

CONSTRUCTING AND CONTESTING GENDER: POWER DYNAMICS AND GENDER SOCIALIZATION IN DISNEY ANIMATED FILMS – A MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Haiqa Afzal¹, Dr. Fatima Zafar Baig²

¹MPhil Scholar, Department of English, the Women University, Multan,
²Assistant Professor, Department of English, the Women University, Multan

¹haiqaafza324@gmail.com, ²fatimabaig_84@wum.edu.pk

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20338969>

Keywords

Disney animated films, multimodal discourse analysis, feminist critical discourse analysis, gender socialization, power dynamics, postfeminism, gender representation

Article History

Received: 25 January 2026

Accepted: 28 February 2026

Published: 22 March 2026

Copyright @Author

Corresponding Author: *

Haiqa Afzal

Abstract

Disney animated films are among the most globally influential cultural texts shaping how young audiences understand gender, authority, and social value. This study investigates how power dynamics and gender socialization are constructed, reinforced, and contested across four Disney animated films drawn from distinct historical moments: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Frozen* (2013), and *Encanto* (2021). While contemporary Disney is widely assumed to have moved beyond the patriarchal stereotyping of its classical era, this paper argues that the shift is more representational than structural. Adopting a qualitative multimodal feminist design, the study integrates Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, and the theory of “doing gender” to analyze purposively selected scenes across visual, linguistic, and narrative semiotic modes. The analysis is organized through three interrelated dimensions: the multimodal construction of gendered identities, the discursive representation of power dynamics, and gender socialization and performance. The findings show that the classical films naturalize patriarchal ideology through tightly coordinated visual, verbal, and narrative systems that code femininity as passive, domestic, and romantically dependent and masculinity as active, institutional, and authoritative, whereas the contemporary films substantially revise these codes by granting female characters agency, emotional complexity, and narrative centrality and by reconstructing masculinity as emotionally available and relational. However, the contemporary films continue to anchor feminine worth in relational obligation and emotional labor and resolve through reconciliation with, rather than rejection of, the structures that regulate gender. The study concludes that the trajectory from *Snow White* to *Encanto* is simultaneously real and limited and the patriarchal ideology has not disappeared but has been repackaged into subtler, postfeminist, and more resilient forms.

1. INTRODUCTION

Animated films occupy a central position in contemporary media culture because they actively construct and circulate social perceptions of identity, behavior, gender roles, morality, and power. The Walt Disney Company, one of the

most influential global cultural institutions, has shaped children's understanding of gender across generations. Disney films function as representational systems that participate in the construction of social reality rather than serving

merely as entertainment; they help audiences define which behaviors, appearances, emotions, and social roles are culturally sanctioned (Hall, 1997). Because such films are repeatedly watched during childhood, they operate as a dynamic agent of gender socialization, normalizing particular gendered behaviors through culturally approved models (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Gender, in this account, is not a fixed biological attribute but a socially constructed and performative process produced and reproduced through everyday practice (Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987), while power is understood not as a centralized possession but as a diffuse force exercised through discourse that shapes what is considered normal and acceptable (Fairclough, 1995; Foucault, 1978).

This study analyzes four Disney animated films from distinct historical periods: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Frozen* (2013), and *Encanto* (2021), in order to trace how gendered power relations and processes of gender socialization are constructed, negotiated, and contested across changing cultural contexts. Comparing the classical and contemporary films makes it possible to examine both ideological continuity and ideological transformation within a single corpus, and to test whether Disney's progressive contemporary reputation is borne out at the level of multimodal discourse.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Disney animated films have long been criticized for reproducing patriarchal, heteronormative, and hegemonic gender ideologies. Earlier princess films represented female characters within narrow frameworks of beauty, emotional dependence, obedience, and passivity, while male characters were associated with rationality, leadership, and social power (England et al., 2011; Towbin et al., 2004). Recent films such as *Frozen* and *Encanto* increasingly present themselves as progressive texts centered on empowerment, resistance, and female agency, generating a widespread assumption that Disney has transcended traditional stereotypes. Emerging scholarship, however, indicates that this transformation may be more representational

than structural, with patriarchal ideology repackaged into subtler, postfeminist, and culturally adaptable forms rather than dismantled (Arnold et al., 2015; Streiff & Dundes, 2017). The central problem this study addresses is therefore the ideological contradiction between Disney's progressive representational image and the persistence of stereotypical gendered power relations embedded within its multimodal discourse, since contemporary power operates less through overt domination than through emotional discourse, family responsibility, and self-sacrifice. A second, methodological problem is that prior research has largely relied on content analysis, stereotype counting, or thematic interpretation, with limited attention to how multiple semiotic modes work together to construct gender and power, and with traditional and contemporary films often examined in isolation (Shehata, 2020). This study confronts both problems by comparatively analyzing the four films through an integrated multimodal feminist framework.

