized the initial track of *Aladdin* (1992), "Arabian Nights." The song describes

Arab culture to introduce the movie. "Oh, I come from a land/From a faraway place/Where the caravan camels roam/Where they cut off your ear/If they do not like your face/It is barbaric, but hey, it is home," was the song's opening lyrics when the movie was shown in theaters. (Giroux & Pollock, 2010, p.109). "How could a producer, with a modicum of intelligence, just a modicum of sensitivity, let a song like that open the film?" Shaheen asked in his documentary (Jhally, 2006). The song's lyrics depict a society where officials punish minor infractions with severe physical punishment. The lyric "Where they cut off your ear/If they do not like your face" (Giroux & Pollock, 2010, p. 110) was eventually replaced with the line "' Where it is flat and immense/And the heat is intense'" when Aladdin was released on video (Giroux & Pollock, 2010, p. 110). Nonetheless, the track continues to call Arab culture "barbaric." Disney is not sufficiently altering the message by not removing the "barbaric" sentence, according to Shaheen (2009). There is much more than just one song that portrays the Middle East as violent. Throughout the movie, Aladdin and Jasmine are both threatened with mutilation.

Stereotypical Arab traits depict evil characters like Jafar and the Royal Guards. Thick beards, bulbous faces, turbans, and heavy accents are characteristics of these "bad guys" (Giroux & Pollock, 2010). Nonetheless, Jasmine and Aladdin, the primary characters, have American accents. Rosina Lippi-Green's linguistic study of Disney films from the past 50 years was described in depth by Brand (2012). According to the study, characters who speak a dialect of non-standard American English tend to be the antagonists. The protagonists were limited to individuals who spoke in a "mainstream" American dialect. Aladdin is also not depicted wearing a turban, a big nose, or a lengthy beard. Salem, a former South Bay Islamic Association

spokeswoman, clarified, "They have given [Aladdin] this American persona, which makes him lovely. Because of incidents like these, my daughter claims she feels embarrassed to identify as Arab" (as quoted in Giroux & Pollock, 2010, p. 109). The frequent portrayals of Arab characters as evil give the spectator the impression that all Arabs are bad Arabs. Disney reinforces the notion that characters who do not align with White cultural norms are portrayed as less relatable or less admirable rather than embracing the idea that there are many valid ways to be human. Non-Western cultures are taught to children in simplified ways. The intricate histories and identities that make up these civilizations are not presented to them. Only the Westernized versions are shown to them.

2.1.2 Colorblind Casting

Within today's discourse around media, debates over inclusion and diversity have increasingly polarized arguments over contradictions of representation, especially in casting methods. Arguably, most contentious among these practices is "colorblind casting" as a practice growing out of a liberal politics with ambitions to move beyond race by treating all as equal, therefore bespeaking that race is not a matter of concern when questions of artistic or professional judgment are at stake. This practice, however, has been criticized as a form of "post-racial ideology" that obliterates systemic inequities by erasing historical experience (Goldberg, 2009; Ahmed, 2012). Under neoliberal regimes of media, colorblindness more often functions not as a tool of equity but as a branding strategy that keeps whiteness as the normative center and offers a shallow semblance of inclusion. Rather than resisting hegemonic standards, it may support them by depoliticizing identity and avoiding structural questions of access, authorship, and power (Warner, 2015; Yoon, 2021). This section is critical of

the concept of colorblind casting and questions its practical, ideological, and symbolic effects, primarily as it operates over Disney's shifting casting options over platforms such as theatre and film.

The technique of assigning parts without considering an actor's race or ethnicity is known as "colorblind casting." This approach is motivated by the idea that the best performance should be selected regardless of the background. Theoretically, this Method seems inclusive as it implies that the only factors used in casting are skill and merit. Scholars like Warner (2015) contend, however, that colorblind casting frequently overlooks the historical underrepresentation and systemic injustices that first determine access to opportunities. This approach has the potential to uphold current standards and solidify whiteness as the invisible default by denying the existence of race. Colorblindness may give the appearance of justice while upholding uneven power relations rather than addressing the structural marginalization of non-white performance. Scholars, therefore, distinguish between inclusive or conscious casting, which deliberately engages with racial difference as part of a diversity-oriented approach, and colorblind casting, which ignores race. In this sense, colorblind casting can serve as a neoliberal tactic that hides rather than addresses racial disparities in media representation, making it less of a progressive step.

In principle, "blind casting" should foster inclusion, but the "paint-down" approach eliminates opportunities for diversity. Colorblind casting allows performers of all races and ethnicities to apply for roles that are not race-specific. According to this assumption, "each actor selected will be the best person for the role, and somehow the diversity issues will organically work themselves out as a result of good casting

choices" (Warner, 2015, p. 34). While this Method has succeeded, it should not be confused with fostering diversity. Intentionally casting for diversity involves actively seeking racial differences, whereas colorblind casting does not consider race (Warner, 2015). Warner (2015) claims this ultimately leaves casting up to the producer or director, who lacks objectivity and has personal biases on particular portrayals. As a result, this approach may be highly beneficial or destructive in terms of expressing ethnic variety.

Disney has had some success with colorblind casting in Broadway musicals, which is more permitted in live theater. Disney's animation masterpieces have been adapted into stage musicals, and while casting has not always been diverse and whitewashing has occurred, there has been improvement. A black Kristoff from Frozen and a Japanese American Ariel from The Little Mermaid have just been hired by Disney for Broadway shows. Not much is known regarding Kristoff's casting. Nonetheless, expertise is taken into consideration in the case of Ariel by director Glenn Casale, who is renowned for his work. Chen (2017) asserts that one way to address the lack of diversity onstage successfully is to cast white actors in parts of color and actors of color in roles that white actors generally play. Casale suggests it is essential to consider the casting director's objective rather than merely convenience when determining their aim. As stated in a 2016 study titled "Inclusion or Invisibility? Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment," Disney failed inclusion ratings despite apparent advancements on the company's part (Smith, Choueiti, & Pieper, 2016). Though they sometimes misfire in the casting room, these attempts to promote colorblindness in casting should be advantageous.

"Colorblindness in its various manifestations is largely about reproducing and

denying the systemic inequality that is alive and well in Hollywood," Warner concluded after doing her research (2015, p. 47). Each time a white actor is permitted to downplay historical roles of color or when a colorblind casting call fails to produce a diverse cast, a culture is developed that provides white actors with a lot more chances than actors of color.

2.1.3 Race, ethnicity, and minority

Clarifying terminology such as ethnicity, race, diversity, multiculturalism, and minority is necessary to avoid confusion and ambiguity during the study. The term 'race' employed in this study is problematic as it has uncertain and variable definitions. Race evolved from a base of disparate families and origins to a classification tag of persons separated by physical features over cultures and states. In the early 1800s, Georges Cuvier divided mankind into three categories: Caucasian, Ethiopian, and Mongolian. Caucasians were superior to other groups regarding physical characteristics, which Cuvier later used to justify injustices (Derksen, 2007, p. 852). Due to the term's increasingly subjective and social connotations, the definition of "race" has evolved to include "[a]n ethnic group, regarded as showing a common origin and descent; a tribe, nation, or people, regarded as of common stock" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2008). The idea of ethnicity follows from this. Ethnicity is defined as "[s]tatus in respect of membership of a group regarded as ultimately of common descent, or having a common national or cultural tradition; ethnic character" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2014). Such terms are synonymous in that sense as they reflect the aforementioned concept of race. Ethnicity, however, is determined by cultural aspects like religion, country, or language, as opposed to

physical appearance, which usually determines race. Under such a concept, a person is usually a member of a single race (or mixed-race) but of several ethnicities.

Clarification of terminology like race, ethnicity, diversity, multiculturalism, and minority is necessary to minimize confusion and ambiguity during the study. This study's use of the term "race" is challenging owing to its ambiguous and shifting definitions. Race evolved from a denominator for separate families and ancestry to a categorical term for individuals divided by physical characteristics across cultures and nations. In the early 1800s, Georges Cuvier classified humanity into three categories: Caucasian, Ethiopian, and Mongolian (white, black, and yellow). Cuvier stated that Caucasians were superior to other races based on physical characteristics, which has subsequently been used to excuse injustices (Derksen, 2007). The term "race" now refers to "[a]n ethnic group, regarded as showing a common origin and descent; a tribe, nation, or people, regarded as of common stock," reflecting the word's increasingly social and subjective connotations (The Oxford English Dictionary, 2008).

This leads to the concept of ethnicity. According to The Oxford English Dictionary (2014), ethnicity is defined as "[s]tatus in respect of membership of a group regarded as ultimately of common descent, or having a common national or cultural tradition; ethnic character." The terms are considered synonyms in this sense as they reflect the concept of race that was previously discussed. However, ethnicity is defined by cultural aspects like religion, country, or language, whereas physical characteristics typically define race. According to this concept, a person is often considered to belong to one race (or be mixed-race) yet may belong to many ethnic groups.

2.2 Previous research

2.2.1 Critiques of Disney

Media conglomerates like Disney have been bellwethers in the academic critiques of cultural hegemony, representation, and ideology's global flow for several decades. As a chief producer of children's products, Disney is a preeminent builder of cultural imaginaries and social norms. Theories like those of Adorno and Horkheimer (1944) used to criticize previously the culture industry's tendency to clothe ideology in spectacle, a paradigm that remains very applicable when considering Disney's global reach and moral tales. The company's cartoon programs have long been discussed as both reflective and representative of hegemonic ideologies, particularly in what they say about race, gender, and nationhood. The impulse has been to look to Disney as a place where innocence myths are implicated in intricate configurations of power and thus mark it as a rich site of ideological criticism. The rest of this section aligns that impulse in that it adopts a tradition of analysis, borrowing upon a volume of critical literature that questions those ways that Disney imposes cultural meaning, particularly as it has to do with issues of race and ethnic representation, and reflects those points at which recent theoretical interventions complicate or deepen those older critiques.

In the 1970s, criticizing Disney was already deemed "mainstream" (Dorfman & Mattelart, 1971). Since the 1990s, Disney, the man, the business, and the movies have all been the focus of widespread criticism and academic curiosity. Numerous volumes have been published on Disney's approach to diversity, with both proponents and detractors. *Deconstructing Disney* (Byrne & McQuillan, 1999),

Multiculturalism and the Mouse: Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment (Brode, 2005), and *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (Giroux, 2010) are three important works that are frequently referenced in this section of the research. These important books, which were published five years apart, discuss how race and ethnicity are portrayed in Disney. The latter two volumes critically examine Disney's works, contrasting to Brode's earlier work.

Deconstructing Disney is the most cited study about diversity in Disney, along with books like *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* (Bell et al., 1995). Byrne and McQuillan primarily focus on Disney films produced after 1989, making their analysis especially relevant for this thesis. *Mulan*, however, is still the most recent movie covered in this book because *Deconstructing Disney* was released in 1999. This is where further information may be found in other articles and Giroux's work, which was released more than a decade after *Deconstructing Disney*.

Despite his best-known contributions to critical thought and critical pedagogy, Giroux is one of the most renowned Disney critics of our time. *The Mouse That Roared* mostly concentrates on the societal implications of Disney works rather than offering precise evaluations of the studio's movies because of Giroux's extensive study. Giroux's ideas may be more important in connecting the debate of the findings from the subsequent film analysis than the findings themselves, in contrast to Byrne and McQuillan's work.

There is a counterargument to the claim that Douglas Brode's interpretation of Disney synthesizes the two volumes already cited. In *Multiculturalism and the Mouse*, Brode argues that Disney was among the first to produce Western films that accurately depicted ethnic minorities. Brode examines Disney's offerings as well as the sociopolitical environment of the era to bolster his claims. However, even if Brode makes some intriguing points, they are still questionable. Giroux argues the following and attacks Brode for using very selective interpretations of Disney movies to bolster several of his claims: "The very fact of Disney's representation of racial minorities, implied homosexuals, or women (regardless of whether the characters are construed as positive or negative or the politics of representation is suppressed) makes Disney's politics laudatory for promoting multicultural diversity." (Giroux, 2010, p. 241) Furthermore, although *Multiculturalism and the Mouse* was released in 2005, Brode hardly mentions Disney movies made after 1989. This may render Brode's work unimportant for this investigation, but it also explains why *Multiculturalism and the Mouse* is essential to my argument. One may argue that this thesis, in a sense, "picks up where Brode left off," as the choice to concentrate on films produced after 1989 was partly motivated by the fact that these films were not included in Brode's study. Applying some of Brode's points about movies produced before 1989 to the more recent films examined in this study might add some intriguing viewpoints.

However, none of these works address any of the Disney Revival Era films (2009–present day) because of the time of publication; it is in this area that I sincerely aspire to contribute something fresh to the subject. It may be possible to assess change or advancement by using the same critiques and arguments offered by

the experts above to the more contemporary movies. Furthermore, none of the above volumes examine the general shift in Disney's representation of race and ethnicity in a comparable way.

These critical discussions demonstrate that Disney's shifting representational politics may be understood using three primary theoretical frameworks. The first lens Disney uses to analyze how it adapts folktales to conform to specific cultural norms is the fairy tale tradition. The second is gender depiction, which examines how femininity, masculinity, and princess culture have been portrayed over time. The third and final subject is race and Orientalism, which clarifies how Disney fosters cultural diversity and Western dominance. The following sections will cover each of these components in more detail.

2.2.2 Fairy Tales and Disney

Fairy tales have long served as educational and ideological tools, passing down moral principles, social ethics, and oral tradition over the ages. Fairy tales are more than just magical narratives; they are intricately woven literary works that have their roots in oral tradition and have been formalized via literature and film. According to scholars such as Jack Zipes (1995, 1997) and Maria Tatar (1992), these stories often naturalise dominant relations of power, instructing in disguise as fantasy around issues of gender, class, and national identity. As fairy tales invaded mass media's domain, particularly through animation and cinema, their function shifted from community-constituted to standardised and mass-produced products. The commodification further gave them additional ideological potency, particularly

amongst dominant purveyors like Disney. Correspondingly, the interpretation of fairy tales in recent film thus entails identifying how configurations of narrative, archetypes, and codes of aesthetics are conserved but redeployed to reflect and reinforce dominant cultural ideologies in recent contexts.

Fairy tales were originally meant to educate and introduce people to one another. Tribes shared the meaning of daily life through the face-to-face telling of stories (Zipes, 1995). "To explain natural occurrences such as the change of the seasons and shifts in the weather or to celebrate the rites of harvesting, hunting, marriage, and conquest," according to Zipes (1995, p. 22), this oral tradition was employed. Tribe members established a feeling of belonging and purpose by sharing these tales. The themes and content of the stories developed in response to the tribes' changing beliefs and behaviors. However, literacy development caused significant changes in the oral storytelling tradition. With the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, stories could be published in large quantities. These stories immediately earned formal acknowledgment as literary fairytales.

In his book *Happily Ever After* (1997), renowned fairytale expert Zipes covered the history of fairy tales, their social significance, and the close ties between fairy tales and Disney. Using Pinocchio, Hansel and Gretel, and Puss in Boots as examples, he examined the function of literary fairy tales and how cultures relate to them. He clarified how fairy stories evolved into a tool for civilization, teaching civilizations appropriate thought and behavior patterns (Zipes, 1997). People learned proper gender roles, power dynamics, conventions, and morals from literary fairy tales.

