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Final Essay

More than a Princess: Femininity and Patriarchal Norms in *Moana*

Osnat Shurer's 2016 film, *Moana*, was released through Disney in 2016. It follows Disney's latest stream of movies with an attempt at widening their cultural outreach. *Moana* centers around a young female protagonist of the same name. Moana is the daughter of a chief who is the leader of a small Polynesian island. The movie begins when the ocean, a personified character throughout the movie, bestows a green stone upon Moana, of which the meaning is not certain. The story centers around Moana as an independent and bright young girl in the midst of being trained to be the next chief. When the island of her people begins to die in front of their eyes, she goes on a mission to restore the aforementioned green stone to its home island. Overall, the film follows a young and bold girl who works to be the chief of an island, embarks on a mission against her father's wishes, and does not desire a love interest. With *Moana* being such a recent film, it is held to a much higher standard for inclusivity and progressivism. In using a feminist critical lens to observe the film's feminist achievements, it becomes clear to see that *Moana* breaks many of the standard norms Disney tends to follow.

Depicting Moana as a Polynesian girl is not only a positive representation for people of color, but also helps break the norm of female protagonists being traditionally white, skinny, and overly sexualized. From *Snow White* to *Sleeping Beauty* to *The Little*

Mermaid and even now to *Frozen,* the female protagonists are all white and skinny. The overly sexualized aspect comes not just from these protagonists, but the Disney movie franchise as a whole. While objectifying women is not necessarily a new concept, the sheer number of messages that are being sent to young girls has increased (Hanes). Most Disney movies center around a young girl who is waiting to be saved. Considering the movies mentioned above, it is no wonder that girls are expected to wait around for their prince. Some media even presents shows that focus on many women competing in order to show their strengths above other women to impress men in addition to shows about physical improvements (Hanes). With shows like these advertising a very set notion of physical standards combined with movies that exhibit these exact same standards, the young girls who watch it all can only assume on thing: that is how they should look and act. With the entry of *Moana,* Disney has given young girls a fresh new look and take on men. The movie entirely lacks a male love interest. She is not white, and she is not incredibly skinny. Her hair matches her personality in its naturalness and wildness. She does not wear makeup, and she does not attend balls in fancy dresses. Moana is young girl and, just as it should be, her body is not discussed in any sort of manner in her coming of age experience.

  Moana also depicts a home life that does not follow a standard Disney trope. Although Moana's father is the chief of the island, Moana is next in line. This is especially uncommon for most children's films where the chief or person in charge is male and the next in line is always given to the son or closest male relative. Additionally, in most films, there is often a lacking of a mother character. In fact, there is sometimes

no positive female role model seen in films at all. Many films will have women pitted against each other or will have a female motherly-like character that impacts the protagonist a negative way. However, Moana has a strong relationship with her mother and her grandmother. It is her grandmother who encourages her to "listen to what the voice inside says" even if it may be "opposite to what [her] father said" (qtd. in Dilara M). Even though Moana's father is the son of the grandma, the grandma would rather have Moana be happy and seek what she wants in life as opposed to listening to what her son has to say. Additionally, when Moana is struggling with her love of the water, it is her mother who explains that her father has past trauma from the water and is only doing his best to protect Moana from what hurt him. This female solidarity is something that *Moana* depicts as powerful and important. It *is* important to encourage young girls to seek the help and support from other girls.

  Moana has a protagonist that differs harshly in personality from standard Disney princesses. Moana breaks the traditional norms of young girls needing to be proper, sweet, and generally mild mannered. She bucks at these norms by being very independent and strong-willed. She shows strong interest in the water, and despite her father's constant chastisement, her love for what is beyond her is unstoppable. In continuing to pursue her interest with the support of her mother and grandmother, she ends up being able to overcome the monster and save her island. One study found that when schools developed programs that encouraged girls to make up their own projects about things that interested them, they were more like to fall deeply and passionately into something. If girls are encouraged to take their interests seriously, they will improve

socially and emotionally (Hanes). Moana is a practical example of this very notion. When a young girl, Moana, is encouraged to take her interest seriously, her social and emotional being improved and she truly understood herself. *Moana* as a film is a strong representation of encouraging girls to not push their interests down.

While she seeks the help from a Polynesian demigod, Maui, Moana makes it clear that Maui will not dominate this journey. A major part of Moana's journey across the sea does depend on Maui's help, but Moana knows that this journey could also not be completed without her. In their first meeting, Moana begins her monologue to inform Maui he has to "board [her] boat, sail the sea, and restore the heart of Te Fiti." Maui cuts her off, assuming that she is a simply just a fan of his and proceeds to sing his own song entitled "You're Welcome." Moana becomes enraged by this, grabs him by the ear, and viciously states that she is "no fan" of his as he is the reason her island is dying. She then convinces him to sail the sea with her and restore the heart on the condition that she will be able to get his magic hook back. Moana, a young girl, is able to convince this burly, self-involved man that they work better together than they do separately. In one scene, the pair is trapped in the cave of a giant crab, and it is Moana who figures out that she can use fluorescent plant to distract the creature so that Maui can retrieve his hook (Kongwattana). The film acknowledges that it is okay to ask for help for an important task, but it is not okay for overly confident men to try to take the task away from the young girls who have asked for help. Additionally, *Moana* conveys that teamwork is simply the best way to go about a difficult event. These are themes not

often portrayed in movies shown to young girls, but they are arguably some of the most important.

   While *Moana* stands as a phenomenal modern representation of breaking traditional patriarchal norms, there are still some spots in the film that fall into these same norms it works so hard to defy. The overall plot of the film is dependent on when Maui "violates the mother island" by taking the small green stone, representing the heart and fertility of the island (Dundes). It is only when her heart is "stolen" that she turns into the "devil God Te Ka" (Kongwattana). This is remarkably compared to the idea of a man violating a woman and taking her virginity. While this is not something that a small child would recognize, they would be able to understand the idea of the villain stealing something, and the beautiful and previously nurturing island turning into an evil monster because of it. The islands purity is removed once a man comes in, takes something, and makes the island an evil place that is no longer worth visiting or looking at. It is only restored once the man realizes the terrible thing he has done and rectifies it. This conveys to young girls that they should only be seen as beautiful if they are pure or after a man has apologized to them. As a patriarchal norm, searching for the approval of a man is a very standard one.

   Furthermore, as a male character, Maui has struggled indefinitely with the concept of his manhood. The notion of men and boys needing to be at a certain level of masculinity is absolutely a patriarchal norm. These movies are not only viewed by little girls, but also little boys that see Maui struggling to convince himself he is manly enough. The environment that surround children, specifically the media presented to

them "help produce, perpetuate and teach gender norms and stereotypes" (Hine). Maui's overly large muscles and chest combined with his "phallic" symbol of a fishhook, he is hypermasculinized throughout the entire film (Dundes). Just as little girls look up to princesses that have a perfect body image, little boys look up to male demigods that are concerned only with their looks and their level of masculinity.

As the film follows the coming of age experience for a sixteen-year-old girl, many patriarchal norms are broken. Young girls have the opportunity to see another girl take on a task that seems larger than life, overcome those telling her she shouldn't do it, and work with another person to save her home island. With the removal of the standard love interest trope, Disney has provided a movie focused entirely on a determined young girl. While the film may still have some standard patriarchal norms, the film as a whole is a groundbreaking feminist work that conveys many important notions to young girls that they may not otherwise see.

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