1.2. Significance of the Research

This research is significant because Disney films play a substantial role in early gender socialization through repeated viewing. Children internalize models of authority, femininity, masculinity, and emotional legitimacy that shape their understanding of social reality (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Hall, 1997). By comparing classical and contemporary films, the study clarifies how ideological representations of gender and power evolve, contributing to broader debates on post feminism, mediated empowerment, and changing gender representation in popular culture (Gill, 2007; Streiff & Dundes, 2017). Its comparative multimodal approach also constitutes theoretical and methodological contribution. Whereas previous Disney scholarship has concentrated on identifying stereotypes or thematic content (England et al., 2011; Towbin et al., 2004) This study shifts the analytical focus from what is represented to how representation itself produces ideology across visual and verbal modes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Shehata, 2020). The

findings are valuable to scholars, educators, parents, media students, and content creators seeking to understand how children's media subtly reconstructs ideological meanings related to gender and power.

1.3. Research Objectives

This research critically examines how gendered power relations are constructed, maintained, and contested across the four selected films through a multimodal feminist discourse perspective. The specific objectives are:

- To examine how representations of male and female characters in *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Frozen*, and *Encanto* reinforce or challenge existing gender-based power hierarchies.
- To explore how recurring gendered portrayals in Disney films participate in shaping viewers' understanding and internalization of traditional gender roles.
- To identify and interpret the underlying ideologies of gender and power conveyed through the narratives, dialogues, and visual portrayals in Disney animated films.

1.4. Research Questions

The study is guided by three research questions:

- 1) How are power structures constructed in Disney films through representations of male and female characters?
- 2) How do Disney animated films contribute to the socialization of gender roles among young audiences?
- 3) What implicit ideologies of gender and power are embedded in the visual and narrative structures of Disney animated films?

2. Literature Review

In the literature review, the study consists of several prior researchers regarding the core issue of the research. The theoretical framework of the study provides support to the research in a comprehensive manner.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Theory plays a vital role in the research work. Because of theory (ies), researchers try to identify the facts about their concerned studies. In this

study, the researchers employ MDA, FCDA, and Gender Socialization to identify how Disney films construct, naturalize, and contest gender and power as social constructions rather than natural facts.

2.1.1. Disney Films as Discourse

Discourse, in Fairclough's (1992) formulation, is language as a form of social practice where every communicative act, whether verbal, visual, or narrative, simultaneously reflects and constitutes the social world. Fairclough (1995) further argues that discourse does not merely describe reality but actively constructs it, so that the way things are represented shapes how audiences understand and reproduce social norms. Hall's (1997) theory of representation extends this by holding that meaning is produced through cultural codes and practices, and that dominant representations construct particular versions of reality that serve ideological interests. From this standpoint, Disney films are not neutral entertainment but complex multimodal discourses that encode ideological constructions of femininity, masculinity, and power which young audiences decode and internalize as natural (Giroux, 1999). This discursive power is heightened because it operates through pleasure and emotional engagement rather than explicit instruction, making the ideology harder to recognize and resist (Lazar, 2007).

2.1.2. Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), serves as the primary analytical framework. MDA examines how meaning is produced through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes such as image, color, sound, language, gesture, camera angle, and spatial organization rather than language alone. Building on Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, Kress and van Leeuwen argue that images possess their own grammar through which meaning is socially constructed, and they identify three meta functions: representational meaning (how participants and events are depicted), interactive meaning (the image-viewer relationship established through

gaze, angle, and distance), and compositional meaning (how elements are arranged into hierarchies of significance). These dimensions are decisive in animated film, where costume, body language, framing, and color symbolically construct gender identity and power.

2.1.3. *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis*

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), developed by Lazar (2005, 2007), foregrounds gender as a central analytical category and seeks to expose the ideological processes through which patriarchal norms are reproduced, legitimized, or challenged in discourse. FCDA is informed by Foucault's (1978) account of power as operating through normalized systems of knowledge, by Mulvey's (1975) concept of the male gaze, which positions women as objects of visual pleasure while associating men with action, and by Gill's (2007) account of postfeminist media culture, which fuses independence and empowerment with continued emphasis on beauty, emotionality, and self-surveillance (Khan et al., 2017; Nawaz et al., 2020). These perspectives are particularly productive for analyzing contemporary heroines who appear to challenge stereotypes while still operating within normative femininity (Bhutto & Ramzan, 2021; Javaid & Ramzan, 2025)

2.1.4. *Gender Socialization Theory*

The study also draws on West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of "doing gender," which treats gender as an ongoing interactional accomplishment performed under conditions of social accountability that reward conformity and penalize deviation. This is supported by Bandura's (1977, 2001) social learning theory, which explains that children acquire behaviors through observation and imitation of admired media figures; by Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, which holds that repeated cultural representations make gender norms appear natural; and by Bem's (1981) gender schema theory, which describes how children cognitively organize gendered information through repeated exposure. Together these accounts explain how recurring multimodal representations in Disney

films shape the construction and internalization of gender identities among children.

