Kata Kita, Vol. 14, No. 1, March 2026, 126-132 DOI: 10.9744/katakita.14.1.126-132
e-ISSN: 2598-7801

The Hero and Villain Gender Stereotypes in *Jumbo* Animation Film

Necholas David
Master of Literature Program, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University, Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA
Email: h21240014@john.petra.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This article examines gender stereotypes in the depiction of the hero and villain in the Indonesian animated film *Jumbo* (2025). Using qualitative textual analysis, the study evaluates the characters' behavior through the theoretical lens of Stuart Hall's concept of representation and Judith Butler's gender performativity. The method involves deconstructing the speech acts and performative gestures of two main characters: Meri, the kind-hearted ghost, and Pak Rusli, the corrupt village chief. The findings indicate that the film constructs the characters' identities through binary oppositions and repeated performative acts. Pak Rusli embodies masculinity defined by the abuse of institutional power, while Meri displays femininity limited to emotional acts and dependence on others. The study concludes that *Jumbo* ultimately reinforces normative gender ideology.

Keywords: animation film, gender stereotypes, *Jumbo*, performativity, representation

INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian animated film *Jumbo* (2025) emerged as a national cultural phenomenon, setting a record for ticket sales in Indonesian cinemas. Produced by Visinema Studios in collaboration with over 400 local creators, the film made history by surpassing 10 million viewers shortly after its release on March 31, 2025. Beyond its commercial success, the film offers a wealth of cultural analysis, particularly regarding the gendered construction of good and evil characters. This dichotomy of hero and villain is a fundamental narrative structure in the global film tradition. It serves as an arena for negotiating cultural values and ideological norms. The depictions of these two characters are rarely neutral in gender. Instead, they are heavily imbued with stereotypes that define masculinity and femininity (Malhotra, 2019). Research on animated films consistently shows that mainstream animation companies like *Disney* perpetuate traditional gender roles.

For example, Ji (2021) and Wellman (2020) show that heroes often embody active and physically dominant masculinity, while female characters are framed through relational narratives that emphasize emotional expression and a need for rescue. Conversely, villains are often depicted as transgressors, with male villains representing corrupt patriarchal power and female villains portrayed as defying normative expectations of femininity (Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003). This long-standing pattern provides an essential backdrop for analyzing how local animated films renegotiate these universal norms.

In Indonesian cinema, depictions of good and evil are richer in nuance, offering representations of good and evil interwoven into the nation's socio-political and cultural fabric. Definitions of heroism and villainy in public life are highly fluid, shaped by the prevailing political narratives of their time. As illustrated by Franklin & Hägerdal (2024), public figures can be dramatically transformed from villains to heroes and vice versa. Beyond politics, folklore offers rich examples of gender depictions, particularly depictions of the horror feminine. Adiprasetio (2023) writes that characters like the *kuntilanak* serve not only as images of horror but also as manifestations of historical trauma and social anxieties regarding women's autonomy and sexuality. This context means that any contemporary Indonesian film depicting good and evil characters is closely connected to the history and social unrest of its time.

Therefore, the animated film *Jumbo* is a significant cultural text. The film tells the story of Don, who is bullied because of his body size. However, the analysis here focuses on two important supporting characters who embody the film's central moral and gender conflicts: Meri, a kindhearted female ghost who acts as a spiritual guide, and Pak Rusli, a corrupt village chief in Kampung Seruni who acts as an institutional antagonist. Their roles as hero and villain are interesting because they demonstrate deeply rooted local and global stereotypes.

To deconstruct this process, this analysis will draw on Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. Hall's theory explains how characters like Meri and Pak Rusli are constructed as ideological markers within a culture's system of stereotypes, binary oppositions, and "othering." Meanwhile, Butler's theory reveals the mechanisms by which these represented identities are naturalized through repeated gendered acts. Together, the two will demonstrate how the animated film *Jumbo* actively reproduces prevailing gender boundaries.