However, as technology advanced, the literary fairytale genre saw more changes, and movies became a significant medium for fairytale stories.

The way cultures may understand the stories' lessons was altered when fairy tales were adapted for the big screen. People can construct their perceptions of the characters when they hear or read a narrative. These subjective judgments are constrained when images and narratives are combined. "The images deprive the audience of the ability to visualize their characters, roles, and desires," (Zipes, 1997, p. 37). In the 1930s, the cinema industry saw significant advancements in color and sound (Zipes, 1997, p. 37), which gave filmmakers total control over how individuals were portrayed. According to Belle (as cited in Layng, 2001, p. 2), animation is a deliberate creative form. The creators' frequently distorted perceptions of the world are presented to the audience. The films' messages were entirely controlled by producers (Layng, 2001).

Walt Disney used film to transform fairy tales as an institution (Zipes, 1997). Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, released in 1937, began Disney's dominance over fairy tales. Snow White was the first fairy tale-based animated film with colors and a soundtrack. Disney became a market leader in animated fairytale films because of the film's exceptional technical and artistic production (Zipes, 1997). Thanks to Snow White, Disney also set the precedent for future animated fairytale movies toward the end of the 20th century. According to Zipes (1997), this Disney model has several vital components. He said the film had "boys' locker-room talk" themes because all the animators were men (Zipes, 1997, p. 71). The movie's overall plot is the same: the main character gets into difficulties and has to be saved. Gender determines

whether the main character or another individual performs the rescue. Character roles are also well-defined in each movie. Women are expected to care for the home and the children, while men are powerful and do most of the outside work. While virtuous personalities are usually fair, evil characters are frequently dark or black. The benchmark for animated fairytale movies is still this approach.

These days, "fairytale" is almost synonymous with Disney (Zipes, 1995). Disney holds an educational position as a result. According to Giroux and Pollock (2010), movies are seen as "teaching machines" with the power to impart morals, values, and beliefs. The lessons taught by Disney are equally valid as those taught in public schools, families, and places of religion. The movies use innocence and magic to teach kids about themselves and the meaning of life. Layng (2001, p. 2) states that the potent messages are "designed to shape and direct society toward happiness and away from evil." Therefore, it is essential to comprehend and evaluate the information that Disney conveys.

Kids see the world through the prism of Disney. At first, Disney movies came out every eight years (Layng, 2001). This allowed Disney to introduce the streamlined viewpoint to every generation. When Disney movies were first made available on video, kids could again view the films' messages. Due to its accessibility and Disney's widespread appeal, animated fairytale films have an important role in kid's socialization (Layng, 2001). Children primarily learn about themselves and their interactions with others through these videos (Giroux & Pollock, 2010). The meaning of being "male, female, white, black, gay, straight, citizen, or noncitizen" is something that Disney movies teach kids (Giroux & Pollock, 2010, p. 2). This

explains why Disney's representation of different social groups has drawn criticism from several scholars. The 2010 book *The Mouse That Roared* by Giroux and Pollock examined how Disney molds kids. "Parents, educators, and other adults must comprehend how [Disney's] animated films impact the values of the children who watch them," the authors stated (Giroux & Pollock, 2010, p. 97). Disney movies have been criticized from various angles, but this project will concentrate on how the princesses and multiple cultures are portrayed. According to academics' literary works, these issues have been the most troublesome.

2.2.3 Media Representation and the Construction of Racial and Cultural Identity

The media does not just mirror society; it molds it. The way identity, power, and cultural difference are portrayed on screen profoundly influences public understanding, often in ways that go unnoticed. As Stuart Hall (1997) famously argued in his theory of encoding and decoding, media messages are not transmitted in a vacuum. They are embedded with dominant cultural values and interpreted by audiences through the lens of their social contexts. This means media texts do not merely reflect ideology; they actively participate in producing it. Moreover, more often than not, what gets reinforced are hegemonic norms: whiteness, heteronormativity, and Western ideals positioned as the standard. Representation is not just about being seen but about how and why specific identities are legitimized while others are sidelined, caricatured, or rendered invisible altogether. Scholars like bell hooks (1992) and Shohat & Stam (1994) have long called attention to the flattening of racialized subjects into familiar, often harmful tropes: the thug, the exotic beauty, the loyal sidekick. The stakes are exceptionally high in children's

media, where complex realities are boiled down into bite-sized narratives, often reinforced through bright, stylized animation. These simplifications can subtly and powerfully teach young audiences who matters and who does not. Moreover, when these images travel across cultures, they do not just entertain; they carry with them quiet assumptions about what is normal, desirable, and dangerous. So any meaningful critique of media must go beyond counting faces on screen; it has to ask more profound questions about framing, omission, and the stories we are repeatedly told about the world.

Cultural and media studies have long focused on how culture is portrayed in the media. According to academics like Stuart Hall (1997) and Edward Said (1978), media texts construct cultural meaning through selective representation rather than reflecting reality. Hall highlights how viewers' perceptions of race, ethnicity, and national identity are shaped by encoding and decoding cultural information in the media. Similarly, Hollywood film frequently converts various cultures to static, conventional representations representing Western hegemonic ideals, according to Shohat and Stam (1994). This has an even greater impact on children's media, particularly animation, as young viewers frequently lack the critical literacy necessary to understand such pictures. As a major player in the worldwide media landscape, Disney typically acts as both a reflection and a shaper of prevailing views, contributing significantly to this cultural construction.

Disney's depiction of princesses impacts how the general public and young women perceive themselves. Similarly, the studio's simplistic outlook jeopardizes knowledge of and respect for many cultures. Disney regularly portrays characters of color as

distinct by using stereotypes. Whiteness, meanwhile, disappears. Because no stereotypes are employed to indicate otherwise, White characters are left unmarked and are presumed to be White. Race is applied to plainly identified Others, but the primary characters are unmarked, indicating their assumed and unseen whiteness, according to Barnd (2012,p. 69). Many characters of color lack complex representations and have their cultures and experiences oversimplified. As a result, minorities/others' sense of self is flattened (Giroux & Pollock, 2010). These people are frequently depicted utilizing unfavorable stereotypes that are rooted in racial beliefs ingrained in American society.

Disney has negatively portrayed many people of color for many years. The African American-accented crows in *Dumbo* (1941) are shown as impoverished, stupid, and naïve (Towbin et al., 2004, p. 28). The idea that members of this culture are impoverished, stupid, and naïve is conveyed by the correlation of these traits with characters that are classified as Black. Stereotypical Asian characteristics are also seen in *Lady and the Tramp's* (1955) Siamese cats, Si and Am. They both have thick accents, buck teeth, and slanted eyes (Akita & Kennedy, 2012, p. 55). They also use bad English because the song "The Siamese Cat Song" contains a lot of grammatical and syntactical mistakes. A summary of all the trouble Si and Am create was given by Akita and Kenney (2012, pp. 56–57). The list contains eight crimes, such as robbing a newborn of its milk, destroying a piano and draperies, and frightening a fish. The cats then accuse Lady of being the only one causing trouble. Disney conveys that these Asian traits make a character "bad"; thus, only Western traits make a character "good" by villainizing Si and Am. Latino is the code for Tito from *Oliver and Company* (1988). Spanish phrases are commonly used by Chihuahuas,

who have a Chicano accent (Barnd, 2012). Tito perpetuates Western perceptions of Latin culture. The term "aliens" worries him, and he believes that any large mansion must accommodate "at least two hundred people." (as cited in Barnd, 2012, p. 75).

Racial difference is only indicated for non-white characters, whereas protagonists like Cinderella or Ariel are racially unmarked. This reinforces the concept that whiteness is "neutral" or "universal," further solidifying the default link of "goodness" with whiteness (Giroux & Pollock, 2010). Together, these portrayals influence how audiences worldwide—children in particular—learn to identify particular beliefs and behaviors with race and culture. Therefore, in the broader framework of cultural production, Disney's portrayal of racial and ethnic heterogeneity merits careful examination.

2.2.4 Orientalism as a Western Framework of Representation

Western media's portrayal of cultural difference has always been closely tied to histories of imperial power and colonial thinking. One of the most influential frameworks for unpacking this relationship comes from Edward Said's theory of Orientalism. According to Said (1978), the "East" was not discovered but constructed by the West as a land of mystery, irrationality, and inferiority, positioned in contrast to a logical and advancing "West." This process wasn't simply about inaccurate portrayals. Orientalism functioned as a discourse—a system of ideas that helped justify geopolitical control by shaping knowledge, cultural narratives, and public opinion.

In film, these ideas don't just play out in the storyline. They show up in how characters are drawn, spaces are depicted, and who gets to be a hero or a villain. Scholars such as Shohat and Stam (1994) and Alsultany (2012) have built on Said's work, showing how movies reinforce these binary oppositions through patterns like desert landscapes versus royal palaces, barbaric villains versus civilized protagonists, and the persistent eroticization of non-Western characters. What's striking is how these patterns continue to appear even in films that promote themselves as inclusive or modern. This makes it all the more important to examine how Orientalism still operates in today's cultural output. The following section explores this further, using Disney's *Aladdin* as a case study to highlight how old narratives are repackaged for contemporary viewers.

In his 1978 book, Said coined the term "Orientalism" to describe the relationship between the "West" and the "East." Disney's 1992 *Aladdin* reinforces Western views of the Middle East, which Said's arguments help put in perspective. In the latter part of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, the concept of the Orient changed (Said, 1978). "Orient" was the name used to describe the region inhabited by individuals who traveled from Asia to the Mediterranean. Orientalism simultaneously supported and legitimized colonization. As Said puts it, these efforts were spurred by "widespread interest in the alien and unusual" (1978, pp. 39–40). Europeans thought all Orients belonged to a lower race that had to be saved by a higher race that knew best, according to Said (1978, pp. 39–40). European colonial powers ruled the Orient, which included conquering lands and regulating their resources and internal affairs. This political philosophy created an "us" vs. "them" split. Europe, often known as the "West," was the former, whilst the "East,"

commonly referred to as the static, all-encompassing Orient, was the latter. Said (1978, p. 49) states that Westerners were considered "rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values." Conversely, Arab Orientals did not exhibit any of these traits. Orientalism "often involves seeing Arab culture as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and at times dangerous," according to the Arab American National Museum (2011, para. 1). According to Said (1978), this difference has become so commonplace that it is now accepted as fact in dominant Western discourse. Scholars like as Shaheen have advanced their studies by utilizing Said's concept of Orientalism.

Shaheen is a well-known authority on the representation of Arabs and Muslims in media outlets. His book *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Villifies a People* was published in 2001. The accompanying documentary was released in 2006. The restrictive and frequently unfavorable portrayal of Arabs in Hollywood movies was the subject of both the book and the documentary. In his book's second edition, Shaheen examined about 1,100 movies.

Additionally, Shaheen made a concerted effort to advance nuanced portrayals of Arabs (Marble, 2017). He gave global advice to directors, performers, and studio executives. His most notable contribution is Disney's lyrical alteration to the track "Arabian Nights" in *Aladdin* (1992). Like Said, Shaheen clarified that the French and British had an idea of the Arab as the Oriental Other centuries before (Jhally, 2006). Using "images of desolate deserts, corrupt palaces, and slimy souks inhabited by [...] the lazy, bearded heathen Arab Muslim," the Europeans condensed the vast region into a single colony (Shaheen, 2009, p. 13). Shaheen called this recurring, consistent

vision "Arab-land." His primary concern was the demonization of Arabs by Hollywood companies. He clarified that "almost all Hollywood depictions of Arabs are bad ones" rather than the fact that Arabs are occasionally the villain (Shaheen, 2009, p. 17). He clarified that because these pictures are so common, viewers can start to believe that the Arabs on TV are genuine.

The opening track of Aladdin (1992), "Arabian Nights," has drawn criticism from several academics, including Shaheen (2009) and Giroux and Pollock (2010). The song describes Arab culture to introduce the movie. "Oh, I come from a land/From a faraway place/Where the caravan camels roam/Where they cut off your ear/If they do not like your face/It is barbaric, but hey, it is home," was the song's opening lyrics when the movie was shown in theaters. (Giroux & Pollock, 2010, p.109). "How could a producer, with a modicum of intelligence, just a modicum of sensitivity, let a song like that open the film?" Shaheen asked in his documentary (Jhally, 2006). The song's lyrics depict a society where officials punish minor infractions with severe physical punishment. When Aladdin was released on video, the phrase "Where it is flat and immense/And the heat is intense" finally took the place of the original line, "Where they cut off your ear/If they do not like your face" (Giroux & Pollock, 2010, p. 110). Nonetheless, the song continues to call Arab culture "barbaric." Disney is not sufficiently altering the message by not removing the "barbaric" sentence, according to Shaheen (2009). There is much more than just one song that portrays the Middle East as violent. Throughout the movie, Aladdin and Jasmine are both threatened with mutilation.

Stereotypical Arab traits depict evil characters like Jafar and the Royal Guards. Thick beards, bulbous faces, turbans, and heavy accents are characteristics of these "bad guys" (Giroux & Pollock, 2010). Nonetheless, Jasmine and Aladdin, the primary characters, have American accents. Brand (2012) detailed Rosina Lippi-Green's linguistic analysis of Disney movies spanning fifty years. According to the study, characters who speak a dialect of non-standard American English tend to be the antagonists. The protagonists were limited to individuals who spoke in a "mainstream" American dialect. Aladdin is also not depicted wearing a turban, a big nose, or a lengthy beard. Salem, a former South Bay Islamic Association spokeswoman, clarified, "They have given [Aladdin] this American persona, which makes him lovely. Because of incidents like these, my daughter claims she feels embarrassed to identify as Arab" (as quoted in Giroux & Pollock, 2010, p. 109). The audience is led to believe that all Arabs are terrible Arabs by the frequent depictions of Arab characters as wicked. Disney reinforces the notion that characters who do not align with White cultural norms are portrayed as less relatable or less admirable rather than embracing the idea that there are many valid ways to be human. Non-Western cultures are taught to children in simplified ways. The intricate histories and identities that make up these civilizations are not presented to them. Only the Westernized versions are shown to them.

2.2.5 Contextualizing the Disney Renaissance: Cultural Relevance and Representational Shifts

In the late 20th century, animated storytelling went through a noticeable shift. Media giants like Disney began reestablishing their global influence by releasing a series of films that were not only visually impressive and emotionally engaging but also

commercially dominant. This period, often called the Disney Renaissance (1989–1999), brought back the familiar structure of musical fairy tales, now updated with a focus on individual growth, romance, and epic adventure. While these films are nostalgic in many people's memories, they have also come under critical scrutiny for reflecting and reinforcing dominant ideas about gender, race, and culture (Zipes, 1995; Giroux, 2010; Bell et al., 1995). Animation, mainly when aimed at young audiences, does more than entertain; it subtly shapes how viewers understand the world. The Disney Renaissance is exciting in this regard. On the surface, it appears inclusive, drawing from global myths and non-Western settings. However, a closer look often reveals a familiar pattern: exotic cultures reimagined through Western lenses, simplified and stylized for mainstream appeal. This legacy becomes even more relevant today, as Disney revisits these stories through live-action remakes. It is important to understand where these narratives started to assess whether anything has truly changed in how race, ethnicity, and cultural identity are portrayed. The following section will explore how *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin*, and *Mulan* reflect the values of their original era, and how those values persist or shift in their modern retellings.

