

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

B.1 Theoretical Framework

This study analyzes Mulan, the main character in Disney's *Mulan* (2020), by applying Alfred Adler's theory of Individual Psychology to examine her psychological development in relation to her struggle against societal expectations. Adler's theory emphasizes the unity of personality, the importance of social influences, and the individual's decision in shaping their own life. Through this lens, the study explores Mulan's inner conflicts, the motivations behind her actions, and how her choices reflect and influence the social environment around her.

B.1.1 Social Background of the Film

Disney's *Mulan* (2020) is set in Ancient China, although it does not explicitly mention a particular dynasty; however, many of the visual elements and costumes are inspired by the Tang Dynasty. Mulan's story itself, which originated in ancient poetry, is generally set during the Northern Wei Dynasty (Jiang, 2020). At that time, social norms and gender expectations were powerful. Women were expected to adhere to traditional roles as wives and mothers, while men were expected to be warriors and providers. These social conditions were heavily influenced by Confucian values, which emphasized strict gender roles and hierarchies. Women were often considered second-class citizens, with limited opportunities to

participate in public life or the military (Ebrey, 1996). The film also portrays a society where women are expected to be quiet, obedient, and bring honor through marriage. This cultural background sets the foundation for the strict expectations Mulan's character must face.

Although the setting reflects the past in terms of historical values, it also creates space for reflection on the condition of women in modern China. Compared to today's Chinese culture, there have been significant changes in terms of gender roles and how society views women. Although there are still problems with gender equality, especially in rural areas, modern women in China now have more opportunities to pursue higher education and careers in various fields, such as business, education, politics, and even the military, to achieve financial independence (Loh, 2023; Yang, 2020). However, as explained by Zhang & Liu (2022), there are still remnants of traditional values that require women to adhere to old roles, and the struggle for equality continues.

On the other hand, although women in China are now more educated and many are successful in business or technology, they still experience social pressure to marry young and become housekeepers, making it difficult to balance professional and familial obligations (Brancaccio, 2024). Nevertheless, many women are now adopting a different view. One report indicates that 44% of young women in large cities have no intention of getting married (Chen, 2024), and many choose to prioritize their careers (Zhanhang, 2023). In fact, according to Henley

Business School (2023), the number of working women with university degrees is higher than that of men. This indicates that more women are embracing the challenge of making their own decisions about their lives, despite societal norms that still limit them.

Therefore, understanding the social context of the film and how it differs from modern China is essential for analyzing how Mulan resists societal expectations and how her environment influences her psychological development. This background helps demonstrate that her struggles and decisions reflect a broader issue experienced by many women in the past and today.

B.1.2 Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology

Alfred Adler (1870–1937) was an Austrian psychologist known as the founder of Individual Psychology. Early in his career, Adler joined the psychoanalytic group of Sigmund Freud (the founder of psychoanalysis), but later he chose to leave due to differences of opinion, especially regarding the focus on social motivation and life goals as the center of personality development (Feist & Feist, 1976).

Individual Psychology, according to Adler (1997), is a psychological approach that emphasizes understanding the individual as a whole, where every action and reaction reflects a person's attitude towards life, or Adler refers to it as "purposeful behavior." Adler argues that every individual is driven by the desire to

overcome feelings of inferiority and achieve goals or significance within a social context.

This theory also emphasizes the significance of social context, encompassing childhood experiences and social interactions, in shaping an individual's character and adaptability. Unlike Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, who focused on subconscious drives and biological instincts, Adler believed that an individual's awareness and conscious decisions play a significant role in shaping a person's personality and determining future outcomes (Schultz & Schultz, 2017).

In the process of psychological development, as explained by Adler, several key concepts play an essential role. These include: (1) feelings of inferiority, (2) striving for superiority, (3) fictional finalism, (4) style of life, (5) creative power of the self, and (6) social interest (Adler in Schultz & Schultz, 2017). These concepts help explain how individuals respond to challenges, set goals, and grow into who they truly are.

Building on this foundation, Adler's framework is particularly relevant for analyzing characters like Mulan, who face deep personal and social conflicts. Through Adler's lens, Mulan's psychological journey can be seen as a process of overcoming feelings of inferiority, forming her own style of life, and striving for superiority, not for personal gain, but to fulfill her sense of purpose and contribute meaningfully to society. Since Adler emphasized the importance of social

connection and conscious choice, his theory offers insight into how Mulan's identity, decisions, and growth are shaped both by internal motivation and external societal expectations.

Furthermore, Adler viewed personality as shaped by an individual's early social environment and their chosen goals in response to life's challenges. These six key concepts are interconnected: feelings of inferiority become the motivation for striving for superiority, which is guided by fictional goals and manifested through style of life. The creative power of the self allows individuals to choose their path, while social interest determines how much their goals benefit others, not just themselves.

To guide the analysis in this study, the following section provides a detailed explanation of each of Adler's six core concepts. These serve as the foundation for exploring how Mulan's psychological development unfolds throughout the film.