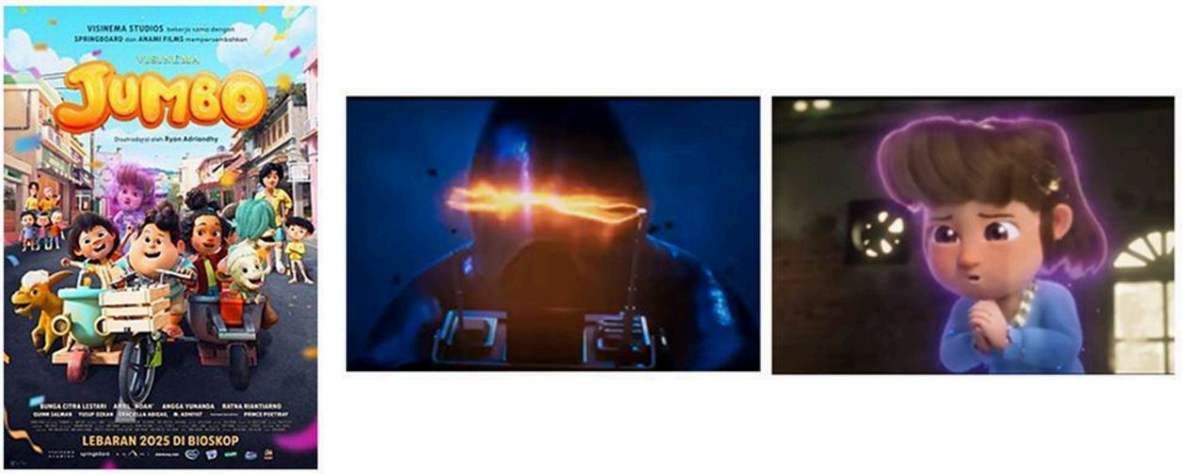

Figure 1. (from left to right) *Jumbo* Film Poster, Pak Rusli, and the Ghost Meri

Stuart Hall's theory of representation is fundamental to understanding the depiction of good and evil characters in animated films. Hall argues that media representation is not simply an objective reflection or mirror of reality. Instead, it is an active process of representation that reshapes reality. In the construction of good and evil characters, identity is formed through explicitly differentiated significations (Woodward, 2008, p. 29). Representation, as a cultural process, shapes identity by classifying the world and defining who is included and who is excluded from those categories (Woodward, 2008, p. 9). It is also known as binary opposition.

Binary opposition is the simplest way to mark difference. In binary opposition, the representation of villains is categorized into two categories: self versus other. The self is considered good, while others are considered evil. The privileged party is usually the protagonist or the general public. The protagonist's identity depends on the villain's existence and difference. Conversely, depicting villains as those who violate established rules would isolate them from the general public.

In *Disney* films, for example, the binary opposition of good/evil is often illustrated by contrasting hero and villain characters through different characteristics. For example, the characters of *Prince Philip* (the hero) and *Maleficent* (the villain) in *Sleeping Beauty* (Traesar & Saktiningrum, 2024). This binary opposition is crucial for establishing a clear identity for the hero/villain, who are seen as the main characters in the story.

Another central aspect of Hall's theory relevant to the depiction of villains is the concept of stereotype. Stereotypes reduce an individual to a few simple characteristics and often present them as

inherent (Longhurst, 2015, p. 50). Stereotypes create a boundary between what is considered normal and what is considered deviant. In the film *Jumbo*, Pak Rusli is reduced to a stereotype of a corrupt official, defined by his greed and involvement in land-clearing. Thus, the villain is deliberately stripped of his complexity and reduced to a recognizable, negative stereotype. This simplification reinforces the hero's status and moral righteousness, as well as the social order he represents.

Moreover, the male villain's portrayal of a female victim, as in the film *Jumbo,* where a female ghost named Meri is the victim, illustrates Stuart Hall's theory of stereotypes and hegemonic power. The male villain embodies hegemonic masculinity (Longhurst, 2015, p. 84). In contrast, the female victim is portrayed with traits associated with traditional femininity, such as passivity, emotionalism, and dependence on others for help.

This use of stereotypes also contributes to the concept of othering (Blommaert, 2009, p. 205), which positions marginalized groups (including villains) outside of dominant norms. Hall specifically discusses "the spectacle of the 'Other'" in representation to analyze how marginalized identities are visually and narratively presented and consumed by the dominant culture (Hall, 1997). Hall explores representations of difference in popular culture and media, including those representing race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and disability. He argues that difference is fundamental to the formation of meaning because identity is constructed in relation to what is perceived as the Other. The villain is the narrative manifestation of this "other." By defeating and humiliating the evil other, films reinforce ideological boundaries between the audience, as the general public, and those in positions of power, as the other.

Furthermore, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity challenges the notion that gender is a stable, internal essence or a natural binary between male and female. Introduced in her work, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler (2015) argues that gender is an identity constructed through the repetition of structured actions, gestures, and desires that cite established social norms. A person is considered a performer by performing an act. This performative process shifts the focus from the character's gender to the character's gendering through ongoing performance. Thus, their identity ultimately becomes understandable by the audience.