In order to put the representational shifts seen in the chosen remakes into perspective, this section provides a synopsis of the Disney Renaissance period, emphasizing its cultural relevance, narrative trends, and worldwide influence. AEven though animation technology became more expensive overall, movies made greater profits than ever during the Disney Renaissance, one of the most successful eras of Disney animation. The popularity of the films produced during this era eventually led to the establishment of Broadway musicals. Walt Disney Studios has already (or is

now) turned many of these Renaissance animations into live-action movies. In other words, even though these films were released in the decade prior, they are still very relevant nowadays. Three of the films in this research are, predictably, located here. Most of Disney's Renaissance pictures also include non-Western locales and characters.

The Little Mermaid, which debuted in 1989, signaled the start of the Disney Renaissance and is primarily credited for rejuvenating Disney's animation studio after a financial decline. The film, directed by Ron Clements and John Musker, is primarily based on the same-named fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen from 1837. It portrays the story of Ariel, a young mermaid princess who yearns for life beyond the water and eventually gives up her voice for human legs in search of love and freedom. Unlike Andersen's darker and sad original, Disney's rendition reimagines the story with a lighter tone, distinctive music, and a traditional happy ending. The movie received accolades for its emotional depth, musical soundtrack, and animation, but it also established the "Disney Princess" pattern that would later characterize the Renaissance. The story's all-white cast and lack of cultural identity were hardly questioned at the time, even though Ariel swiftly rose to fame with her Eurocentric looks, red hair, and young defiance. The Little Mermaid narrative did not reach a new stage of public discussion on race, representation, and what inclusive casting meant until the 2023 live-action remake was announced, in which Halle Bailey, a Black actress, played Ariel.

The list of relevant films begins with the Academy Award-winning box office success Aladdin, whose plot and characters are partly based on one of the most

widely recognized tales from *The Thousand and One Nights*. The film, which Ron Clements and John Musker directed, is about the story of Aladdin, an orphan who encounters a genie in a magical lamp. It is set at an indeterminate moment in the fictional and ethereal city of Agrabah. Aladdin, an orphan, attempts to change his life to win Princess Jasmine's love after the Genie granted him three wishes. Despite Aladdin's instant success, many viewers opposed it, including the American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (Shaheen, 2009, pp. 13–17). Disney's portrayal of the Middle East was criticized for several inaccurate and deceptive claims. Ultimately, Aladdin became one of the most controversial films ever produced due to its post-Gulf War and orientalist stereotypes (King, 2010, p. 74).

Disney decided to release its first animated film set in China with *Mulan*, which came out in 1998 after movies set in Pre-Colonial America, Medieval France, and Ancient Greece. Disney's second female not white lead character, after Pocahontas, is a warrior woman named after the movie's title. Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook directed the film. The story of *Mulan* is based on the popular Chinese imagination of Hua Mulan and occurs at some point during China's Northern and Southern dynasties (420–589 A.D.). In the film adaptation, Mulan enlists as a man in the Imperial military after stealing her father's equipment. Mulan is converted from a citizen to a soldier, sent to battle, and eventually (almost alone) saves the war against the Huns for China after undergoing hard, prolonged training and receiving moral and strategic guidance from her dragon companion, Mushu. *Mulan* was still not very popular in China, despite being one of the less criticized films discussed in this study. Many people praised the picture for being both feminist and open-minded (Ward, 2002, pp.

107–108). In light of the primary analysis of the film, this particular reaction and critique will be further investigated.

2.6 Research questions and hypothesis

The key research questions of this study are as follows:

Research question 1: How do the live-action adaptations of *The Little Mermaid* (2023), *Aladdin* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020) redefine cultural identity, including notions of race and ethnicity, in comparison to their original animated versions?

Research question 2: How far do these redefinitions indicate significant change in the representational politics of Disney?

These questions enable a straightforward comparison of the Renaissance-era movies with their live-action retakes and the critical consideration of the nature of the transformations undertaken—be they indicative of actual ideological progression or more as surface-level reactions to popular cultural demands. This research seeks to assess if these movies are a form of progress or performativity within the larger framework of storytelling and identity formation within popular culture.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

This study takes a qualitative textual analysis approach to examine how Disney's recent live-action remakes reinterpret racial, cultural, and gender identities originally crafted in its Renaissance-era films. The analysis was carried out through a transparent, repeatable process that unfolded in three phases to ensure transparency and conceptual clarity.

To begin with, films were selected based on a well-defined set of guidelines. Each remake had to be rooted in Disney's Renaissance period, roughly spanning the late 1980s through the 1990s. It also needed to occur in a non-Western cultural setting, spark public discussion about representation, and achieve global box office success. These requirements were chosen not just for historical alignment, but because they reflect broader questions about media, power, and identity in the current cultural landscape.

The next phase involved a close comparative analysis of three film pairs: *Aladdin* (1992 and 2019), *Mulan* (1998 and 2020), and *The Little Mermaid* (1989 and 2023). These pairs were explored through detailed scene-by-scene readings, involving

multiple viewings and extensive note-taking. Observations focused on how characters were portrayed, how visual aesthetics evolved, what casting choices were made, and how language and dialogue may have shifted between versions. By placing the remakes side-by-side with their animated originals, the study aimed to identify both continuities and disruptions in how Disney engages with cultural representation.

Finally, the analysis was organized around six interpretive categories: how characters are designed, how casting reflects or disrupts racial expectations, the use and implications of accent choices, narrative alterations, symbolic visual elements, and connections to broader theoretical debates. These categories were not randomly selected or retrofitted to the data. Instead, they were developed in response to the study's central questions and are informed by ongoing academic discussions.

Theoretical frameworks such as Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, Rosalind Gill's ideas about postfeminism, and Michael Warner's critique of surface-level diversity provided critical lenses through which the films were read.

By blending theory with empirical observation, this methodology allows a nuanced understanding of how major media producers like Disney navigate the complex terrain of identity, inclusion, and global appeal. A summary of the film selection process and the analytical categories used can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. Selection Criteria and Analytical Categories

Dimension	Details
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Selection Criteria	- Originates from Disney Renaissance era (1989–1999) - Set in culturally specific, non-Western contexts - Recent live-action remakes (2019–2023) that sparked public debate - High global visibility and box office success
Analyzed Categories	- Character design and visual representation - Casting choices and racial/ethnic coding (e.g., colorblind casting) - Accent usage and language representation - Narrative shifts and cultural reframing - Visual or symbolic elements (e.g., setting, costuming, color palette) - Thematic connections to Orientalism, gender politics, and performative diversity strategies

The original movies that will be cited in this project are *Mulan* (1998), *Aladdin* (1992), and *The Little Mermaid* (1989), which are part of the Disney film series known as the Disney Renaissance. The movies *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *The Rescuers Down Within* (1990), *The Lion King* (1994), *Pocahontas* (1995), *The*

Hunchback of Notre Dame (1996), *Hercules* (1997), and *Tarzan* (1999) are all included within this time frame (Pallant, 2011, p. 89). Before the Renaissance, Disney went through a slump in box office success. *The Little Mermaid* (1989) was just narrowly outperformed by the combined domestic gross of *The Black Cauldron* (1985), *The Great Mouse Detective* (1986), and *Oliver and Company* (1988). A restoration of the studio's artistic vision from the Disney-Formalist era was mirrored in the Disney Renaissance.

As stated by Harris (1998), the Disney Renaissance was characterized by "an amazing string of films that were both artistically and commercially successful and became instant classics" (Pallant, 2011, p.89). Domestically, the films during this era made an average of \$140 million (Pallant, 2011). Numerous movies received tremendous praise as well. The two most popular G-rated movies were *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) and *Aladdin* (1992) (Pallant, 2011). The extraordinary success of these movies indicates how well-liked they were and, as a result, how widespread their themes were. *The Little Mermaid* (2023), *Aladdin* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020) are some of the movies from this era that were copied into live-action remakes. As example studies, *The Little Mermaid* (2023), *Aladdin* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020) were chosen because they each show Disney's well-known efforts to retell culturally particular stories from its Renaissance-era back catalog. In addition to retelling tales that were formerly associated with non-Western cultures, these movies also serve as focal points in discussions about diversity, racial swapping, and the politics of representation in modern media. Every remake generated a lot of media coverage and audience discussion, with opinions ranging from applauding inclusive casting to criticizing alleged departures from cultural authenticity. They are perfect instances

for examining how Disney navigates racial and cultural identity through adaptation in a post-2020 media landscape because of their widespread exposure, economic significance, and contentious attitudes. When taken as a whole, these movies provide a wealth of comparison material for examining whether the company's representational strategy represents true ideological advancement or performative conformance with multicultural branding.

The most important criticisms raised by the academics cited in the literature review are reflected in the analysis conducted for this project. *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Mulan* (1998), and *Aladdin* (1992) were mentioned before examining the live-action remakes to have a deeper understanding of the issues raised by the academics. The particular criticisms serve as a reference for examining *The Little Mermaid* (2023), *Aladdin* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020). Scenes, characters, and narrative components that either closely resemble or diverge from the original animated films are given special consideration in the remakes. When comparing the remakes to their original work, these similarities and differences are utilized to assess how they handle racial, identity, and representational concerns.

The analysis entailed watching both the original and remake versions of each film several times. During these viewings, detailed field notes were kept to capture recurring themes, significant alterations, and ideological signals concerning race, ethnicity, and gender. Particular emphasis was placed on aspects like character design, visual metaphors, and shifts in narrative structure. Certain scenes stood out as especially revealing—for instance, *Mulan's* tense encounter with the matchmaker, *Jasmine's* defiant rendition of “Speechless,” and the visual coding of *Ariel's*

underwater realm. These moments served as key entry points for examining how racialized meanings are either reinforced or reimagined.

Textual analysis has long been a cornerstone of qualitative research in media and cultural studies, offering a lens through which scholars can dissect how meaning is embedded in and transmitted through various forms of media. As Brennen (2017) explains, this method allows for a nuanced interpretation of media texts' symbolic and ideological undercurrents, emphasizing their form, content, and structural choices. Researchers have leveraged this approach to critically engage with portrayals of race, gender, and politics across visual media. Take, for example, Hooks (1992), who probed the construction of Black femininity in popular cinema, or Gill (2007), whose examination of postfeminist media unraveled the intricate play of narrative techniques and visual codes. Likewise, Said's (1978) seminal critique of Orientalism has been repurposed by media theorists to challenge Western-imposed visions of the East in animated and live-action narratives. Within Disney scholarship, figures like Giroux (1999), Towbin et al. (2004), and Pallant (2011) have tapped into textual analysis to interrogate the ideological work performed by Disney's storytelling. Building on this lineage, the present study turns a critical eye toward Disney's classic animated features and their live-action counterparts, examining how themes of race, gender, and cultural identity are negotiated through stylistic choices, production decisions, and audience-oriented aesthetics.

By specifying both the focus of the analysis and the methods employed, this methodological approach seeks to balance critical interpretation with academic

precision. It also provides a clear structure that future researchers can replicate or adapt in their own investigations.

3.1 Source material

Before discussing the movies covered in this research, the reasoning for selecting the particular titles in this study is briefly outlined. Selectivity is inevitable when research concerns a company as prolific and diverse as Disney, but this comes with the danger of biased or overly specific conclusions. To make the research relevant and in-depth, the movies discussed in this thesis have been selected according to a definitive set of criteria that mirror the objectives and theoretical foundations of the research.

This thesis compares and analyzes three film pairs, each comprising a Disney Renaissance-era animated film and its live-action remake of the 21st century. They are:

- *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *The Little Mermaid* (2023)
- *Aladdin* (1992) and *Aladdin* (2019)
- *Mulan* (1998) and *Mulan* (2020)

The key criteria adopted in choosing these movies are that the movie should be from Disney's Renaissance period (1989–1999) and have undergone a live-action remake by Walt Disney Studios between 2019 and 2023.

The Disney Renaissance is commonly viewed as the company's creative and commercial breakthrough, characterized by both its return to musical storytelling and

the launch of its iconic princess-based films. The studio returned to this canon recently with live-action adaptations to update antiquated conventions and address modern-day issues. This makes the Renaissance period particularly useful as a starting point of comparison in studying racial and cultural representation shifts.

The following criterion further entrenches them in this thesis: The movie has to have a racial, ethnic, or culturally coded setting or character dynamic ripe for critical representation examination. All three pairs of films are also located in culturally distinctive, non-Western locations—Agrabah, Imperial China, and the fictional underwater kingdom of *The Little Mermaid*, which in the live-action adaptation is infused with distinct Caribbean sensibilities. These are not blank spaces but racially and culturally charged spaces where representation is negotiated, shaped, and contested.

However, not all remakes are equal in their cultural saliency nor in the public debate they have helped to create. Accordingly, a second consideration was that the remake would have also brought significant public debate on race, casting, and representation. All of the live-action films chosen were the subject of heated debate in the media and among audiences: from the casting of Ariel as Halle Bailey, to allegations of Middle Eastern misrepresentation in the portrayal of Aladdin, to the political fallout over the decisions in *Mulan*'s production. These have pushed these films to become part of a more general discourse in the culture regarding identity, inclusion, and representation in international media.

Apart from thematic relevance, one must look at visibility. The movie must have a broad international audience and box office success. Disney live-action adaptations are not small-scale experiments. They are big-budget, globally marketed films viewed by millions of people, creating vast commercial and cultural resonance. All the chosen films have grossed hundreds of millions of dollars and are thus as much a corporate endeavor with far-reaching consequences as a storytelling decision. What distinguishes these three movies is that they are both commercially successful and culturally sensitive; the widespread exposure of these remakes increased the impact of their representational decisions, making them international focal points in the continuous discussions about race and identity in the media.

Although Disney has made other live-action retakes over the last few years, including *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) and *The Lion King* (2019), these films were not used because they were more Eurocentric and anthropomorphic in their focus, making the topic of race and ethnicity more challenging to discuss or irrelevant in the parameters of this research. The six chosen movies, three original releases, and three remakes make possible a distinctive analysis of how Disney's handling of race, ethnicity, and cultural identity has changed. By focusing the analysis on these particular pairs, the research can remain in-depth while examining larger racial representation tendencies. The following chapter will introduce each of these films with brief descriptions of their storylines, characters, and respective cultural backgrounds before engaging in more in-depth critical analysis in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

In this chapter, the three chosen live-action remakes *The Little Mermaid* (2023), *Aladdin* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020) are thoroughly examined in relation to their animated predecessors. Using the previously developed theoretical frameworks, each film is closely analyzed to see how it depicts race, ethnicity, and cultural identity. By bringing the three live-action remakes *The Little Mermaid* (2023), *Aladdin* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020) into dialogue with their original animated counterparts, this chapter will consider how Disney's representational strategies have changed and to what extent these shifts signpost a real ideological break with the past regarding the company's positioning of race, ethnicity, and cultural identity. The chapter will revisit the foundational theoretical ideas discussed in the second chapter above, such as Orientalism, postfeminism, colorblind casting, and neoliberal multiculturalism, to make sense of the patterned and contradictory approaches emerging throughout the analyses. Close attention will also be paid to recurring thematics: performative inclusivity, the visual coding of whiteness and othering, the limitations of cultural authenticity, and the contextualizing of female empowerment within Westernized morality frameworks. Although each film presents different narrative and cultural decisions, this chapter seeks to synthesize the findings and explore whether Disney's

new strategies signal a major ideological break or remain within established hegemonic frameworks.