2.2. *Related Researches*

Previous studies increasingly treat Disney as a powerful cultural text shaping gender perception. Arnold et al. (2015) found that male dominance and female emotional dependency remained central in *Frozen* and *Snow White* despite stronger protagonists, but relied on thematic content analysis. Shehatta (2020) used Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar to show that *Brave's* protagonist challenges princess stereotypes while certain feminine expectations persist, though only one film was examined. Alsarairh, Singh, and Hajimia (2021) applied Fairclough's model to *Frozen* and found persistent stereotypes beneath a progressive surface, but used general CDA rather than FCDA and focused on verbal discourse. Streiff and Dundes (2017) argued that *Frozen* ultimately contains Elsa's power, while Clarke (2024) and Jabar et al. (2024) demonstrated, through longitudinal and corpus methods respectively, that stereotypical associations remain embedded even as female characters become more assertive.

The work of Baig and colleagues is especially pertinent. Baig, Khan, and Aslam (2021) applied Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis to popular children's films, including *Cinderella*, and found that female characters were constructed as passive, dependent, and emotionally driven while male characters were dominant and authoritative, normalizing patriarchal expectations through repeated exposure. This study directly connects Disney discourse with gender socialization and demonstrates the value of FCDA for children's media, but it remains restricted to verbal discourse and neglects multimodal resources such as gaze, framing, costume, and color. Baig's related analysis of gender socialization through fairy tales similarly shows how early narratives plant gendered structures that shape children's perception of reality, while Baig et al.'s (2020) multimodal discourse analysis of media coverage of the Aurat March demonstrates the analytical productivity of combining visual and verbal semiotic analysis to expose how language and

power construct sociocultural ideologies. The present study extends this trajectory by applying an integrated multimodal feminist framework to a comparative corpus spanning Disney's classical and contemporary eras. Across this body of work, most studies isolate discourse, behavior, or multimodal representation, and few combine MDA, FCDA, and gender socialization theory to examine how Disney films simultaneously construct, normalize, and contest gendered power relations, the gap this study addresses.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Nature of the Research

The study adopts a qualitative research approach to investigate power dynamics and gender socialization in Disney animated films. A qualitative design is appropriate because animated films communicate meaning through the simultaneous operation of dialogue, visuals, gesture, color, music, camera framing, and narrative structure, and only interpretive analysis can trace how these resources jointly shape gendered meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The approach is essential for uncovering ideological assumptions that are not stated but embedded. For example, the way *Snow White and Cinderella* aestheticize domestic labor as feminine virtue, the way *Frozen* visually liberates Elsa through color and framing, and the way *Encanto* situates empowered women within family-centered emotional discourse.

3.2. Research Design

Four Disney animated films were purposively selected as the corpus: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Frozen* (2013), and *Encanto* (2021). These films were chosen because they represent distinct historical phases of Disney's evolving gender discourse and together permit a comparative analysis of both ideological continuity and ideological transformation across the classical and contemporary eras. The films were viewed repeatedly to develop familiarity with their narrative structures, character dynamics, visual patterns, and ideological themes. Scenes relevant to the research objectives were then identified

and shortlisted, with particular attention to moments involving authority, obedience, emotional labor, resistance, caregiving, leadership, dependency, and female agency; musical sequences and emotionally significant interactions were prioritized because Disney frequently encodes ideology through songs and multimodal symbolism. Selected scenes were divided into verbal components (dialogue, song lyrics, conversational exchanges, speech patterns) and visual components (costume, gaze, posture, body language, facial expression, color symbolism, camera angle, framing, spatial positioning), and were analyzed through the integrated lens of Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, and the theory of "doing gender."

3.3. Delimitations of the Study

To preserve analytical focus and depth, the study is delimited to four Disney animated films and to the representation of gender socialization and power dynamics through multimodal discourse; other dimensions such as race, class, nationalism, religion, audience reception, childhood psychology, and commercial marketing are beyond its scope. The analysis is confined to selected, ideologically significant scenes rather than a scene-by-scene treatment of complete films, and it is restricted to three theoretical frameworks in order to maintain coherence. Only the English-language versions of the films are analyzed, since linguistic variation in dubbed or translated versions may alter discursive meaning.

3.4. Data Collection

The data were collected from the films themselves, which constitute the primary source of both visual and verbal material. The population comprises all Disney animated feature films from 1937 to the present, a corpus too extensive to analyze in full; a purposive sample of four films was therefore selected for their analytical value and their capacity to represent change and continuity in gender representation over time. Scenes carrying significant ideological value were systematically documented and categorized for interpretation, ensuring that the

data set was research-oriented and directly aligned with the study's objectives.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The analysis proceeds comparatively across *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), *Frozen* (2013), and *Encanto* (2021), organized through three interrelated dimensions, each examined along two analytically essential lines.