Butler's theory differs from previous notions of performance as a voluntary act. Performativity here is both compulsory and discursive. A person performs gender not because of an inherent sexual identity, but rather by constantly imitating an idea that has its origins (Longhurst, 2015, p. 148). In this case, the imitation is based on preexisting norms of masculinity and femininity circulating in our culture. Characters like the heroic prince display masculinity by adopting norms of courage, physical strength, and assertiveness. Meanwhile, a compassionate ghost displays femininity by citing norms of care, tenderness, and emotional support. The validity of this performativity stems not from its originality, but from its adherence to the standards it reiterates. It explains why certain gender depictions feel instantly recognizable because they successfully adopt established cultural conventions.

Performativity in animated films is particularly evident because animation is a medium that explicitly constructs character. Animated characters are literally created to be presented to the audience. This includes gestures, expressions, and overall actions, all deliberate choices by the author. It makes the characters in animated films perfect examples of Butler's theory. The writers and animators decide which gender norms to cite for each action. By examining this, we can see which specific norms the film validates and which are deemed deviant. Therefore, this analysis will discuss which particular words and actions shape Meri's femininity and which shape Pak Rusli's corrupt masculinity.

ANALYSIS

The Kindhearted Ghost as Performative Femininity (Meri's Heroism)

In many narratives, female ghosts are framed within gender stereotypes that limit them to either vengeful or helpless girls. Meri's character in the film *Jumbo* is not vengeful, but she is limited and powerless despite her supernatural powers. Her portrayal reinforces traditional notions of femininity, namely passivity, dependence, and a state of constant service to others (Arend, 2014). This analysis deconstructs Meri's heroism by showing how she is constrained by patriarchal structures, both in the human world and in the spiritual rules that currently govern her existence.

Meri's first appearance in the film immediately conveys the image of a weak and oppressed girl. It reflects a fundamental gender stereotype in society. The girl does not command or use her powers to harm humans. Instead, she pleads with the male protagonist, Don, and his friends. Meri's statement, "*Aku yakin cuma kalian yang bisa membantu aku*" ("I am sure you are the only ones who can help me"), is crucial. This statement frames her not as a possessor with equal power, but as a supplicant. It reinforces the stereotype that women lack the innate capacity to resolve their own crises and must rely on male intervention as the primary solution.

Furthermore, the assistance Meri receives is not free, but transactional. She must perform a specific function to receive it. In the film *Jumbo*, the main protagonist, Don, requires Meri to help him win a singing contest. This dynamic diminishes Meri's power and aligns with the stereotype of women's value as dependent on their usefulness to men. Her supernatural assistance becomes a service she must provide, but the reciprocity is uncertain. This condition places Meri in a vulnerable bargaining position. This transactional process reflects a patriarchal economy in which women's labor or support is often expected, yet also devalued (Morris & Blume Oeur, 2018). Women must constantly beg for recognition and reciprocity.

Don's denial and withdrawal from the initial agreement also reinforces the gender stereotype Meri experiences, that is, women must continually beg men. After Don wins the singing contest, Meri still does not receive help, and she must beg Don again. Her heroism in securing Don's victory is forgotten. She now has to plead emotionally for Don to help her. It is a standard narrative in which female characters must beg to assume male roles. Therefore, women's contributions are easily overlooked, and their solutions to problems are dependent on the kindness or generosity of men.

Meri's limitations are also manifested physically. It is manifested in her jasmine necklace, a symbol of femininity and the realm of the dead (Rachman et al., 2026). Every time Meri uses her supernatural powers to help Don, the number of jasmine flowers on her necklace decreases. It is a powerful metaphor for the stereotype of limited feminine power. The woman's resources are consumed in serving others. Unlike male heroes who typically possess limitless or regenerative powers, Meri's powers are limited and diminishing. Her very existence is tied to the depletion of these resources and time. Meri is forced to calculate and conserve her resources passively. It contrasts with the active and expansive heroism typically associated with masculinity.

Meri's gender dynamics contrast with those of the male authority figure, Pak Rusli, who plays the villain. While Meri must actively seek help from Don, Mr. Rusli appears as the village chief, actively mediating community disputes. In a land dispute, he actively takes control by saying, "*Gini aja, nanti biar saya yang bicara sama atasan Anda*" (Look, I will talk to your boss later). He positions himself as a negotiator who makes decisions for others. This role aligns with the stereotype of the rational and decisive male leader. This contrast between hero and villain underscores Meri's position outside of authority structures. Meri's power is solely spiritual and personal, while Pak Rusli takes effective public action as a man.