4.1 The Little Mermaid

4.1.1 Andersen's Original Tale: A Story of Sacrifice and Transcendence

Long before Hans Christian Andersen published his now-iconic version in 1837, mermaids and sea maidens were already swimming through the currents of European folklore. These earlier tales painted them as enigmatic, often dangerous beings, part human, part otherworldly, tied to the vast unknown of the sea and the murky consequences of longing and temptation (Warner, 1994, p.20). Unlike the clean-cut imagery we associate with mermaids today, these figures occupied a kind of in-between space, symbolic of desire's risks and nature's unpredictability (Bottigheimer, 2009). Andersen's story shifted that narrative. His mermaid became less a figure of seduction and more a soul searching for grace, her journey marked by sacrifice and spiritual yearning, in keeping with the Christian moral lens of the 19th century (Zipes, 2006, p.35).

Then came Disney's 1989 animated *The Little Mermaid*, which reimagined Andersen's tale through a different cultural filter. The existential weight and tragic elements were smoothed over in favor of a story about romance, personal freedom, and chasing dreams, core themes of Disney's late twentieth-century storytelling (Do Rozario, 2004). Once a quiet seeker of spiritual transcendence, Ariel was reinvented as a rebellious, curious teenager whose desires were far more earthly. The sea witch became an entertaining villain, the prince a charming but passive reward, and the ending offered not sacrifice but celebration (Bryman, 2004, p.89). This version

brought Ariel into the global pop culture spotlight and set the tone for the 2023 live-action remake. Rather than revisiting Andersen's meditative take on the soul, Disney's remake sticks closely to its legacy, a colorful, romanticized vision designed more for emotional satisfaction than spiritual reflection.

The Little Mermaid, written by Hans Christian Andersen and released in 1837, is the heartbreaking story of a little mermaid who longs to have an immortal soul and the love of humanity by overcoming the limitations of her aquatic life. The original's melancholy tone and requirements of self-sacrifice set it apart from most modern renditions. Awed by men's life, the lifeless mermaid develops feelings for a prince she saves from drowning. Seeking to join him, the mermaid negotiates with a sea hag a torturous bargain in which she loses her voice in exchange for legs so that each step feels like she is walking on knives. The prince marries another woman, and the mermaid, still unable to bring herself to assassinate him in the hopes of continuing to live, turns to sea foam. Andersen's story is not one of romance but of spiritual transcendence in that the mermaid is offered the possibility of an immortal soul through the practice of virtues. The work is a 19th-century Christian-inspired tale of virtue, chastity, and the rewards of piety, with a complex treatment of humanity's identity, craving, and condition. This original work is the opposing comparative to Disney's adaptation in tone and meaning and a key reference point considering revisions to the 2023 live-action retelling.

4.1.2 Analytical Framework and Methodological Approach to the 2023

Adaptation

To explore Disney's 2023 adaptation of The Little Mermaid in depth, this chapter takes a layered approach, using the theoretical tools laid out in Chapter 2 to guide its

analysis. The film is examined through six interconnected lenses: narrative structure, character design and evolution, racial and cultural representation, gender dynamics focusing on postfeminist themes, visual aesthetics, and the public discourse surrounding its release. These perspectives help uncover how the remake either reaffirms, challenges, or reshapes the ideological currents embedded in earlier versions. Particular attention is given to the casting of Halle Bailey and the broader cultural implications of race-swapping, a move considered through the frameworks of colorblind casting (Warner, 2015,p.34) and performative wokeness (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p.12). Ariel's arc is also viewed through the lens of postfeminist individualism, especially in how her agency is portrayed as a matter of personal expression rather than systemic critique (Gill, 2007, p.18).

Meanwhile, questions of visual inclusivity are unpacked by analyzing the film's use of mise-en-scène and symbolic cues. The narrative is situated in dialogue with Andersen's original tale and the 1989 animated classic. By weaving these strands together, the chapter traces where the 2023 film aligns with or diverges from its predecessors, highlighting the complex interplay of race, gender, and neoliberal multiculturalism in Disney's evolving storytelling.

4.1.2 Disney's 2023 Adaptation: Cultural Reimagining and Multiculturalism



Figure 1

The Little Mermaid (2023) promotional poster (Disney, 2023). Retrieved from http://www.impawards.com/2023/little_mermaid_ver3.html

Disney's 2023 release of Rob Marshall's version of Hans Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" is groundbreaking in its dedication to multiculturalism. Casting a Black actress, Halle Bailey, as Ariel in the film was unconventional. This struck a deep chord for viewers who hardly ever see themselves represented in prominent roles. The movie goes beyond the on-screen portrayal by reimagining the undersea country of Atlantis. The music's pervasive Caribbean influence produces a lively and rhythmic environment. This cultural change is also reflected in the indigenous

wardrobe choices, which may include vibrant hues and flowing textiles. There were suspicions that the mythology and folklore in the movie could have been slightly modified to include Caribbean aspects. It questioned conventional depictions of characters like Ariel and generated significant discussions about representation in movies. Whether or not the film's execution is perfect, it unquestionably paves the way for future works to integrate a variety of themes and styles more organically.

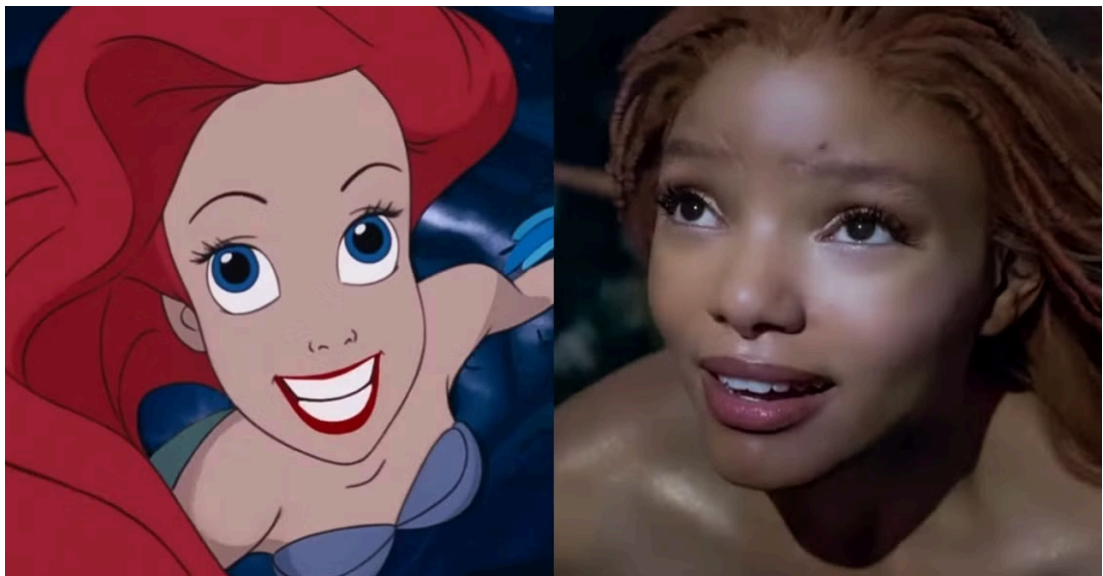


Figure 2

Comparison between the original animated Ariel (*The Little Mermaid*, 1989) and Halle Bailey as Ariel in the 2023 live-action adaptation. Screenshot from MovieWeb article (McCall, 2023). Retrieved from

<https://movieweb.com/original-ariel-jodi-benson-said-little-mermaid-updates-were-necessary-times-change/>

4.1.4 Scholarly Perspectives on Race, Gender, and Trans Identity

Numerous scholars from various fields have studied the adaptation of Hans Andersen's *Little Mermaid*. Two articles explore research on racism in the adaption

of Hans Andersen's Little Mermaid. According to Richardson (2024) and Jayanti et al. (2024), The Little Mermaid categorized white land life as superior to multiethnic Mer life, creating a divide between the two. The Little Mermaid narrative has aspects of gender flexibility, particularly when it comes to the topic of transgender people, according to two additional studies. "The Little Mermaid" is a narrative about acting transgender identity, according to Spencer (2013) and Gerber (2017). It shares similarities with the development of transsexual identities and features motifs of self-censorship, parental conflict, and body-mind disharmony.

4.1.5 Ariel's Obsession with the Human World: Narrative Continuities

Regarding Ariel and her obsession with the surface world, the adaptation of "The Little Mermaid" meticulously maintains several essential elements from the original tale. In the original text, Ariel's grandmother is crucial in fostering her interest in the human world above the water. The grandmother's intriguing narratives and helpful knowledge about the surface nourish Ariel's creativity and longing to venture outside her aquatic home. Although the grandmother character is conspicuously missing, Ariel's obsession with the surface world is as evident in the adaptation. Instead, Ariel's travels and personal collection of human artifacts depict her desire to learn more about what lies above. Her deep-seated longing to comprehend and see the world beyond the ocean is eloquently portrayed in situations when she is amazed by numerous items from the surface. Hearing about the world above the sea was the most enjoyable thing she had ever done. (Andersen 1837, page 2) The exchanges between Ariel and her sisters are authentic to the original text. Both versions portray her sisters as uninterested in the surface world and prefer their undersea lives. This contrast highlights Ariel's individuality and distinguishes her as the lone sibling who aspires to a different life. Ariel's courageous resolve to follow her aspirations, even

while stepping into unexplored terrain alone, is further highlighted by her sisters' hesitancy to accept the unknown.

4.1.6 Visual Revisions and Inclusive Casting: Ariel and Her Sisters

The characters' looks were altered in the adaptation in several important ways. Ariel, the protagonist, is the one who most clearly exhibits these changes. According to the original text, Ariel has blue eyes and a light pink complexion, which aligns with a typical European style. Nevertheless, Halle Bailey, an African-American actress, was cast as Ariel in the adaptation. Of the six, the youngest was the most beautiful; her skin was as delicate and exact as a rose leaf, and her eyes were as deep blue as the darkest ocean (Andersen, 1837, page 20). Along with Ariel, her sisters' appearances and personalities were also changed. In Andersen's original text, Ariel's sisters are only mentioned in passing and are recognized by their birth order. Ariel's sisters are described by Andersen as having "white hands," implying a homogeneous look consistent with the stereotypical European conception of mermaids. Her sisters then appeared on the waves, wringing their white hands and staring at her sorrowfully (Andersen, 1837, p. 18). However, by giving these characters unique names and using women of various ethnicities to play them, the adaptation diversifies them. The adaptation gives each character uniqueness and personality by naming Ariel's sisters Tamika, Perla, Caspia, Indira, Mala, and Karina. This choice not only sets them apart from the original text but also demonstrates a casting strategy that is more inclusive and modern. By giving Ariel's sisters names instead of referring to them by their birth order, the adaptation gives their personalities more nuance and complexity.

Ariel is portrayed in the original text by Hans Christian Andersen as having blue eyes and a white complexion, which reflects the social mores and conventions of the period in which it was written. However, the choice of Halle Bailey, an African-American actress to play Ariel in the version of "The Little Mermaid" represents a conscious break from this conventional portrayal. According to semiotic theory, Halle Bailey's portrayal of Ariel signals modern diversity and inclusiveness in media and narrative. In addition to challenging traditional interpretations, the adaptation's reworking of Ariel with a distinct racial identity mirrors a more significant cultural movement towards accepting varied portrayals in popular culture. The casting's reworking of Ariel's role highlights the adaptation's goal of appealing to and reflecting today's multicultural audience while bringing fresh interpretations and meanings to the well-loved fairy tale story.



Figure 3

The live-action adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* (2023) features a racially diverse group of mermaid sisters, a deliberate shift from the uniform portrayal in the original

animation. Image retrieved from Pop Culture Wonders (2023).

<https://popculturewonders.com/ariels-sisters-live-action/>



Figure 4

The original animated portrayal of Ariel's sisters from *The Little Mermaid* (1989) reflects a uniform racial and aesthetic representation, in stark contrast to the diverse casting of the 2023 live-action remake. Image retrieved from Disney Dining (2023).

<https://www.disneydining.com/ariels-sisters-get-new-names-and-new-ethnicities-in-live-action-the-little-mermaid-lf1/>

As previously mentioned, Andersen provides a quick introduction to Ariel's sisters, who were originally unnamed and only identified by birth order. They were unnamed figures only identified by their birth order and were said to possess "white hands." However, by giving them unique names and using women of various ethnicities to play them, the adaptation diversifies these characters. The adaptation gives each character uniqueness and personality by naming Ariel's sisters Tamika, Perla, Caspia, Indira, Mala, and Karina. This choice not only sets them apart from the original text

but also demonstrates a casting strategy that is more inclusive and modern. The version offers a multicultural depiction that appeals to today's viewers by giving Ariel's sisters various looks.

By including a range of viewpoints and backgrounds, this inclusive casting decision enhances the tale and may result in a more interesting and dynamic plot. Ariel's sisters' distinct personalities add to the overall depth of the movie by providing fresh chances for character growth and interaction that were not in the original script. An important and constructive change from the original book is shown by the adaptation's decision to diversify Ariel's sisters and give them unique names. It shows how timeless tales may be adapted to consider contemporary ideals and social shifts while still engaging and approachable for audiences of all ages. Prince Eric's parents are mentioned in passing as King and Queen, although the Queen's appearance is not explained in Andersen's original text. The adaption incorporates diversity by using a black actress to play the Queen, a notable divergence from this. This decision increases representation and enhances the narrative by providing a more inclusive depiction of monarchy in the novel. The adaptation honors the royal ancestry of the original text while also conforming to modern ideals of diversity and representation in the film by recasting the Queen's role with a black actress.



Figure 5

Queen Selina, portrayed by Noma Dumezweni in *The Little Mermaid* (2023), exemplifies Disney's recent efforts toward inclusive casting by featuring a Black queen in a previously racially ambiguous role. Image retrieved from SlashFilm (2023). <https://www.slashfilm.com/1294465/little-mermaids-queen-selina-explained/>

4.1.7 Audience Reception, Race Discourse, and Backlash

In order to make *The Little Mermaid* suitable for audiences of all ages, Walt Disney changed or eliminated several elements from the original plot. Young adults make up most of Disney fans on X (formerly Twitter), and they view Walt Disney's *The Little Mermaid* as a significant worry over racial and ethnic diversity. Concerns around race and ethnicity have grown more severe in the United States since 1980.

Particularly in the United States, racism needs to be addressed because it is still not regarded as a human rights violation. It is believed that many US policies do not respect human rights. Black people are thought to have outnumbered white people before the middle century due to a combination of factors such as the large number

of immigrants, the substantial population growth, the dominance of young people in a community, and demographic changes (Colby & Ortman, 2014). Viewers of The Little Mermaid were aware of the controversial racial issues surrounding the black mermaid after the film's premiere. How Ariel was portrayed in the Live-Action version disappointed some X (formerly Twitter) users. Disney once portrayed Ariel as a white mermaid with bright ginger hair (Budiartie, 2019).