4.1. The Multimodal Construction of Gendered Identities

4.1.1. Visual Construction: Costume, Color, and the Gendered Body

In the classical films, costume and color operate as a unified semiotic system that codes femininity through beauty, fragility, and constraint. Snow White's fair skin, large eyes, and soft costume textures, and Cinderella's transformation from a torn dress to a luminous blue ball gown, encode feminine value as realized through aesthetic elevation and romantic availability rather than capability or autonomous selfhood, while the Evil Queen's dark, saturated attire codes powerful femininity as morally transgressive (Van Leeuwen, 2011). The contrast between Snow White and the Queen is especially instructive as shown in Figure 4.1.1(a). The film constructs a binary opposition between a "good" femininity defined by softness, obedience, and youth and a "bad" femininity defined by authority, ambition, and vanity, so that female power itself becomes visually legible as danger. Cinderella's costume transformation functions as the film's most ideologically concentrated moment, encoding the message that feminine social mobility is contingent on aesthetic elevation enabled by external (and ultimately patriarchal) intervention rather than on labor or autonomous capability as shown in Figure 4.1.1(b).

The contemporary films revise this grammar deliberately. In *Frozen*, Anna's practical travelling

costume which is a cape, sturdy boots, and layered functional clothing that ends above the ankle for ease of movement. It is designed for action rather than display, in pointed contrast to the restrictive sartorial coding of the classical heroines. Elsa's evolution from a constrained corseted gown rendered in muted, controlled tones to the flowing ice dress of "Let It Go" as shown in Figure 4.1.1(c) reclaims the romantic blue of *Cinderella* as a color of female power and self-expression, a semiotic reversal in Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) sense, whereby an established code is transformed through new contextual deployment. The film also explicitly parodies the classical beauty-romance equation of Anna's whirlwind attraction to Hans, based entirely on appearance and social performance. It is ultimately revealed as misguided, encoding a narrative critique of the very ideology that structures *Snow White* and *Cinderella*. In *Encanto*, Mirabel's culturally grounded Colombian dress and round, bespectacled appearance are never narratively evaluated or connected to social outcomes, and the film's saturated Colombian palette replaces classical pastel femininity with a collective cultural vitality that ties femininity to heritage rather than romantic idealization. Luisa's muscular physique introduces the first female body in the corpus coded through strength rather than delicacy, while Isabela is deliberately designed to classical beauty standards as shown in Figure 4.1.1(d) precisely so that her liberation arc can critique that ideology, exemplifying the selective interrogation of beauty Gill (2007) identifies in postfeminist media. The trajectory is clear: feminine costume moves from restricting and decorating the body to enabling action and expressing cultural identity, even as residual physical idealization persists at the character-design level, reminding us that the revision is more complete at the narrative than at the visual level.



Figure 4.1.1(a) - Snow White in rags / the Evil Queen in dark regalia



Figure 4.1.1(b) - Cinderella's blue ball-gown transformation



Figure 4.1.1(c) - Anna's practical clothes and Elsa's "Let It Go" ice-dress transformation

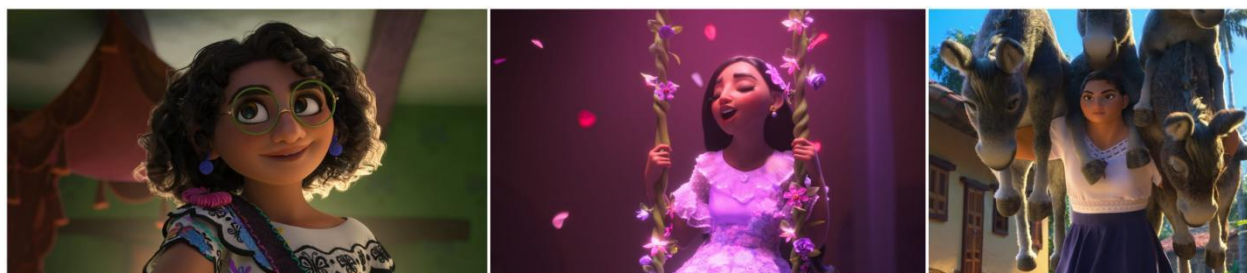


Figure 4.1.1(d) - Mirabel, Isabella, and Luisa in Encanto

4.1.2. *Linguistic and Narrative Construction of Gender*

Language and bodily comportment reinforce the visual coding. In *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, female dialogue is hedged, deferential, and grammatically passive. Snow White's pleas and her future-oriented "Someday My Prince Will Come," Cinderella's compliant "Yes, stepmother". Meanwhile, sparse male speech is narratively decisive, and naming practices (Cinderella named for the cinders she tends) encode identity as domestic function rather than autonomous personhood (Fairclough, 1992; Lazar, 2007). Body language amplifies this function. The classical heroines are constructed through closed, downward-oriented postures and predominantly averted gazes that, in Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) terms, position them as "offer" images, objects presented for the viewer's contemplation rather than subjects who demand engagement. Meanwhile, high-angle framing during their moments of vulnerability encodes the viewer's visual power over them. Their facial expressions perform what Hochschild (1983) calls emotional labor, naturalizing domestic confinement as feminine contentment.