More deeply, Meri's heroism is limited to her role of nurturing and supporting others. She uses her power not to seek revenge or liberate others or herself. She uses her power to help Don win a singing competition. Victory is a man's dream, and Meri, as a woman, must support him. It aligns with classic gender stereotypes that limit women's influence to empowerment and support for men's ambitions and success. Her supernatural abilities are channeled into forms of assistance traditionally considered feminine and non-threatening to men's positions. Therefore, her potential power is constrained by socially accepted gender norms.

In terms of her ability to take independent action, Pak Rusli actively plans his schemes. He secretly deals with the developer and manipulates Atta and his brother to facilitate his evil plans. Meanwhile, Meri is largely reactive. Meri must wait and passively plead with Don. This distinction reinforces the active-passive gender binary. Men can act and make things happen, even through deception (such as Pak Rusli's cunning actions), while women must wait for something to happen to them and then seek protection. Therefore, Meri's heroism is not an active pursuit but a reactive response to injustice perpetrated solely by male agency.

Furthermore, Meri's condition as a ghost can be read through a gender-based lens. She is trapped in spirit form and unable to move freely in the human world. This limitation is directly caused by the men who destroyed her tomb. Her existence as a ghost, which ultimately meets Don, is not a situation she independently chose, but rather a consequence of the patriarchal violation that sought to displace her tomb. Meri's struggle here is simply to rest in peace, not for power or a greater purpose. It aligns with the feminine stereotype of seeking harmony and peace rather than independence. Meri's existence as a spirit represents the condition of victimhood she must constantly endure. Rather than using her power to empower her, her condition makes her the one who must always be protected or rescued.

In conclusion, despite her kindheartedness, Meri displays femininity that reinforces gender stereotypes. Her dependence on men limits her heroism. She is a caring supporter, a begging victim, and has only dwindling resources. The storyline of *Jumbo* supports the patriarchal notion that women's power is only valid when used in service to others. Furthermore, women must remain subservient to male authority and uphold it. Therefore, the film's narrative features a supernatural heroine who reflects the limitations on women's freedom. Even in the spirit world, traditional gender roles can persist.

Corrupted Authority as Performative Masculinity (Pak Rusli's Villainy)

As a village chief called "Pak Kades," Pak Rusli embodies and displays masculinity rooted in traditional gender stereotypes. His authority is constructed through a carefully crafted narrative that portrays him as a patriarchal protector, rational mediator, and decisive leader (Duncanson, 2015). All of these roles are considered masculine traits culturally. However, this portrayal also masks corruption, vulnerability, and the manipulation of the villagers' trust in Kampung Seruni.

Early in the film, Pak Rusli intervenes in a debate between residents and surveyors who are proposing a relocation. His demeanor and manner of speaking during this debate reflect the stereotype of a man as a natural and calm conflict mediator. When faced with the villagers' angry protest, "*Kemarin jalan ke kuburan orang tua gua, lu tutup! Sekarang lu mau gusur toko gua?*" ("You have blocked the road to my parents' graves! Now you want to demolish my shop?" Pak Rusli intervenes not with aggression but with the calmness of a father caring for his people, "*He he he, ada apa Bapak-bapak, Ibu-ibu. Hah?*" ("Hey, hey, hey, what is wrong, ladies and gentlemen? Huh?"). His demeanor and neat green shirt visually and verbally signal a controlled and rational masculinity. It is contrasted with the villagers' emotions.

The portrayal of Pak Rusli here exploits the stereotype of the male leader as a provider and protector. By promising the villagers and land surveyors, "*Gini aja, nanti biar saya yang bicara sama atasan Anda*" ("Look, I will talk to your boss later"), he fosters hope that he will protect the villagers from external threats, namely a developer arbitrarily clearing their lands. However, the role of protector here is deeply corrupted, as Pak Rusli has secretly promised the land to the developer for his own personal gain. Pak Rusli's presence at the beginning of the film becomes a tool of betrayal that exploits the villagers' trust in him.

Pak Rusli further demonstrates his masculinity by positioning himself as the sole authority to combat the fear of the supernatural. When meeting Atta and his brother, Pak Rusli says, "*Tidak ada itu hantu. Selama ada Pak Kades, tidak ada hantu yang berani mengganggu warga*" ("There are no

ghosts. As long as the village chief is here, no ghosts will dare to disturb the residents"). It is a powerful assertion of masculine, rational control over the irrational, feminine realm of the spirit. He plays the role of a courageous patriarch who banishes fear. Thus, this scene reinforces the stereotype that masculinity is about fearless domination of all things, both in the visible and invisible worlds.