The Walt Disney Company responded to those accusations by claiming that because Hans, the author of "The Little Mermaid," is Danish, Princess Ariel is a Danish woman with dark skin and red hair (Madjid, 2023). Therefore, the debate impacts white people and people of color (Budiartie, 2019). The live-action "The Little Mermaid" movie is controversial because it portrays Ariel as a black mermaid. It is typical for people to contrast the black and white races in movies. Equality has developed since most devotees believed the mermaid to be white. On the other hand, the live-action movie depicts Ariel as a ginger red, black mermaid (Madjid, 2023).

4.1.8 Race Swapping, Visibility, and the Paradox of Representation

One of the contentious aspects of the live-action adaptation is the idea of race swapping—altering the race or nationality of an originally white character to symbolize a marginalized community. Casting Halle Bailey as Ariel has been hailed as a step in the direction of greater diversity by many, but some say such casting moves can serve as a shallow statement that disregards more underlying issues. Such an approach can fall short in the way of "race blindness," where visual diversity is championed, but the surrounding context of race in terms of culture, history, and storytelling is not changed. Instead of creating new tales featuring marginalized

identities, reusing legacy characters without substantially rethinking their situations can perpetuate the current situation in the appearance of advancing.

In this regard, casting a Black Ariel can be understood as a double-edged sword. For one, having a Black Ariel gives voice to audiences who have traditionally not appeared in Disney's central princess canon. Conversely, such a change is in a narrative structure initially constructed for a white character within a Eurocentric fantasy universe. The movie does not fully address how Ariel's racial identity would inform her experiences and surroundings nor provide a culturally reinterpreted version of her based on her heritage. Instead, race is rendered hypervisible in the act of casting while also made invisible in the narrative—establishing a dissonance in line with the logic of race blindness.

In addition, the adaptation's calling card of inclusiveness can also be read as a corporate effort to cater to the latest sensibilities without defying its conventional storytelling model. Disney's willingness to remake established tales with inclusive casts, as opposed to new ones. This moment has been interpreted by scholars as a “performative wokeness” strategy—a way to signal progressiveness without disrupting the structures of marketability or narrative tradition (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Yoon, 2021).

4.2 Aladdin

4.2.1 Representation Problems in the 1992 and 2019 Versions

The story of Aladdin traces its roots to the famed Middle Eastern collection One Thousand and One Nights (*Alf Layla wa Layla*), though curiously, the tale itself was not part of the original Arabic canon. It entered the collection through Antoine

Galland, a French translator in the 18th century, who claimed to have heard it from a Syrian storyteller named Hanna Diyab (Irwin, 1994, p.45; Marzolph, 2007, p.66).

Galland's version placed Aladdin in a vaguely defined "Eastern" world, sometimes imagined as China, other times Persia or an Islamic Golden Age city, woven through with motifs of magic, deception, power, and imperial intrigue. Unlike its modern iterations, this early version was layered and sometimes unsettling, filled with violence, manipulation, and fantasy elements that directly played into Western Orientalist imaginations of the exotic and mysterious East (Zipes, 2012, p.32).

When Disney reimaged the story for its 1992 animated film, it made sweeping changes to suit a younger, global audience. The setting became Agrabah, a fictional city that blended Middle Eastern and South Asian influences into a generalized, placeless "Orient," detaching the narrative from any absolute geographic or cultural specificity (Shaheen, 2009, p.51). The studio infused the plot with catchy musical numbers, comedic sidekicks, and a romantic storyline, reshaping Aladdin's tale to fit the successful formula of its so-called Disney Renaissance. Darker elements from Galland's telling, like political violence, multiple marriages, or class-based brutality, were scrubbed away in favor of a simpler moral structure and a more digestible tale of self-discovery (Sells, 1995, p.12). Though it retained some exoticized visuals, Disney's Aladdin leaned heavily into Western storytelling tropes, turning what was once a gritty folktale into a colorful, high-energy fantasy built around personal ambition and love (Pallant, 2011, p.23). By the time the 2019 live-action remake came along, much of this transformation had already been cemented.



Figure 6

Official poster for *Aladdin* (2019), highlighting the central characters—Jasmine, Aladdin, and Genie—set against a fantasy-Orientalist backdrop. Image retrieved from Disney Türkiye (2019). <https://www.disney.com.tr/filmler/aladdin>

When Disney released *Aladdin* in 1992, it instantly became a classic. The American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) criticized the film for its racist depictions of Arab culture, even though critics loved it when it first came out (Frook, 1993, as cited in Shaheen, 2009, p. 17). Since its theatrical release and initial protest, the film has been heavily criticized for how it depicts people of color and Middle Eastern culture. Disney believed the 2019 remake would bring some of the

portrayals up to date. Unfortunately, the lack of behind-the-scenes representation and the film's limited engagement with deeper sociocultural issues prevented the remake from fully achieving Disney's stated goal of improving representation. Some notable improvements from the 1992 film were made in the 2019 version, including more people of color in the cast, redesigning Jasmine's role, and eliminating derogatory stereotypes in the song lyrics. The absence of representation behind the decision-making process means that the filmmakers' efforts to engage with various communities and recruit cultural advisors are insufficient. Only 17% of creative roles in the top 100 films in 2016 were held by women, and even fewer were held by people of color, according to a 2017 study (Smith, 2017). It does not appear to be changing in 2019—just 14.4% of directors of motion pictures were persons of color (Vary, 2020, para. 5), and Disney is part of the problem. One person of color is in a senior role on the creative team for the 2019 movie version. Identifying as Asian, Dan Lin is the film's producer. Disney continues to see Arab, South Asian, and Muslim culture as a single monolith, even though the company "sought advice from a Community Advisory Council composed of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and Muslim scholars, activists, and creatives" (Alsutany, 2019, p. 78). The cultural basis of the plot would be able to blossom much more if someone with South Asian or Middle Eastern ancestry directed the film. In that case, combining the many cultures of these distinct nations and areas into a single, exoticized civilization would not have diluted them.

4.2.2 Analytical Framework and Methodological Approach to the 2019

Adaptation

To critically examine Disney's 2019 live action adaptation of *Aladdin*, this chapter adopts a structured yet flexible textual analysis shaped by the theoretical perspectives discussed in Chapter 2. The evaluation is organized around six overlapping areas of focus: Orientalist framing and spatial design, character portrayal and racial coding, gender politics through a postfeminist lens, casting practices and colorism, the influence of the white gaze, and broader narrative shifts. These categories were chosen to explore how the remake addresses questions of race, ethnicity, and representation, particularly about the 1992 animated version and the folktale origins of the story. Central to this inquiry are the continued use of Orientalist imagery (Said, 1978), the deployment of colorblind casting as a visual solution to systemic inequities (Warner, 2015), and the inclusion of empowered female moments that reflect postfeminist sensibilities (Gill, 2007). For instance, Jasmine's rise to political leadership is examined as part of a larger strategy of performative wokeness (Banet Weiser, 2018), where empowerment is offered in symbolic gestures rather than structural transformation.

Alongside these elements, the chapter explores how the film presents visual diversity while leaving deeper representational hierarchies unchallenged. This includes attention to accent usage and the subtle racial coding of secondary characters. By placing the live action film in dialogue with the animated classic and the original folk narrative, the analysis reveals how Disney adapts cultural identity to meet the demands of a global marketplace, all while promoting an image of progressive inclusion. This approach not only brings the film's ideological tensions into focus but also exposes the limits of neoliberal multiculturalism in achieving genuine representational change.

4.2.3 Colorism and Casting Choices

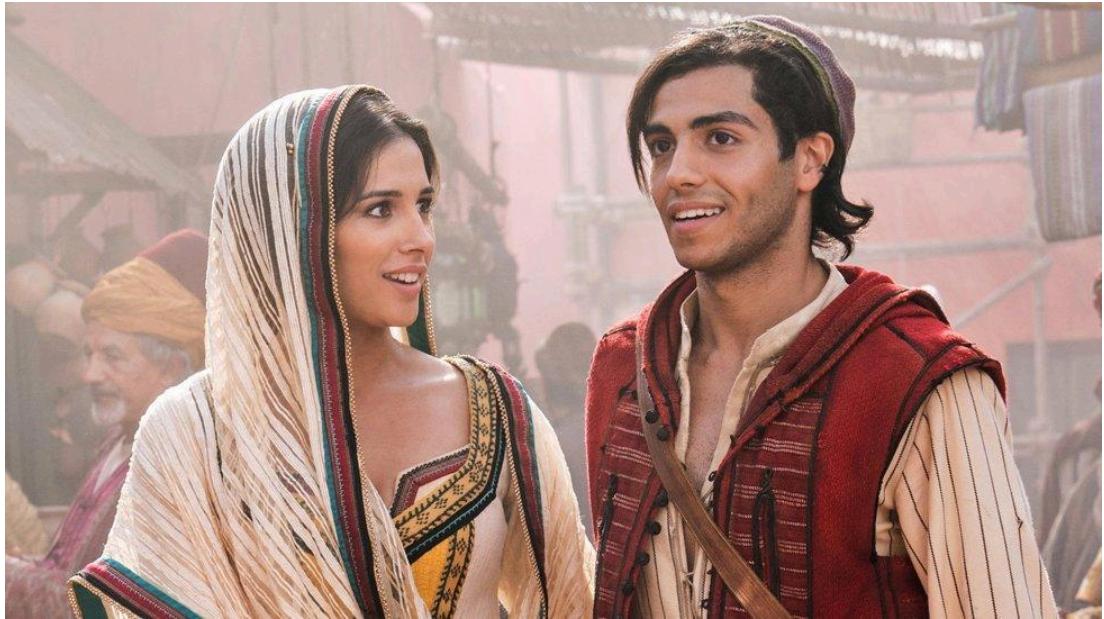


Figure 7

Jasmine and Aladdin in the 2019 live-action remake, wearing culturally ambiguous Middle Eastern costumes. Image retrieved from BBC News (2019).

<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-48226718>

The selection of Naomi Scott as Jasmine caused criticism even though the film was able to cast a large number of persons of color. Scott's casting is an excellent illustration of colorism, which Hunter (2005, p. 45) defines as "the process of discrimination that privileges light-skinned people of color over their dark-skinned counterparts." Scott is an actor from Britain of mixed Indian and English ancestry. Scott's skin tone is lighter than that of many South Asian peers. Hollywood perpetuates the concept that lighter skin is a desirable beauty standard by casting actors of color with lighter skin tones. At the same time, South Asian women are still inundated with advertisements and messaging that support this ideal. "This iteration

of Princess Jasmine ticks all the boxes of the Hollywood formula for casting a woman of color: a name that's easy to pronounce and looks just white enough."(Salam, 2019, para. 4) Scott's casting as Princess Jasmine demonstrates how historical racism still exists. (2019, Salam). Scott is not the only member of the main cast with a light complexion, along with Mena Massoud (Aladdin), Nasim Pedrad (Dalia), and Marwan Kenzari (Jafar). Disney's penchant for people with lighter complexions is still noticeable, despite its improvement over the first Aladdin's predominantly white cast.



Figure 9

Jafar in Disney's *Aladdin* (2019), depicted in lavish oriental garments, reinforcing stereotypical associations of Middle Eastern villains with excessive opulence and mysticism. Image retrieved from Disney UK (n.d.).

<https://www.disney.co.uk/movies/aladdin-2019/everything-we-know-so-far>

Even though the primary protagonists are all light-skinned, actors of deeper skin tones may be observed in the film's background. However, they are frequently depicted as villains or antagonists. The guards attempting to apprehend Aladdin and

Jasmine in the One Jump sequence are considerably darker-skinned than the two of them. This demonstrates how Disney maintains the negative stereotype of darker-skinned males as undesirable individuals who ought to be avoided. Disney also acknowledged that because they could not find talent in Asian areas, they put brown features on dozens of white actors for sequences with Asian crowds in the film (Jones, 2018). The gesture demonstrates how Disney and Hollywood overlooked the abilities of performers of color.

4.2.4 Whiteness and Marketability: The Role of Prince Anders



Figure 8

Prince Anders in Disney's *Aladdin* (2019) wearing an anachronistic and culturally ambiguous costume that contrasts sharply with the rest of the cast. Image retrieved from Aladdin Wiki (n.d.). https://aladdin.fandom.com/wiki/Prince_Anders

Disney debuted Prince Anders as a new character in the 2019 film. The sole white character in the film is Prince Anders. There were no white characters in the first one. One may argue that Prince Anders was present to act as Aladdin's antithesis. He plays a little part and primarily serves as a comic. In contrast to Aladdin's initial encounter with Jasmine, his remarks on her appearance give the impression that Aladdin is sincere, whereas Anders is superficial. The addition of a white character may also be seen as Disney's effort to market itself to a white market. When a white character is added to a movie that traditionally only had characters of color, it implies that the movie is unmarketable. While individuals of color are anticipated to connect to white films, white people aren't predicted to connect to films that include people of color. Audiences of color are anticipated to communicate with white leaders, while mainstream storylines infrequently presume or incorporate the contrary (Hunt et al., 2017; Bell Hooks, 1992). This reflects the racial disparity of viewership. The representation of people of color in Hollywood has never been easy. In 2016, only 29.2% of the characters in the films that grossed the most were members of ethnic or racial minorities who were underrepresented (MDSCI Staff, 2017, para. 3). Aladdin provides a notable example of this trend in the industry: the creation of Prince Anders, a white character not present in the 1992 animated version, could be an attempt to re-center whiteness and improve marketability. Even if the film's diverse casting was noticeably improved, the inclusion of a purposefully humorous white character may be seen as an effort to rewrite the story in a way that would still appeal to white viewers, contradicting the representational advancement it seems to be pursuing.

Disney said in late 2019 that Prince Anders would get a spin-off film to exacerbate the situation. This occurred just days after Mena Massoud, who portrayed Aladdin in a billion-dollar film, failed to secure even one audition. In the end, the spin-off demonstrates how Hollywood continues to prioritize white people above people of color, regardless of the diversity initiatives Hollywood claimed to have implemented.

4.2.5 Orientalism, White Gaze, and Exoticization of Jasmine

Alonge (2017) defines the White Gaze as the assumption that the audience is white, which results in the creation of a film or piece of art from the viewpoint of white viewers. Numerous cultural allusions and occurrences, such as Prince Anders' stare and the wedding festivities, are filmed by white male directors in the 2019 film. The viewer learns to exoticize Jasmine through Prince Anders. When Prince Anders and his men looked at Princess Jasmine in the scene where she was first shown as a real princess, the audience witnessed her beauty through their eyes. When the audience sees Jasmine, it cuts to Prince Anders' responses to show how they should respond to her with her pet, Rajah, and her helper, Dalia. Prince Anders' remarks thus come off as exoticizing Princess Jasmine since he implies that her beauty alienates him, even though they have some good intentions. Prince Anders' remarks and looks reveal Hollywood's Orientalist prejudices. According to Said (1978), orientalism is a tactic used by the West to invent, highlight, exaggerate, and misrepresent the differences between Arab and Middle Eastern cultures and people and those in the West. In essence, the West used Orientalism to highlight its superiority over those in the East. Princess Jasmine is exoticized, and Prince Anders' remarks and stare demonstrate how South Asian and Middle Eastern cultures are still alien to Westerners.