In *Frozen* and *Encanto*, female dialogue becomes assertive, investigative, and self-defining. Anna's lyrics are grammatically active and future-directed, Elsa moves from repeated apology to declarative self-definition ("Here I stand, and here I'll stay"), and Mirabel's confrontation with Abuela is structured as a direct accusation rather than a hedged request. The bodily grammar shifts accordingly. Elsa is filmed from low angles during "Let It Go," the camera grammar the classical films reserve for legitimate (male) authority, encoding her power as visually authorized rather than threatening, while Anna's direct, socially engaged gaze constructs her as a visual subject who engages rather than an object observed. At the level of narrative positioning, the classical heroines function as objects whose existence motivates male action (Mulvey, 1975). Snow White's most consequential act of accepting the apple is simultaneously her most catastrophic mistake, encoding female autonomous judgment as dangerous. Cinderella's transformative

moment is performed by the Fairy Godmother rather than through her own agency. By contrast, Anna's and Mirabel's autonomous decisions drive their films' central action. Crucially, however, both contemporary heroines' agency remains relational and oriented toward family healing, so the ideological content of feminine agency expands while its other-directed character remains continuous with the classical construction of femininity as inherently relational.

4.2. The Discursive Representation of Power Dynamics

4.2.1. *Patriarchal Authority and Its Contestation*

In the classical films, male and institutional authority is the unquestioned organizational default. The prince's single decisive act of awakening kiss delivered to an unconscious body without consent resolves the entire narrative of *Snow White*. His minimal screen presence producing consequences the heroine's extensive activity never approaches. The King's private wish for grandchildren in *Cinderella* instantly becomes a kingdom-wide decree. Female authority figures such as the Evil Queen and Lady Tremaine wield genuine power, yet that power is coded as monstrous or tyrannical, so that the only legitimate authority on offer remains masculine and institutional (Lazar, 2005) as shown in Figure 4.2.1(a). Spatial elevation and compositional centrality consistently mark male characters as powerful while female characters are visually subordinated, naturalizing gendered asymmetry as a compositional fact (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

The contemporary films retain traces of this authority while contesting its visible forms. *Frozen* exposes Hans's romantic authority as fraudulent social performance. His early speech and bearing perform all the markers of sincere masculine romantic authority, and his subsequent unmasking retroactively reframes them as calculated, using the conventions of masculine sincerity to critique their ideological foundations. *Encanto* reveals through Bruno's discursive erasure ("We don't talk about Bruno") that male

authority can operate even through enforced absence, his prophetic voice suppressed precisely because it threatens the family's dominant narrative. Most significantly, both films subject institutional and family authority to critique rather than naturalization: Elsa's internalized "Conceal, don't feel" is reframed not as protective guidance but as a damaging regulatory demand whose enforcement causes the narrative's central catastrophe. Abuela's confession "I was so afraid of losing the miracle that I lost sight of

who the miracle was for" requires the institutional authority figure herself to acknowledge ideological complicity, a narrative demand the classical films never make of their authority figures as shown in Figure 4.2.1(b). Yet the relocation is incomplete. Bruno's eventual rehabilitation confirms that male voices, once realigned with institutional rather than threatening purposes, retain discursive centrality even within an ostensibly reconstructed social world.



Figure 4.2.1(a) - classical patriarchal authority (the prince's awakening kiss in Snow White and/or Lady Tremaine's domestic command in Cinderella)

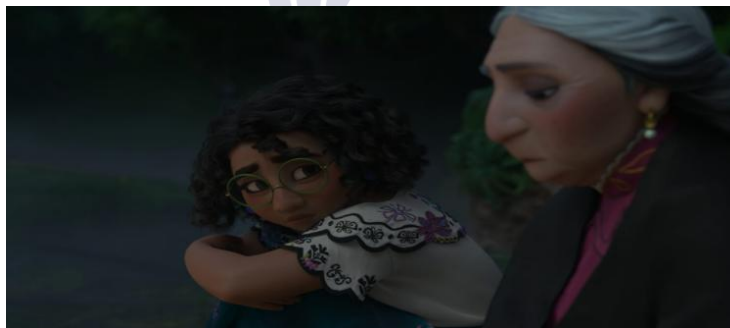


Figure 4.2.1(b) - Abuela's confession scene in Encanto, illustrating the contestation of institutional authority