B.1.2.1 Feelings of inferiority

Adler (1997) explains that inferiority is the feeling of inadequacy in certain aspects of life, which is something natural that everyone experiences, particularly from childhood. This feeling does not signify weakness; rather, it serves as a fundamental human motivation for development. From infancy, humans begin to recognize their limitations due to their dependence on their parents. Nevertheless, this feeling can motivate them to learn, grow, and pursue success in life (Schultz & Schultz, 2017).

It is essential to understand that the level and way a person feels this feeling of inferiority can vary and manifest differently in different social situations. Some causes include childhood experiences, social comparisons, family environment, negative experiences, or how a person sees themselves. Furthermore, Adler argues that this feeling can come from biological or social factors. Biological feelings of inferiority arise due to physical limitations like illness or weakness. While socially, this feeling occurs when someone feels unequal to others, even though that is not necessarily true. Usually, this is influenced by social norms, stereotypes, or unpleasant personal experiences.

B.1.2.2 Striving for Superiority

“Striving for superiority” in Individual Psychology, according to Adler (1997) means everyone’s effort to overcome feelings of inferiority and achieve something better in life. Everyone, especially children, naturally feels weak or not good enough in some way. To overcome this feeling, they strive to be better, either in terms of ability, achievement, or social relationships, which is known as compensation. Adler adds that the quest to be “superior” is not about beating others, but more about developing oneself and achieving goals that make life more meaningful. So, it is about how individuals strive to grow and feel more confident in their lives.

B.1.2.3 Fictional Finalism

Adler introduced the concept of “fictional finalism” or, in other words, “fictional goal”, which means that people are guided by imaginary or ideal goals that they believe will give their lives meaning. These goals are called “fictional” because they exist in our minds and cannot be proven as absolute truths, but they still shape how we live and make decisions. For example, many people believe that everyone is equal, or that good behavior leads to rewards in the afterlife. Even though these ideas cannot be scientifically tested, they influence how people behave and interact with others.

Adler himself had a strong fictional goal. As a child, he nearly died from pneumonia, so he set a lifelong goal to overcome death. While avoiding death completely is impossible, he pursued this goal by becoming a doctor who could help others fight illness and prolong life (Schultz & Schultz, 2017). This is an example of how “fictional finalism” drives people to take action, even if the ultimate goal can never truly be reached.

B.1.2.4 Creative Power of the Self

As explained above, people are not simply shaped by their past experiences or environment, but they have the power to create their own personality and future. While Adler acknowledged that early childhood and social relationships influence personality, he argued that what truly matters is how individuals interpret and respond to those experiences (Schultz & Schultz, 2017). This idea is

what Adler called “the creative power of the self”, which refers to the ability to create an appropriate style of life with the abilities and experiences provided by our social environment and genetic heritage.

Adler believes this “creative power” works within a deep unconscious will for an unconscious purpose. Individuals create unconscious conceptions of themselves and how they want to be to live in this world (Adler in Eife, 2019). Nevertheless, this creative capacity involves not only unconscious motivations but also conscious awareness. According to Adler, the creative power of the self allows individuals to freely shape their own behaviors and personalities and to determine their unique ways of dealing with life’s challenges (Feist & Feist, 1976).

The conscious self enables individuals to make deliberate and responsible choices, even when those choices go against external expectations or norms. In this context, conscious decision-making reflects the individual’s active role in striving for superiority and developing a meaningful life path. Therefore, the conscious self is closely linked to the creative power, reflecting the intentional aspect of personal growth.

B.1.2.5 Style of Life

Adler’s concept of “style of life” refers to each person’s unique way of dealing with life and the problems they face. This style of life is formed in childhood and includes a person’s view of themselves, their goals in life, and how they

interact with others. Style of life reflects how a person copes with feelings of inferiority and strives for superiority in a social context.

Adler (1938) believed that everyone has a goal to grow and reach their full potential, and style of life is how they plan and navigate that journey. Simply put, style of life is the pattern of behavior and attitudes that a person carries throughout their life, influenced by childhood experiences and how they relate to others in society. Style of life is important because it affects an individual's happiness and success in life.

B.1.2.6 Social Interest

Adler (1997) believed that getting along with others is one of the first and most important challenges we face in life. He called this concept "social interest", which refers to an individual's innate ability and desire to cooperate with others to achieve both personal and societal goals. It is about cooperation and contributing to the group, focusing on "we are in this together" instead of "it is me versus you." Kelland (2023) emphasized that Adler's theory of social interest and cooperation suggests that the right way to achieve superiority is through social interest and cooperation. He argued that humans, as part of the stream of evolution, seek personal superiority and often form groups to live within a society.

B.1.3 Characterization in Film

In films, characterization refers to how a character is built and presented throughout the narrative and to the audience. It includes how a character talks,

acts, moves, and responds to surrounding situations. According to Boggs and Petrie (2008), a character's traits can be shown through appearance, dialogue, actions (internal and external), and reactions from others. These elements help the audience understand the character's personality and emotional depth.