The film's use of Middle Eastern and South Asian attire and customs is another instance of Orientalism. Although several commentators commended Aladdin's representation of various civilizations, they neglected to point out that this blending of cultures in a film intended for Western viewers breeds prejudice and ignorance. Behind the scenes, more representation of people of color may have resolved these problems. Aladdin tried to change how Arabs were portrayed (2019). The original version's opening sequence is entirely different from this one. Two ships cruise the ocean in place of a barren desert. A family consisting of the Genie, Dalia, and their two kids is on one ship. The Genie shares the Aladdin story with his kids. The song "Arabian Nights" made the most obvious change to how the Middle East was portrayed. The line "It is barbaric / But hey, it is home" was taken out by Disney. The variety among Middle Eastern civilizations is also discussed in the updated version of the song. "Where you wander among / Ev'ry culture and tongue/It is chaotic / But hey, it is home," the Genie sings.

4.2.6 Cultural Fusion, Geographical Ambiguity, and Surface-Level Diversity

Although it is evident that Agrabah is a fictitious setting, there is ongoing discussion on the area's potential location and cultural impact. Because of the opening song, "Arabian Night," and the degree of Middle Eastern musical influence, some people think that Agrabah is a Middle Eastern location. The Taj Mahal is thought to have impacted the castle simultaneously, suggesting Indian culture in the film. This cultural fusion demonstrates the interchangeability of Arabs, South Asians, and Indians (Salam, 2019). Disney had the opportunity and the desire to address the culturally offensive elements of the original film with the remake. These initiatives, however, failed because they chose white authors, producers, and directors. Disney

perpetuates that all Asians or other nations are the same by fusing many diverse nations and cultures. It propagates naïve notions and preconceptions about non-American nations. Disney might have chosen a single culture to highlight in the remake. This cultural misunderstanding may have been resolved if the studio had selected a person of color to lead behind the scenes. However, they took the simple route and adjusted the surface level using varied casting.

4.2.7 Jasmine's Empowerment and "Performative Wokeness"

Disney's 2019 version of Aladdin aims to portray Princess Jasmine as a symbol of strength in addition to its superficial displays of diversity. Her solo song "Speechless" and her makeover into Agrabah's first female Sultan represent a significant departure from the 1992 version. Some have viewed these alterations as "woke elements," indicating advancements in gender representation. Critics counter that this change is still superficial because it is still enmeshed in a plot that emphasizes romantic satisfaction and does not completely eliminate the original's Orientalist frameworks. As a result, even while Jasmine's storyline represents change, it might ultimately be more beneficial to Disney's larger business objectives than to true representational improvement.

4.2.8 Accent Politics and Reinforcing Western Supremacy

Lastly, the film differentiates between people with foreign and American accents. Disney dismissed this ADC complaint over the first film (Frook, 1993). The nice guys, the Genie, Jasmine, and Aladdin, all speak with American accents. Jafar, the Sultan, and Dalia all have certain "foreign" accents, each of which stands for a distinct type of "foreign." Jafar, the primary adversary, continues to speak with an

Arabic accent as though Arabs are distinct and outsiders are evil. Both Dalia and the Sultan appear to embody Hollywood's perception that people with American accents are wiser than foreigners. Strengthening the perception that people with non-eurocentric characteristics and foreign accents are nasty and unreliable. (2019, Alsultany).

4.3 Mulan

4.3.1 Plot Overview and Key Differences (1998 vs. 2020)

The story of Hua Mulan originates from an ancient Chinese ballad known as The Ballad of Mulan, or Mulan Ci, which dates back to the Northern Wei dynasty between 386 and 534 of the common era. The ballad recounts the tale of a young woman who disguises herself as a man to take her aging father's place in the military. She has served with distinction for over a decade, all while keeping her identity hidden (Bai, 2005). Unlike the fairy tales familiar in Western traditions, this original version of Mulan includes no magical creatures or romantic entanglements. Instead, it centers on Confucian values such as filial piety, loyalty, and moral integrity (Dong, 2010, p. 21). Mulan's choice is not a form of rebellion but a deeply rooted act of family devotion and social responsibility. When the war ends, she returns to her ordinary life without accepting government titles or honors. This quiet conclusion reflects the traditional virtue of modesty. Further, it underscores Mulan's identity not as an individual seeking fame but as someone who fulfills her obligations with humility and grace (Wang, 2019, p. 82).

When Disney released its animated adaptation of Mulan in 1998, the narrative took a different direction to better suit Western audiences' expectations and the conventions

of animated family films. The studio introduced new elements such as talking animal companions, a romantic subplot with Captain Shang, humorous interludes, and vibrant musical sequences. These additions shifted the tone toward entertainment and accessibility (Anjirbag, 2018). In doing so, Disney simplified or overlooked the political and cultural depth of the original story, framing Mulan's journey as one of self-discovery and personal empowerment. This reimagining fits Disney's larger effort to expand its princess portfolio while maintaining broad international appeal. Although the film introduced Mulan to global viewers and embedded her into pop culture, it also altered the core themes of the legend—replacing collective values with ideas more aligned with liberal feminism and individual aspiration (Yin, 2009, p. 285).

This reworking signals a significant shift in ideology, not just in storytelling but in the cultural framework through which the tale is told. The original folk narrative emphasizes responsibility to family and society, while Disney's version elevates personal growth and internal strength. This fundamental contrast between communal honor and individual triumph sets the foundation for a deeper exploration of how animated and live-action films interpret gender, cultural identity, and power differently.



Figure 10

Promotional poster of *Mulan* (2020), showcasing the titular character in warrior attire, emphasizing strength, agency, and a break from traditional gender norms in Disney's reimagining. Image retrieved from Amazon (n.d.).

<https://www.amazon.com/Trends-International-Mulan-Unframed-Version/dp/B084J4NR7R>

Mulan, the 1998 animated film, tells the story of a young Chinese woman who poses as a male to join her aged father's army out of fear for his life. After being mishandled and undervalued initially, *Mulan* eventually develops into a capable soldier and utilizes her cunning and agility to save the emperor and all of China from

the Hun invasion. The movie honors courage, selflessness, and cunning but subtly conveys these virtues through musical numbers, comic scenes, and a fusion of Eastern and Western cultural themes. While her romantic potential and personal desires with Captain Shang are kept under wraps, Mulan's triumph is distinguished not only by her military prowess but also by the honor she returns to her family.

In contrast, the 2020 live-action version prioritizes a more somber, action-packed plot over humor and camaraderie. Mulan is portrayed in the remake as a nearly legendary warrior destined for greatness, introducing the idea of chi as a mystical force. The movie also reimagines its opponents, substituting the Rouran warriors for the Huns, and adds Xianniang, a strong shapeshifting sorceress who serves as Mulan's evil counterpart. The remake prioritizes personal fate over subversive identity performance, unlike the original. Although Mulan does not conceal her chi, she is advised to repress it to blend in with a culture that fears strong women. The feminist implications of the story are drastically changed by this reconfiguration, which substitutes the idea of natural exceptionalism for gender-disguised and slowly acquired admiration.

Although Mulan's bravery is at the heart of both tales, there are considerable differences in how her strength is presented and justified. While the live-action adaptation depends on fate, honor, and power, the animated version bases her metamorphosis on tenacity, cleverness, and rebellion. These differences highlight fundamental conflicts between systemic change and performative empowerment and provide insight into Disney's changing views on gender, identity, and cultural representation.

4.3.2 Analytical Framework and Methodological Approach to the 2020

Adaptation

The analytical approach used to examine Disney's 2020 live action adaptation of *Mulan* follows a structured yet interpretive qualitative textual analysis method guided by the theoretical perspectives introduced in Chapter 2. This section explores how the film navigates issues of gender, race, and cultural representation through six main focus areas. These include gender performance and crossdressing, the individualization central to postfeminist narratives, romantic undertones and retreat into domestic life, Orientalist framing and cultural reshaping, the construction of gendered oppositions within a Western lens, and the presence of neocolonial attitudes in the portrayal of tradition. Each category is informed by broader theoretical frameworks such as Judith Butler's concept of gender as performance (Butler, 1990), Rosalind Gill's exploration of postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007), Edward Said's foundational work on Orientalism (Said, 1978), and Sunny Yin's critique of cultural simplification for global audiences (Yin, 2009).

A central concern in this analysis is how the 2020 remake reimagines *Mulan* not as a self-made figure, but as a warrior shaped by fate and myth, thereby removing much of the gender defiance that defined the 1998 animated version. Her strength, explained through the mystical force of chi, replaces the earlier narrative of earned empowerment through struggle and resistance. The film's conclusion, especially the absence of institutional leadership in favor of a return to family life, is read through the lens of postfeminist retreatism (Negra, 2009), which often frames personal choice as a substitute for structural change. This chapter also investigates the film's aesthetic and narrative use of Orientalist tropes, revealing how elements of Chinese culture are

stylized in ways that make them palatable to Western audiences. In doing so, the remake subtly positions Chinese tradition as backward while promoting values such as independence, merit, and self-assertion as inherently universal and desirable.

Through this multi-layered reading, the 2020 version of *Mulan* emerges not simply as a modern retelling, but as a carefully crafted rebranding exercise. It offers the appearance of empowerment while often reinforcing existing gender roles and cultural hierarchies. This approach allows a deeper understanding of how Disney's storytelling strategies mirror evolving market pressures and contemporary political expectations, illuminating what has changed and remains firmly in place between the animated and live-action versions.

4.3.3 Gender Performativity and Crossdressing

Unlike the majority of Disney films, *Mulan* emphasizes how gender is a constructed idea. Since tales of female crossdressers highlight the difference between biological sex as well as socially constructed gender, and hence the constructed nature of gender stereotypes, it mostly does this through *Mulan*'s cross-dressing (Flanagan, 2014, p. 44). Despite the film's attempts to highlight the performative nature of gender, *Mulan*'s cross-dressing is a temporary performance, an essential phase before standards of gender (and happiness) may be reestablished (Schrefer, 2010, p. 14).

The gender performance dilemma in "Reflection," where *Mulan* sings that she cannot "pass" for an ideal bride or "play the part" of an ideal daughter (00:11:58), and *Mulan*'s perplexing dual-gender behavior through her cross-dressing, as many scholars have noted, appear to be neglected by the film's conclusion when she comes back home to her family and is assumed to marry Captain Li Shang.

4.3.4 Postfeminist Messaging and Individualization

The feminist message that challenges women's restricted options is undermined by the conclusion, which reimposes the patriarchal system and maintains heteronormativity (Byrne & McQuillan, 1999, p. 165; Dundes & Streiff, 2016, p. 40; Flanagan, 2014, p. 46; Limbach, 2002, p. 115; Schrefer, 2010, pp. 7–8, 27). The socialization message appears that if one returns to "normalcy," it is permissible to question gender norms momentarily. According to King et al. (p.115), this is consistent with the tendency that "moments of 'difference' are themselves, in the end, reinscribed within a more traditional framework." Due to her postfeminist stance, Mulan "has an insidious quality by packaging traditional gender roles in an illusion of female strength" (Dundes & Streiff, p.41).

There is currently discussion of Mulan as a postfeminist literature. Unlike Jasmine, Mulan does not expressly use her entire physique as a weapon and is not sexualized. Mulan does not share Aladdin's apparent correlation between feminine authority and sexuality. However, in the scene where Ling, Yao, and Chien-Po disguise themselves as ladies to get inside the palace, it may be argued that "women (or men dressed as women) use their sexuality to prevail" (Dundes & Streiff, 2016, p. 39). This is because they dress in feminine attire to appear less dangerous and use the fruit to imitate busts to demonstrate their femininity in opposition to the Huns. Sexuality and femininity in the shape of symbols become weapons in this moment, as well as the moment in which Mulan uses her fan to disarm the Hun leader. Additionally, even though there are many women in the audience, Mulan exclusively requests men for assistance when she needs someone to alert the Emperor (Pat Morita) of the

approaching Hun onslaught (01:08:13). This demonstrates her lack of confidence in a woman's ability to assist her. As a result, this movie, like *Aladdin*, implies to audiences that a woman's femininity and sexuality are her most powerful assets.

As one might anticipate, self-actualization and feminine individualization are prominent themes in *Mulan*. This is demonstrated by the heroine in "Reflection" singing that she wants to express who she is on the inside and admitting to her dragon sidekick Mushu that she enlisted in the army to prove her value (01:02:42). As previously said, the postfeminist sensibility, Jasmine's tale arc, and, ultimately, *Mulan*'s are all centered around the ideas of being oneself and making decisions. One of the challenges with female individualism, according to Gill, is the reprivatization of problems, the tendency in postfeminist works to express instances of prejudice "in exclusively personal terms" (Gill, 2007, p. 153). According to Gwendolyn Limbach (2002), "[r]ather than criticizing the institution that holds that a proper wife must be only silent and beautiful, the film instead focuses on the crisis an individual experiences when she does not meet the requirement" (p.118). This kind of reprivatization may also be found in *Aladdin*, where the primary topic of conversation is Jasmine's predicament of being forced into an arranged marriage. In both films, no other notable female characters challenge societal conventions comparably; in *Mulan*, the other happy girls who will meet with the Matchmaker appear glad to be there (00:08:50). Therefore, "a political agenda calling for women's rights" is not a part of either *Mulan*'s or Jasmine's disobedience (Dong, *Mulan's Legend* p.184). In line with Yin's assertion that "[f]eminism is less threatening and more acceptable to the Western audience if non-Western women are being rescued from, or are willing to fight against, their traditional cultures" (Yin, 2009, p. 293), as

in Aladdin and Mulan, it seems that feminism is only less alarming to male viewers if it is also customized.

4.3.5 Romantic Implications and Reinforcement of Traditional Roles

Like Aladdin, Mulan has a double entanglement with feminist ideals; while it appears to be mostly about female liberation, it also has highly troubling beliefs. Instead of accepting the Emperor's invitation of an exclusive seat on his council, which may elevate women's standing in the community, Mulan says, "I think I have been away from home long enough," and returns home to her family (01:17:27). Her choice is not explained. However, considering that retreatism is a well-established narrative in postfeminist media culture, it is not a wholly unexpected development. Diane Negra characterizes these stories as "fantasies of hometown return in which a heroine gives up her life in the city to take up again the role of daughter, sister, wife, or sweetheart in a hometown setting." (Negra, 2009, p. 2) According to her, these tales are a part of a culture that tests the female character in a professional context and praises parenting. These stories are harmful because they teach females that a happy ending is achieved by performing household responsibilities, such as finding a mate and being a good daughter (Dundes & Streiff, 2016, p. 41). Ward believes that Mulan is motivated by self-discovery rather than romance (Ward, 2002, p. 108). Mulan does have romantic aspirations, even though this may be the case for most of the film, as she becomes agitated when Shang praises her combat prowess instead of expressing a love interest in her (01:18:11). Mulan doesn't initiate a relationship, so the viewership receives the message that only men should approach potential spouses. The notion that a desire or need to find a husband comes from internal as well as external factors normalizes stories of female gender concern over not finding

a mate, as in *Mulan*. Grandma Fa's statement, "Great! She takes a sword home. In my opinion, she ought to have brought a man home" (01:19:58). "Reflects the opinions of society rather well. However, Grandma Fa's remark about Shang remaining forever suggests that a marriage may soon be on the horizon. Angela Davis (1981) argues that even though Mulan and Shang's marriage would have fulfilled a societal ideal, the fact that Mulan makes the decision independently is thematically significant. Similarly, Rosalind Gill (2007) critiques how some women, empowered by postfeminist narratives, make choices that reinforce traditional notions of femininity. She notes that such choices may be perceived as "empowering," but remain problematic from a feminist perspective—especially when they are rooted in normative gender roles. Gill's concerns reflect Davis's earlier argument about the tension between agency and conformity (Davis, 1981).