4.2.2. Emotional Labor and the Reconstruction of Power

The classical films aestheticize domestic labor and emotional suppression as cheerful feminine virtue. Snow White consciously deploys domestic labor to secure belonging ("We'll clean the house and surprise them") and sings while she works. Cinderella transforms grief into aspirational song, so that punitive labor is rendered graceful and exploitation becomes ideologically invisible (Hochschild, 1983; Lazar, 2005). Emotional suppression operates simultaneously. Both

heroines provide unconditional emotional support to others while their own authentic feeling is denied sustained expression. Cinderella's single moment of genuine collapse is immediately interrupted by the Fairy Godmother's arrival, and male emotional display is confined to comic registers that preserve its ideological safety. The contemporary films reframe emotional suppression as damaging rather than virtuous. Elsa's "Don't let them in, don't let them see, be the good girl you always have to be" positions audiences inside the

psychological cost of enforced emotional management. Luisa's "Surface Pressure" names the gap between performed strength and authentic experience with a lyrical directness that functions as feminist counter-discourse to the classical aestheticization of female emotional endurance.

Both contemporary films also undertake genuine power reconstruction. *Frozen* redefines power from externally validated institutional authority to internally generated authentic selfhood, and reconstructs romantic ideology at its foundation. This is done through Anna's act of sisterly rather than romantic sacrifice, dismantling one of patriarchal narrative's most naturalized structures. *Encanto* reorganizes power at individual, familial, and structural levels, requiring genuine

ideological transformation of the authority figure herself, and its final composition places Mirabel at the center of the rebuilt casita with the family arranged around her in a collaborative rather than hierarchical formation as shown in Figure 4.2.2, an arrangement Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) would read as registering collective rather than hierarchical power. Yet the reconstruction is bounded. Elsa's autonomy must be grounded in sisterly love to achieve narrative legitimacy, and Mirabel's reconstructed power remains primarily caregiving-oriented, confirming Gill's (2007) argument that postfeminist texts relocate rather than dismantle the structures they appear to contest, with the emotional labor of family healing remaining primarily female even in progressive representation.



Figure 4.2.2 - Anna's act of true love shielding Elsa from Hans's sword in *Frozen* and the rebuilt casita with Mirabel at the center of the new door in *Encanto*

4.3. Gender Socialization and Performance

4.3.1. *Performing Femininity and Masculinity*

Across the corpus, behavioral, emotional, and social gender performance is regulated through accountability structures that reward conformity and penalize deviation (West & Zimmerman, 1987). In *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, feminine behavior is domestically contained and gracefully compliant, with inward, downward gestures naturalizing femininity as self-effacing, while masculine behavior is expansive and institutionally entitled, and male emotional expression is permitted only within comic registers. *Frozen* and *Encanto* reconstruct all three dimensions: feminine behavior shifts toward expansive, self-directed agency (Elsa's expansive striding during "Let It Go," Mirabel's investigative determination), while masculine behavior shifts toward consent-oriented deference

(Kristoff's "I could kiss you... I mean, may I?") and emotionally accountable vulnerability (Bruno's "I never wanted to hurt you, Mirabel"). Hans's weaponized sincerity simultaneously warns that masculine emotional performance can be strategically deployed. The reconstruction remains qualified, however, because Mirabel's purposeful agency is directed toward family healing rather than individual achievement, so feminine behavioral expansion retains its relational orientation.

4.3.2. *Social Regulation and the Evolution of Gender Expectations*

In the classical films, social gender regulation operates as a seamless, mutually reinforcing system whose requirements are naturalized as the commonsensical conditions of gendered existence. *Snow White*'s domestic virtue and

passive trust are rewarded with romantic rescue as shown in figure 4.3.2(a); the Evil Queen's autonomous ambition is punished with death. Cinderella's patient endurance is rewarded with the glass slipper's perfect fit, and Lady Tremaine's punitive confinement of Cinderella answers her attempted resistance. Discursive enforcement reinforces this through authoritative speech acts. The Magic Mirror's pronouncements naturalize female worth as externally defined fact, so that neither heroine recognizes the regulation she experiences as regulation, confirming West and Zimmerman's (1987) argument that the most complete accountability systems are those in which performers have so thoroughly internalized regulatory norms that external enforcement becomes unnecessary.