"Appearance" involves a character's physical looks, clothing, and style, which can provide insight into their background and personality. These visual clues help the audience understand the character's role in the story. "Dialogue" helps reveal a character's thoughts, beliefs, and relationships with others. Through conversations, the audience can understand how a character thinks and feels.

"Characterization Through External Action" describes characters through their behavior and interactions with the environment and other characters, reflecting their nature and motivations. In contrast, "Characterization Through Internal Action" highlights a character's thoughts, feelings, and inner conflicts, providing emotional depth and insight into their motivations that are not always directly visible. "Reactions from other characters" also play a role, as their responses to a person's behavior offer additional insight into how that person is perceived socially and emotionally.

B.1.4 Character's Conflict

In narrative film, conflict is a key element that drives the plot and reveals a character's depth (McKEE, 1997). According to Boggs and Petrie (2008), conflict

can be categorized into two main types: internal and external, each playing a significant role in shaping a character's psychological journey.

"Internal conflict" occurs within the character, involving tensions between desires, emotions, or values. Meanwhile, "external conflict" occurs between the character and outside forces, such as other people, society, or nature, usually taking the form of physical, social, or environmental challenges.

These conflicts are essential in shaping a character's arc and often help the audience connect emotionally with the story. For example, in *Mulan* (2020), the main character faces significant internal conflict. She experiences self-doubt, guilt, helplessness, and identity confusion, as she is forced to suppress her true self, especially her *chi* and natural abilities to fulfil her family's and societal expectations. This conflict reflects a deep psychological struggle between personal identity and social conformity.

Such internal conflict is crucial for character development and becomes the foundation for analyzing psychological growth. In this study, it marks the starting point of Mulan's psychological journey, which aligns with Adler's idea that feelings of inferiority can motivate individuals toward personal growth and self-acceptance. Thus, understanding both internal and external conflicts offers a more straightforward path to examine the character's transformation through the lens of Individual Psychology.

B.2 Review of Related Research

To support this study, the writer reviewed several previous studies that discuss either the use of Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology or the character of Mulan as she navigates gender and social pressure. These studies offer important insights that help shape this research's theoretical and contextual background.

Several studies apply Adler's Individual Psychology theory to different characters in films. Putri et al. (2023) examine the personality development of the main character in *Luca*, while Nurawaliyah et al. (2023) analyze identity issues in *Soul* through Adler's key concepts. Although both studies use the same theory, they do not focus on gendered social conflict. A more detailed Adlerian analysis is done by Rizka et al. (2024), who explores how Chris Gardner strives for success despite poverty in *The Pursuit of Happyness*. Safanah (2019) uses Adler's theory to examine how Lady Bird, a young woman, struggles to pursue her dreams while facing pressure from family and society. Another study by Izzah (2024) also uses Adler's theory to analyze the character Mirabel in *Encanto*, focusing on her feelings of inferiority, motivation, and striving for perfection. These studies demonstrate how Adler's theory can be applied to different characters with personal and emotional challenges. However, the current research adds a unique focus not only on personal things but also on cultural expectations related to gender.

Other studies look specifically at *Mulan* in the 2020 live-action film, primarily through semiotic and feminist approaches to analyze gender issues in

Mulan (2020). Suri et al. (2022), Citra & Febriana (2022) and Sandiva & Putri (2022) all examine how signs and symbols in the film represent traditional gender roles. They describe how Mulan is expected to be passive, obedient, and focused on domestic duties, while men are shown as strong and dominant. Similarly, Narti & Sari (2022) analyze patriarchal values in the film using Barthes' semiotics. While these studies do not focus on Mulan's internal struggle, they provide helpful background on the external gender expectations that influence her psychological journey.

Meanwhile, from a psychological perspective, Choirudin et al. (2023) use an emotional psychology approach to describe Mulan's emotional experiences in several scenes, which supports the psychological exploration of her inner conflict. Suwastini et al. (2022) focus on Mulan's characterization and identify traits such as carelessness, bravery, independence, strength, and honesty. These qualities align with Adler's concept of striving for superiority and show how Mulan's personality reflects her efforts to grow and fully embrace her true self.

Another related study is by Silviana (2023) in her thesis entitled "The Levels of Self-Esteem Found in the *Mulan* (2020) Film (A Psychoanalysis Approach)." Using Freudian psychoanalysis, she explores how Mulan's self-esteem is influenced by internal conflicts and social pressures, particularly related to gender expectations and family demands. Her analysis reveals how Mulan's identity is shaped by the

tension between her unconscious desires and societal norms, highlighting how these factors affect her confidence and self-worth.

Although the present study applies a different psychological theory, Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology, it still focuses on Mulan's internal struggles. Unlike Silviana's emphasis on the concept of self-esteem through Freudian analysis, this research explores Mulan's development through Adlerian concepts such as feelings of inferiority, striving for superiority, creative power of the self, style of life and social interest. Therefore, Silviana's study reinforces the psychological framework of this research, particularly by illustrating how societal expectations influence Mulan's personal growth. At the same time, this study provides a fresh perspective by highlighting Mulan's conscious choices, psychological development, and journey toward authenticity grounded in Adlerian thought.