4.3.6 Orientalism and Representation of Chinese Culture

According to the colonial rhetoric of Orientalism, China is presented as a weird and foreign location with ancestor worship and pet crickets in the first 10 minutes, just like the Middle East was in *Aladdin*. Disney employs well-known symbols of Chinese culture, including the Great Wall and the Forbidden City, along with clichés like dragon imagery, lanterns, fireworks, calligraphy, and martial arts, to evoke the location, according to scholars (Anjirbag, 2018, p. 236; Dong, 2005, p. 170; Dong, 2010, p. 229; Ma, 2003, p. 153). Disney creates its vision of China by fusing Chinese history and cultures (Tang, 2008, p. 152; Yin, 2014, p. 296) and "emphasizing the Otherness of non-Western materials to cater to the Western audience's desire for exoticism" (Yin, 2014, p. 290). Orientalist clichés like "the effeminate Oriental male," "[t]he perfidious Chinese," and "the inscrutable Chinese" are used to describe

the people of this China (McLeod, 2010, p. 53; Said, 1978, p. 108). Chi Fu, who is exceedingly feminine, as was previously said, best exemplifies the first and second stereotypes. In contrast to Shang, who wouldn't harm a person who had saved his life, he is the initial to take action against Mulan as her gender is revealed and throws her into the snow even though she just saved their lives (01:00:30). The Emperor's use of metaphorical language that is difficult for others to understand is an example of the third cliché. He demonstrates this by telling Shang, "The flower that blooms in adversity is the rarest and most beautiful of all." But Shang needs to explain that he is talking about Mulan when he doesn't comprehend (01:18:35). The wise words of the Emperor are not authentic Chinese sayings, as they were heavily altered for the Chinese adaptation of the film (Xu & Tian, 2013, p. 197). Therefore, the "proverbs" are founded on clichés of Oriental knowledge instead of being anchored in authentic Chinese culture. Because more Westernized characters can not comprehend them, they are used to subtly convey other personalities. There are also overt instances of hatred in Mulan aimed at the Huns, the movie's "real" antagonists. They are shown anomalistically as having grayish skin and talons for fingers, as well as being able to climb trees easily, hang upside down, and sniff objects. Even though these caricatures are inappropriate, Mulan's derogatory representation of Chinese culture should not be overlooked.

4.3.7 Sexism, Cultural Binary, and the Western Ideal

Like Aladdin, in Mulan society is shown as antifeminist, sexist, and something the main protagonists detest. The tracks "Honor to Us All" and "A Girl Worth Fighting For" both propagate sexism and antifeminism by conveying several damaging ideas, including the notion that women are less important than men because they are called

"girls," that they must be reserved and slender, and that the only way for them to make their families happy is to get married and start having children. Men, on the other hand, are referred to as "men." Accordingly, they retain outdated, oppressive gender norms (Anjirbag, 2018, p. 239; Dundes & Streiff, 2016, p. 40). The rhetoric of the characters also demonstrates sexism and antifeminism. Shang wonders whether their families give him females when he requests sons when the recruits fail to meet his standards (00:38:14). They question Mulan why she is acting like such a girl when she refuses to play combat with Ling and Yao (00:43:57). Additionally, Mushu declares that Mulan is the guy after she saves the troops (00:58:57). These statements all support patriarchal narratives of male supremacy. Even if Chinese characters say these things and are therefore connected to Chinese culture, the connection between tradition and misogyny is not as straightforward as that which occurred in *Aladdin*. This is because phrases such as the last two are often used in English and are therefore associated with American culture. However, much as in *Aladdin*, "the law," which has a strong cultural foundation, is presented as sexist and antifeminist. In *Mulan*, women who enlist in the military face execution as a punishment. Chi Fu, who is now associated with Chinese law, responds, "You know the law," when Shang is hesitant to administer this sentence (01:01:03). Even though American society might be characterized as linguistically sexist, viewers in the West can be confident that their laws are not similar. Disney contributes to the idea that gender oppression is a non-Western problem by framing Chinese culture and law, as Yin contends, "as an Oriental tyranny"; in other words, "[b]y blaming the cultural Other, Disney manage[s] to avoid attending to those problems in U.S. society" (293). *Mulan's* Oriental discourse reinforces East-West binary thinking, much like in *Aladdin*. The primary characters in this movie are also heavily Westernized.

Finally, similar to Aladdin, Mulan presents Chinese social and legal systems as discriminatory, antiquated, and alien through a traditional neocolonial discourse with Orientalism as its foundation. Even though it only has Chinese characters (except for African American-coded Mushu), the main character appears as white since she is against this society. As a result, non-Chinese children may develop stereotypes about Chinese people and possibly Asian people overall, whereas Chinese children are educated to adopt Western values. Mulan's interdisciplinary socialization themes devalue Asian ethnic background, Chinese culture, and not conforming gender identities while celebrating heteronormativity and commitment to Western values through the narratives of Mulan, Shang, and Chi Fu. Asian children should strive for a heteronormative, Western mentality. Yin argues that it is pretty disturbing that both Mulan and Aladdin seem to be teaching children that it is only appropriate to be anything other than white if one attempts to become comparatively white, as this reinforces racial and social disparities (Yin, 2009, p. 286). The presumed or unmodified standard by which alternatives are assessed and rated is projected to be the dominant group's values. According to Yin (2009), universalization is an Othering process that "maintains the current order of discourse and power structure" (Yin, 2009, pp. 289–290), a system that elevates Western ideals.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The goal of this thesis was to investigate whether Disney's live-action adaptations of *The Little Mermaid* (2023), *Aladdin* (2019), and *Mulan* (2020) show a substantial ideological shift from their Renaissance-era predecessors in how they depict race, ethnicity, and cultural identity, or if they stick to more traditional paradigms while merely displaying diversity visually. A close textual study revealed that although performative references to inclusivity and visual changes are evident, core ideological foundations frequently do not change.

5.1 Summary of Findings by Film

Disney's casting of Black actress Halle Bailey as Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* (2023) marked a considerable departure from the original Eurocentric portrayal. This choice gave young Black audiences a moment of visibility within the Disney Princess canon and was revolutionary in its symbolic acceptance of diversity. Additionally, the Queen and Ariel's sisters were portrayed by ethnically different actresses, which enhanced the global aesthetic. However, these alterations mostly took place at the surface level. Ariel's Blackness was never thematized or represented in the story, and the plot mainly stayed true to its initial romantic arc. Thus, in a classic case of racial

blindness, race becomes hypervisible in the casting but invisible in the content of the story. Therefore, the adaptation exemplifies what Banet-Weiser (2018) calls "performative wokeness," a tactic that conveys progressiveness without altering narrative structures. The ideological shift is still relatively slight despite visual pluralism. While the casting of Halle Bailey introduces visual diversity, the film ultimately fails to weave her racial identity into the fabric of the story, echoing Warner's (2015) observations on colorblind casting. Although it steps away from the original's overt Eurocentrism, the narrative sidesteps any meaningful engagement with how race could shape Ariel's world or her relationships. Unlike the 1989 version, where whiteness operated as an invisible default, the 2023 adaptation presents a visibly racialized Ariel but drains her character of any socio-cultural context. This aligns with Banet-Weiser's (2018) critique of performative wokeness—where representation serves as a surface-level gesture rather than a narrative pivot. So, while the film may look more inclusive, it clings tightly to its predecessor's romantic blueprint and conventional gender norms. Essentially, it shakes up the visuals but leaves the ideological scaffolding untouched.

The representation issues were much more noticeable in *Aladdin* (2019). Orientalist stereotyping, particularly in the lyrics of "Arabian Nights" and the portrayal of antagonists with Arab-coded accents and aesthetics, drew harsh criticism to the 1992 original. Colorism remained a significant issue even after Disney changed these aspects and added a more diverse ensemble, which included Mena Massoud as Aladdin and Naomi Scott as Jasmine. To reinforce a racial hierarchy, lighter-skinned performers were given preference for starring roles, while darker-skinned actors

portrayed antagonists or supporting roles. A marketing plan to re-center whiteness for broader appeal was also implied by introducing Prince Anders, a white, humorous character absent from the original. Though they were enmeshed in a romance storyline and did not challenge Orientalist frameworks, Jasmine's new song "Speechless" and her elevation to Sultan symbolize liberation. Instead, these changes are a prime example of representational transformation as branding, a key component of neoliberal multiculturalism. Despite its glossy updates and a more globally-minded cast, *Aladdin* (2019) does not entirely escape the Orientalist lens that Said (1978) critiqued decades ago. Agrabah remains a fictionalized East, viewed through a Western filter, glamorous, chaotic, and ultimately othered. Sure, the film scrubs away some of the more glaring offenses from 1992, but then turns around and inserts Prince Anders, a comic white foil whose presence reinforces Western centrality through humor. It is a classic case of neoliberal multiculturalism, diversity that's colorful but non-disruptive. Jasmine's new "Speechless" storyline offers a nod to empowerment, but it channels change through personal voice rather than collective transformation. When placed beside its animated counterpart, the remake feels broader in scope but still skirts around the deeper power imbalances embedded in the tale. It is an upgrade in casting, but not in politics.

Despite being based on one of Disney's most culturally unique fables and set in China, *Mulan* (2020) also exposed the limitations of representational transformation. The live-action adaptation recasts Mulan as a mythic character with chi. This mysterious internal energy replaces gender transgression with natural superiority, whereas the original animated film (1998) focused on cross-dressing and performative gender identity. This re-narrativization reframes Mulan's achievement

as fate rather than earned strength, departing from the 1998 film's themes of performative gender and societal defiance. Furthermore, the adaptation continues to depict Chinese culture through Orientalist clichés, exaggerated martial arts, cryptic proverbs, and animalistic portrayals of wicked Huns, despite removing comic relief elements like Mushu and musical numbers in favor of historical realism. The underlying storyline maintained the supremacy of Western principles like individualism and meritocracy despite the visual realism. Mulan's eventual decision to return to her family and decline a leadership position serves to uphold gender standards disguised as personal preference, a common cliché in postfeminist media. The 2020 live-action remake swaps the original's nuanced take on gender performance for a more mystical, almost predestined form of heroism. It dilutes the feminist edge that gave the 1998 version its punch. In the animated film, Mulan's journey was one of cleverness, perseverance, and deliberate rebellion; here, her prowess feels innate, as though she was born exceptional, not made through struggle. This shift moves the narrative closer to Western-style hero myths, sidelining the cultural intricacies of the source legend. Moreover, while removing Mushu and musical numbers aims for a tone of realism, it replaces caricature with an equally problematic "ethnic spectacle," reinforcing what Chow (1995) warned about. By the film's end, Mulan's choice to return home rather than assume a leadership role seems less like humility and more like a quiet surrender to tradition. On the surface, the film appears more culturally respectful, but beneath that polish lies a retreat from the subversive core of its predecessor.

5.2 Theoretical and Literature Reintegration

This thesis uses three key theoretical perspectives: Orientalism from Edward Said, performative wokeness described by Banet-Weiser, and Warner's critique of colorblind casting. These frameworks help unpack how Disney's live-action remakes engage with race and representation, often in progressive ways that ultimately maintain older ideological patterns. Said's concept of Orientalism is beneficial when examining *Aladdin* and *Mulan*, where cultures like those of Agrabah and Imperial China are reduced to romanticized, exotic settings rather than treated as complex, lived realities. These places are less about authenticity and more about spectacle for Western audiences. Banet-Weiser's discussion of performative wokeness highlights how these remakes rely on symbolic gestures, like casting actors of color or giving female characters solo anthems, without challenging the deeper structures of power. Jasmine may sing about agency, but her story still orbits around love. Warner's theory of colorblind casting offers insight into films like *The Little Mermaid* and *Aladdin*, where racial diversity is made visible through casting yet remains unacknowledged in the story itself. Together, these theories provide a cohesive way to understand how Disney remakes present themselves as inclusive while quietly preserving the status quo.

Building on these frameworks, it becomes clear that Disney's live-action remakes do not genuinely confront the representational issues they seem to acknowledge. They often rework these concerns in progressive ways but ultimately leave the core structures intact. Consider *Mulan*. The 1998 animated film was praised for its subversive approach to gender, presenting *Mulan* as someone who actively defies patriarchal norms by disguising herself as a man. Her strength was earned through struggle, deception, and persistence. The 2020 version shifts away from that

narrative entirely. Instead of focusing on identity and performance, it emphasizes innate power through chi, suggesting that Mulan's abilities are something she was born with. This change not only removes the cross-dressing element but also echoes familiar Orientalist patterns, where Eastern characters are depicted as naturally gifted or mystical rather than complex individuals shaped by circumstance. In doing so, the remake loses much of the feminist nuance that defined the original.

The remake of Aladdin follows a similar path. The 1992 version faced criticism for its reliance on Orientalist imagery, such as the stereotyped portrayal of Arab culture and the villain's darker features and exaggerated accent. The 2019 version attempts to address this by revising lyrics and broadening the cast, but it also introduces a new character, Prince Anders, a white comic figure with no narrative necessity. His presence feels oddly placed, serving as a familiar anchor for Western audiences rather than contributing to the story. This move subtly re-centers whiteness even as the film gestures toward diversity.

Meanwhile, Jasmine's character is given a stronger voice and a solo anthem about empowerment. However, her political awakening remains tied to her romantic journey, illustrating a form of postfeminist empowerment that emphasizes personal expression over structural transformation. In this light, the film does not escape earlier critiques but softens them for modern sensibilities.

A similar pattern appears in The Little Mermaid remake. Casting Halle Bailey as Ariel was widely seen as a progressive move, and it certainly challenged traditional visual norms of Disney princesses. However, the story remains unchanged. Ariel's

racial identity is never acknowledged or explored, and her experiences unfold just as they did in the original. Her character arc centers on romantic longing and self-discovery, untouched by any real-world implications of race. As Banet-Weiser points out, this kind of representation fits neatly into the category of performative wokeness. It offers the appearance of inclusivity without altering the narrative structure in any meaningful way. A film that feels current in appearance but static in substance.

Looking across all three remakes, the pattern becomes unmistakable. They present diversity as a visual update while retaining the same foundational messages about race, gender, and cultural identity. These films may look different from their predecessors, but rarely push beyond the surface. The originals were shaped by the ideologies of their time. Though positioned as improvements, the remakes often mirror those same ideologies in more palatable forms.

This study makes a meaningful contribution to media and cultural studies by examining how Disney's live-action remakes reshape racial and cultural identity ideas in today's media landscape. While existing scholarship has explored representation in animated films or broader diversity trends across media, this thesis narrows its focus to Renaissance-era remakes—a relatively underexamined area within debates on corporate inclusivity. By revisiting key theoretical frameworks like Said's *Orientalism*, Warner's critique of colorblind casting, and Gill's ideas on postfeminist individualism, the study offers fresh insight into how these concepts continue to resonate within global entertainment. It also explores how neoliberal multiculturalism and performative wokeness operate, revealing how companies like

Disney embrace surface-level diversity to broaden market reach without fundamentally shifting power dynamics. In bridging classical theory with the workings of contemporary pop culture, the thesis not only reinvigorates longstanding academic debates but also asks more complex questions about the limits of inclusion. What does seeing more diverse faces on screen mean if the underlying stories remain the same? By highlighting the ideological consistency beneath aesthetic updates, this work invites a deeper, more critical look at what genuine progress in media representation should entail.