Frozen and *Encanto* subject family expectation, reward-punishment, and discursive enforcement to simultaneous critical examination. Damaging family decrees are exposed as psychologically destructive rather than protective. The reward-punishment system is reconstructed so that the severest consequence falls on fraudulent

masculine performance (Hans's social humiliation) rather than female transgression. Elsa's liberation, initially punished through catastrophic consequence, is ultimately reframed as the accumulated damage of prior suppression rather than punishment for authentic selfhood; and regulatory discourse is named and contested rather than naturalized, as the collective silence around Bruno demonstrates how regulation operates through omission as well as speech. Yet both films resolve through reconciliation with, rather than rejection of, the family and social structures that constituted the primary sites of regulation. Elsa returns as queen, and the Madrigal family is rebuilt rather than abandoned as shown in figure 4.3.2(b) reveals that social gender regulation is reformed rather than eliminated, its most damaging expressions removed while its fundamental structures remain operative. This confirms Lazar's (2005) observation that feminist discursive reconstruction within mainstream commercial cinema is always partial and shaped by the ideological conditions of its production.

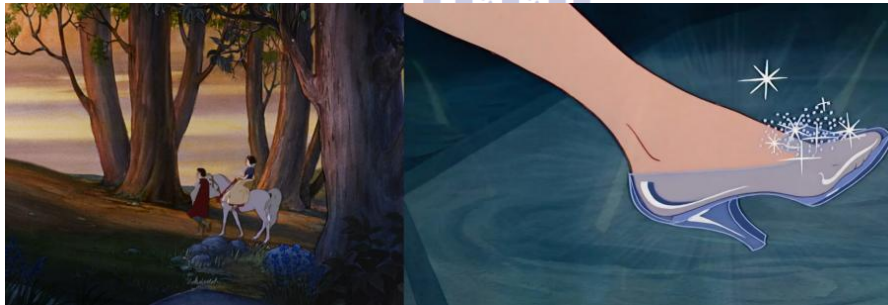


Figure 4.3.2(a) - Classical regulation/reward (Snow White's romantic resolution and Cinderella's glass-slipper selection)



Figure 4.3.2(b) - Elsa's return as queen and the reunited Madrigal family, illustrating reconciliation rather than rejection of regulatory structures

5. Findings and Conclusion

5.1. Findings

With respect to RQ1, the analysis demonstrates that the classical films construct patriarchal power structures in which male characters command institutional authority, mobility, and narrative control while female characters are confined to domestic, emotional, and relational space, their narrative completion dependent on masculine intervention. The contemporary films reconstruct these structures, granting female characters agency, leadership, and emotional complexity and reframing masculine power away from dominance toward emotional openness and collaboration, though traces of male discursive centrality persist.

With respect to RQ2, the films socialize gender through repeated, rewarded performance. The classical films socialize femininity through domestic labor, emotional patience, beauty, and romantic aspiration while villainizing autonomous female power, and socialize masculinity through authority and emotional restraint. The contemporary films model female leadership and diverse femininities. Elsa's autonomy, Luisa's strength, Isabela's rejection of perfection, Mirabel's emotional intelligence, normalizes emotionally expressive, caregiving masculinities, shifting the locus of fulfillment from heterosexual romance toward family and self-acceptance, yet still binding feminine worth to relational obligation.

With respect to RQ3, the classical films embed patriarchal ideologies that naturalize male authority and feminine dependency through soft color, submissive posture, spatial subordination, and romantic closure, while coding ambitious femininity as threatening. The contemporary films embed ideologies of emotional communication, collective healing, and identity acceptance, destabilizing romantic dependency and critiquing perfectionism and emotional suppression but they reproduce a deeper structural logic in which feminine agency remains other-oriented and resolution is achieved through reconciliation with the structures that regulate gender.

5.2. Conclusion

The trajectory from *Snow White* to *Encanto* is simultaneously real and limited. It is real in its genuine expansion of what femininity and masculinity can look like, feel like, and aspire to within Disney's animated world, and limited in its failure to dismantle the structural arrangements that make normative gender performances socially compulsory. The overt patriarchy that beauty and compliance secured for the classical heroines is genuinely dismantled, yet Mirabel must heal her family to be valued, Elsa must ground her liberation in sisterly love to be legitimized, and Anna must endorse romantic partnership alongside female solidarity. These requirements, more subtle and sympathetic than the classical ones, nonetheless encode a feminine identity still oriented toward relational obligation and emotional labor. Patriarchal ideology has not disappeared from the contemporary films; it has evolved, adapted, and repackaged itself into forms that are more culturally sophisticated, more sympathetic to feminist critique, and therefore more ideologically resilient, confirming the accounts of postfeminist ideological operation advanced by Gill (2007) and Lazar (2005).

5.3. Contribution and Future Directions

This study contributes theoretically and methodologically by demonstrating the analytical productivity of integrating Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, and gender socialization theory within a single comparative framework. It shifts attention from what Disney represents to how its representations produce ideology across visual and verbal modes. By analyzing classical and contemporary films together, it offers a scene-level account of how postfeminist ideology operates in children's media, complementing and extending discourse-based work such as Baig, Khan, and Aslam (2021). The findings are applicable to media literacy education, feminist media criticism, and animation studies. Future research could examine the intersection of gender with race, ethnicity, class, disability, and cultural identity in animated media. They can conduct audience

reception studies with children, parents, and educators. They can also expand the corpus to live-action remakes, streaming-era content, and non-Disney studios such as Pixar, DreamWorks, and Studio Ghibli. Future researchers can further apply queer, postcolonial, or corpus-based approaches to generate further perspectives on gender and ideology in animated film.

References

- Alsaraireh, M. Y., Singh, M. K. S., & Hajimia, H. (2021). Critical discourse analysis of gender representations of male and female characters in Disney's movie, Frozen. *Multicultural Education*, 7(6), 296-308.
- Arnold, L., Seidl, M., & Deloney, A. (2015). Hegemony, gender stereotypes and Disney: A content analysis of Frozen and Snow White. *Concordia Journal of Communication Research*, 2, Article 1.
- Baig, F. Z., Aslam, M. Z., Akram, N., Fatima, K., Malik, A., & Iqbal, Z. (2020). Role of media in representation of sociocultural ideologies in Aurat March (2019-2020): A multimodal discourse analysis. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 10(2), 414-427.
- Baig, F. Z., Khan, M. A., & Aslam, M. J. (2021). Child rearing and gender socialisation: A feminist critical discourse analysis of kids' popular fictional movies. *Journal of Educational Research and Social Sciences Review (JERSSR)*, 1(2).
- Baig, F. Z. (2025). Gender socialization through fairy tales: A critical discourse analysis. *The Critical Review of Social Sciences Studies*, 3(4).
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Prentice-Hall.
- Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory of mass communication. *Media Psychology*, 3(3), 265-299.
- Bem, S. L. (1981). Gender schema theory: A cognitive account of sex typing. *Psychological Review*, 88(4), 354-364.
- Bhutto, J., & Ramzan, M. (2021). ENGLISH: Verses of Quran, Gender Issues, Feminine Injustice, and Media transmission-CDA of Pakistani Press Reports. *Rahatul-Quloob*, 111-126.
- Bussey, K., & Bandura, A. (1999). Social cognitive theory of gender development and differentiation. *Psychological Review*, 106(4), 676-713.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Clarke, M. (2024). Evolving gendered behaviours in Disney animated films: A longitudinal analysis, 1937-2021. [Journal/working paper].
- England, D. E., Descartes, L., & Collier-Meek, M. A. (2011). Gender role portrayal and the Disney princesses. *Sex Roles*, 64(7-8), 555-567.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Polity Press.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Media discourse*. Edward Arnold.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality, Volume 1: An introduction* (R. Hurley, Trans.). Pantheon Books.
- Gill, R. (2007). Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(2), 147-166.
- Giroux, H. A. (1999). *The mouse that roared: Disney and the end of innocence*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Sage.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press.
- Jabar, M., et al. (2024). A diachronic corpus analysis of linguistic gender representation in Disney animated films (2000-2023). [Journal/working paper].
- Khan, M. A., Malik, M. R., & Dar, S. R. (2017). Deconstruction of ideological discursivity in Pakistani print media advertisements from CDA perspective. *Ervena: The Journal of Linguistics and Literature*, 1(1), 57-79.

- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Lazar, M. M. (2005). *Feminist critical discourse analysis: Gender, power and ideology in discourse*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lazar, M. M. (2007). Feminist critical discourse analysis: Articulating a feminist discourse praxis. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 4(2), 141-164.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6-18.
- Nawaz, S., Aqeel, M., Ramzan, M., Rehman, W., & Tanoli, Z. A. (2021). Language, Representation and Ideological Stance of Brahui In Comparison with Urdu and English Newspapers Headlines. *Harf-O-Sukhan*, 5(4), 267-293.
- Ramzan, M., & Javaid, Z. K. (2025). Resisting Hegemonic Masculinity: Gender, Power, and Agency in the Narratives of Qaisra Shahraz and Soniah Kamal. *Asian Women*, 41(2), 159-184.
- Shehatta, S. (2020). Breaking stereotypes? A multimodal analysis of the representation of the female lead in Disney's *Brave*. [Journal article].
- Streiff, M., & Dundes, L. (2017). Frozen in time: How Disney gender-stereotypes its most powerful princess. *Social Sciences*, 6(2), 38.
- Towbin, M. A., Haddock, S. A., Zimmerman, T. S., Lund, L. K., & Tanner, L. R. (2004). Images of gender, race, age, and sexual orientation in Disney feature-length animated films. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, 15(4), 19-44.
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2011). *The language of colour: An introduction*. Routledge.
- West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender & Society*, 1(2), 125-151.