Looking at these frameworks collectively, it becomes clear that Disney's live-action remakes rely heavily on surface-level diversity while leaving the deeper ideological roots of the original films largely intact. What might be read as progress, more diverse casting, stronger female leads, or nods to cultural specificity, often serves more as a branding strategy than a true challenge to dominant norms. Within the logic of neoliberal multiculturalism, inclusion becomes a marketable feature, not a transformative force. Although the visuals have shifted to reflect contemporary expectations, the underlying narratives still revolve around Western ideals, individual achievement, and identities stripped of political weight. These patterns support the central aim of the thesis: to question whether these representational updates amount to meaningful change. As the analysis shows, Disney's remakes offer an aesthetic refresh rather than a structural reimagining. In this context, representation becomes less about disrupting the status quo and more about dressing it up in a new, more inclusive costume.

5.3 Methodology Reflection & Researcher's Perspective

This thesis's use of qualitative textual analysis offered a flexible yet structured approach for closely examining Disney's live-action remakes. Through detailed, scene-by-scene comparisons between the original Renaissance-era films and their modern counterparts, this method allowed for a deeper look into how race, gender, and cultural identity are reconstructed across different production eras. It opened space for close attention to casting choices, narrative shifts, visual design, and symbolic patterns—elements central to understanding how representation works in practice. That said, this approach also comes with certain limitations. Since it is grounded in text, it does not account for audience responses or the internal production processes that could further illuminate the intentions and reactions surrounding these remakes. Moreover, while the selected films were chosen carefully as representative case studies, the findings should not be assumed to apply universally across all Disney works or the broader media industry without additional comparative studies.

My perspective as a researcher has also shaped this project in meaningful ways. Like many others, I grew up enchanted by Disney films. Their songs, stories, and colorful worlds left a lasting impression on me. Only later, when I began to look more critically, did I notice the deeper messages embedded in what seemed like innocent tales. These stories, though entertaining, played a role in shaping how those around me and I came to understand ideas of race, gender, and cultural difference. That realization became a turning point in my academic path. I began to see media as a source of enjoyment and a powerful tool of cultural influence. Having experienced these films' emotional connection and representational gaps, I felt compelled to look at how they function today. This thesis is the result of that personal and academic

journey. It combines critical analysis and lived experience to understand better how modern fairytales can reinforce or challenge cultural hierarchies. Through this work, I hope to contribute to broader conversations about media literacy, corporate narratives, and meaningful inclusion in a global entertainment landscape.

5.4 Limitations of the Study

Although this thesis thoroughly examines three significant Disney remakes, its scope is constrained. Because of their unclear cultural coding or anthropomorphic focus, other remakes from the same era, including *Beauty and the Beast* or *The Lion King*, were not included. Additionally, this thesis analyzes the text; it does not thoroughly examine audience reception, which is essential to comprehend how various communities perceive and react to these representational decisions. Furthermore, the analysis concentrates on Western academic discourse; adding voices from the regions portrayed in the films, such as China, the Middle East, and the Caribbean diaspora, would provide the required context and depth.

5.5 Intertextual & Historical Perspective

Although this study focuses on Disney's live-action remakes, it is part of a much broader cultural conversation around the use of colorblind casting in contemporary media. Rooted in ideals of equal opportunity and a desire to move away from white-centered storytelling, colorblind casting has sparked celebration and critique. The practice first gained traction in the world of theatre, particularly in Shakespearean productions where race was often considered irrelevant to the integrity of the role. Over time, it transitioned into film and television, becoming

especially prominent in the early 2000s and reaching widespread visibility in the current decade.

Streaming platforms like Netflix have played a significant role in popularizing this approach. Series such as *Bridgerton* and *Shadow and Bone* serve as key examples. In *Bridgerton*, Black actors appear in high-society roles within a reimagined version of Regency-era England, and yet the show rarely acknowledges race as a narrative factor. While many viewers and critics praised this for expanding representation, others pointed out the discomfort of erasing historical contexts. Some argued that this kind of inclusion risks becoming purely aesthetic without addressing the realities of inequality. *Shadow and Bone* follows a similar path, assembling a multi-ethnic cast in a fantasy world loosely based on Tsarist Russia. Again, questions arise: does this kind of representation broaden inclusion, or does it flatten cultural complexity?

These examples help clarify the double-edged nature of colorblind casting. On the one hand, it opens doors for underrepresented actors and visibly diversifies who gets to be seen on screen. Conversely, it can obscure real-world power structures when divorced from meaningful narrative engagement. Disney's approach mirrors this trend, especially in films like *Aladdin* and *The Little Mermaid*. The remakes feature actors of color in central roles, yet the stories themselves rarely shift to reflect those characters' cultural or racial identities. What results is a version of diversity that feels more visual than substantive—representation without the narrative depth to support it.

Placing Disney's remakes within this larger media landscape strengthens the core claim of this thesis. Simply changing what representation looks like does not automatically change what it means. As seen across platforms, the logic of neoliberal multiculturalism continues to dominate. Difference is celebrated, but often in ways that leave underlying hierarchies untouched.

Compared to Disney's more conservative approach to representation, several contemporary studios have taken bolder steps toward meaningful inclusion—both in terms of narrative structure and commercial success. Streaming services like Netflix and animation studios such as DreamWorks have broadened their casting choices and, in many cases, woven cultural and racial identities more directly into their storylines.

Take Netflix's *The Witcher* and *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story*. Both shows stirred public conversation around race and representation, yet they achieved strong commercial performance and favorable critical responses. What sets these productions apart is their willingness to reimagine the worlds they depict through a multicultural lens. Rather than placing diverse characters into pre-existing scripts without adaptation, these shows build narratives that allow identity to hold real narrative weight. DreamWorks, too, has made thoughtful contributions in this area. While *The Prince of Egypt* and *Abominable* may not be as recent or globally dominant as Disney's offerings, they were still noted for their visual distinctiveness and culturally attuned storytelling.

These examples highlight a crucial distinction. Where Disney often treats diversity as a surface-level feature that supports branding under neoliberal multiculturalism, other studios increasingly aim to embed inclusivity into the logic of the narrative itself. The result is a more diverse cast and a more resonant and grounded story. The following table summarizes how these different studios compare on key measures such as narrative depth, box office returns, and critical reception.

Table 3. Contemporary Industry Comparison: Race, Representation, and Reception

Production	Studio	Representat ion Strategy	Box Office / Reach	Narrative Integration	Critical Reception
The Little Mermaid (2023)	Disney	Colorblind casting (Black Ariel)	\$569M worldwide	Weak	Mixed – praised visuals, critiqued plot fidelity (BBC, 2023)
Aladdin (2019)	Disney	Racially coded casting + white insert	\$1.05B worldwide	Limited	Mixed – praised performanc es,

		(Prince Anders)			critiqued Orientalism (Variety, 2019)
Mulan (2020)	Disney	Pan-Asian cast, but Orientalist narrative	\$70M (COVID release limitations)	Thematically fragmented	Mixed – praised visuals, critiqued chi-rewriting (The Guardian, 2020)
Bridgerton (2020–)	Netflix	Color-conscious casting	Top 10 in 92 countries (S1)	Strong	Positive – praised for genre reinvention and inclusivity
Queen Charlotte (2023)	Netflix	Historical reimagination w/ Black royalty	Top 10 Global TV Shows 2023	High	Acclaimed – celebrated for depth and identity

					focus
The Prince of Egypt (1998)	DreamWorks	Middle Eastern cast, faith-rooted story	\$218M worldwide	Strong	Acclaimed – praised for dignity and authenticity
Abominable (2019)	DreamWorks	Chinese lead + cultural setting	\$190M worldwide	Strong	Positive – praised for cultural detail and heart (IndieWire, 2019)

Table 3

Comparative Box Office Performance and Critical Reception of Inclusive Animated and Live-Action Films (*source: Box Office Mojo, 2019, 2020, 2023; Netflix, 2021, 2023; BBC News, 2023; Variety, 2019; The Guardian, 2020; Ebert, 1998; Ehrlich, 2019; Vogue, 2023*)

As the table illustrates, achieving thoughtful representation does not come at the expense of commercial success. When handled with care and narrative depth, inclusion often leads to stronger audience connection and greater critical recognition.

These examples suggest that diversity, when meaningfully integrated, can be both an artistic and a financial asset.

In this broader media landscape, Disney's remakes look notably cautious. Their tendency to rely on racial ambiguity, symbolic gestures, and narrative safety may help maintain a visually modern brand. However, it also sets them apart from studios taking more creative risks. While others experiment with weaving identity into the heart of their stories, Disney continues to present inclusion as an aesthetic layer rather than a storytelling shift. This comparison strengthens the thesis's core argument: true inclusivity requires more than casting choices or visual updates. Representation remains largely symbolic without a deeper reworking of narrative frameworks, leaving the underlying ideologies untouched.

The representational decisions behind Disney's live-action remakes, and the controversies they spark, are tightly bound to the market-driven logic that shapes much of today's media landscape. Disney's move to reimagine culturally significant classics was never just an artistic venture. It was a calculated strategy aimed at expanding appeal in emerging non-Western markets while catering to Western audiences who increasingly expect socially conscious content. However, as the backlash from both progressive and conservative viewers shows, trying to be globally inclusive and locally acceptable simultaneously is a nearly impossible task. IndieWire, for instance, described *The Little Mermaid* as a "flashpoint for racial anxieties masked as aesthetic critique" (Lattanzio, 2022), while Vox pointed to Prince Anders in *Aladdin* as an "insurance policy against representational risk" (Abad-Santos, 2019). *Mulan* also drew fire, with *The Atlantic* accusing the remake of

reducing Chinese heritage to a "Western-coded empowerment fantasy" (2020). These critiques expose Disney's delicate fault line, between celebrating diversity as a brand asset and unintentionally stirring cultural discomfort. What emerges from these tensions is more than just a reflection of the political moment. The films actively shape our conversations about identity, power, and representation. As this thesis has explored, representation here is not solely about who is included on screen, but also about how public perception is managed in a fast-moving, polarized, and globalized media environment.

5.6 Why Does Disney Bother? Shifts in Representation Amid Political and Cultural Pressures

To understand why Disney has altered its approach to representation in its live-action remakes, it helps to consider these changes within the larger political, cultural, and economic forces that have shaped the early twenty-first century. Over the past decade, movements like Black Lives Matter, MeToo, and Oscars So White have brought intense public attention to racial justice and fairness issues in media. Under this growing spotlight, companies such as Disney faced increased pressure to modernize their image or risk facing backlash and financial consequences (Gray, 2013; Hunt & Ramón, 2020).

Many scholars suggest these shifts are not always rooted in a deep ideological commitment. Instead, they often reflect the workings of what has been called neoliberal multiculturalism. This is a strategy where corporations promote surface-level diversity to appeal to a vast global market while leaving the deeper systems of inequality intact (Melamed, 2006; Banet-Weiser, 2018). Banet-Weiser

(2018) describes how diversity becomes part of a brand—a way to package identity politics that looks progressive without pushing for real change. Similarly, Warner (2015) discusses how colorblind casting can give the impression of inclusion, yet still erase the cultural depth and lived realities of non-white characters. This tension is evident in Disney's recent versions of *Aladdin* and *The Little Mermaid*. While the casting in these films may look inclusive, the stories often stay safe and ideologically conservative.

The push for more visible diversity does not just come from social expectations. Economic realities also drive it. As Mosco (2009) points out, media industries respond to shifts in demographics, market growth, and the global reach of their content. For Disney, this means walking a fine line between maintaining the nostalgic charm of its classic films and updating them just enough to resonate with current cultural climates (Wasko, 2020). The original films from the Disney Renaissance were created when there was little accountability around issues of race and representation. Today's remakes, however, exist in a much more scrutinized media environment, shaped by online activism, global audiences, and constant feedback (Nakamura, 2020).

In this context, representation in Disney's remakes acts more like a symbol than a substance. It offers the appearance of progress by showcasing visible diversity, yet often avoids altering the deeper frameworks that shaped the originals. As this thesis has argued, the new films tend to preserve the same Eurocentric, individualist, and heteronormative values that underpinned their animated predecessors. So, the real question becomes why Disney made these changes and why the changes were

carefully designed to seem bold while avoiding any real disruption. This speaks to the complicated relationship between corporate image-making, cultural politics, and diversity marketing in today's entertainment industry (Ahmed, 2012; Dyer, 1997).

5.7 Future Research

Future studies might go into several different areas. First, audience research could show how viewers from various national, racial, and ethnic backgrounds perceive these movies. Are they viewed as offensive, progressive, or in the middle? Second, it would be possible to assess whether Disney's model of visual inclusion with ideological continuity is a phenomenon shared by the industry by comparing it with other large companies, such as DreamWorks and Netflix Originals. Third, a more nuanced understanding of representation would be provided by examining intersectionality and how gender, racism, class, and sexuality interact in these remakes. Last but not least, it would be beneficial to investigate whether fresh Disney original storylines handle cultural complexity more effectively than these remakes, which are nonetheless constrained by the traditions they aim to modernize.

In conclusion, Disney's live-action reimaginings signify a change in style rather than content. Instead of cultural reckoning, they represent a time of corporate inclusion. They promote progressive principles while maintaining conventional frameworks through nuanced performances, varied images, and empowering soundtracks. Neoliberal multiculturalism, a system that promotes inclusiveness while upholding hierarchy, is fundamentally based on this paradox. Disney has not yet completely rewritten its principles despite having redesigned its images.

5.8 Final Reflection & Closing Statement

This thesis has shown that while outwardly progressive in their approach to representation, Disney's live-action remakes largely fall short when it comes to real ideological change. Films like *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin*, and *Mulan* introduce more diverse casting, visual modernizations, and occasional nods to empowerment. However, when viewed through the lenses of Orientalism, colorblind casting, neoliberal multiculturalism, and postfeminist individualism, these gestures appear more superficial than structural. Rather than challenging the cultural hierarchies embedded in the original narratives, the remakes often repackage those same ideas in more polished and commercially palatable forms.

By leaning on performative wokeness and symbolic diversity, Disney successfully aligns itself with contemporary calls for inclusion, all while reinforcing storylines rooted in Western individualism, racial neutrality, and traditional gender norms. These films uphold the company's signature formula—nostalgia, moral simplicity, and global accessibility—now dressed in the aesthetics of diversity. The result is a clear example of the broader tension within media under neoliberal influence: inclusion is embraced, but in ways that rarely disrupt the foundations of power.

This work's central takeaway is that representation is not a revolution in Disney's live-action remakes. It is a renovation. The surface may change, but the structure underneath remains the same. This insight not only captures the findings of the thesis but also speaks to a broader cultural dynamic. True inclusivity requires more than casting updates or symbolic gestures. It calls for reimagining the stories we tell and a willingness to rethink the values we build them on.

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