On the other hand, this performative courage stands in stark contrast to his personal trauma. In the subsequent narrative, Pak Rusli's own trauma is framed through a challenge to his masculine identity. The digging of his wife's grave, Ida Setiawati, for road construction, represents a profound weakening of his masculinity. Pak Rusli failed in his role as protector of his family, even after her death. This loss undermines the core of his self-proclaimed identity. The masculinity he displays to the public through his corrupt and arrogant behavior becomes a reactionary performance to compensate for his own failure and powerlessness.

Furthermore, Pak Rusli's manipulation of Meri reveals gendered power dynamics. He uses a radio, which is a technological advancement traditionally associated with masculinity (Collinson & Hearn, 2005). With the radio, he controls the woman's spirit and exploits Meri's connection to the spiritual world. This action reinforces the binary of masculine control and technology versus feminine vulnerability and the natural or spiritual world. His entire plan to capture Meri with the radio signal demonstrates how his corrupt authority seeks to dominate and exploit women.

Pak Rusli's performative masculinity is further clarified when contrasted with Meri's characterization, which is confined to the stereotypical powerlessness of femininity. Meri's plea to Don early in the film, "*Aku yakin cuma kalian yang bisa membantu aku*" ("I am sure you are the only ones who can help me"), portrays Meri as passive and dependent on others. This distinction reinforces traditional gender stereotypes: active, oppressive masculine authority versus passive, abused femininity in need of rescue.

In the context of Meri's jasmine necklace, the difference in gender stereotypes becomes even more apparent. Meri is limited by the number of jasmine flowers on her necklace, restricting her freedom to exercise her power. Meanwhile, Pak Rusli's masculine authority is limitless, allowing him to manage and suppress this limited feminine power. Therefore, Pak Rusli's crimes are intrinsically linked to his reaction to corrupt masculinity. He embodies the stereotype of masculinity as a mediator, protector, rationalist, and patriarch, but he uses it to conceal his personal trauma and vengeance. He performatively asserts his authority through a series of gender-based actions designed to maintain power by fulfilling and then exploiting societal expectations of how a male leader should behave.

Ultimately, this analysis deconstructs Pak Rusli not as a lone villain, but as a product and perpetrator of rigid gender stereotypes. His performance reinforces destructive norms, that is, masculinity is portrayed as domineering, manipulative, and emotionally repressed. Femininity, on the other hand, is portrayed as passive and vulnerable. Pak Rusli's downfall stems from the gap between his public persona and the reality of his private life. These differences reveal how these gender stereotypes undermine authority and perpetuate cycles of exploitation due to unresolved trauma.

CONCLUSION

By integrating Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Judith Butler's concept of performativity, this article shows that the heroes and villains in the animated film Jumbo are not static reflections of reality but active constructions of cultural meaning. The villainy of the authoritative village chief (Pak Rusli) and the victimization of the female ghost (Meri) are constructed through the interplay of repeated gender representations and performances. Hall's concept highlights how the film relies on the binary opposition of male versus female (albeit in ghostly form) to structure narrative conflict. The analysis also shows that these identities are maintained through what Butler describes as repeated acts in which the characters not only possess these traits but actively perform them to support the social order depicted in the film.

The analysis demonstrates that the film reinforces gender stereotypes to define moral boundaries. Pak Rusli embodies the other through the stereotype of the corrupt bureaucrat. He embodies a type of masculinity defined by dominance and abuse of institutional power, placing him outside community norms. In contrast, Meri represents femininity by presenting a figure dependent on external safety. This dichotomy not only serves a narrative function to distinguish heroes from villains, but also reaffirms traditional gender roles in which power is considered part of masculinity and suffering is portrayed as spiritual and feminine.

Ultimately, the animated film Jumbo serves as an essential cultural text that articulates the anxieties of modern Indonesian society. While successfully presenting critiques of political corruption and land disputes by positioning the village head as the antagonist, the film also upholds gender ideology by framing men as oppressors and women as victims. It demonstrates that Indonesian animated films can challenge political power structures by transforming officials into villains, but they effectively use stereotypes to reinforce underlying gender performances and structure social relations. Thus, the film serves both as entertainment and as an arena for ideological negotiation, reflecting the complexities of power, identity, and the state in contemporary Indonesian society.

REFERENCES

Adiprasetio, J. (2023). Deconstructing fear in Indonesian cinema: Diachronic analysis of antagonist representations in half a century of Indonesian horror films 1970-2020. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, *10*(2), 2268396. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2023.2268396

Arend, P. (2014). Gender and Advertising. In A. M. Trier-Bieniek & P. Leavy (Eds.), *Gender & pop culture: A text-reader* (pp. 53–79). Sense Publishers.

Blommaert, J. (2009). *Discourse: A critical introduction* (1. publ. 5. print). Cambridge University Press.

Butler, J. (2015). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity* (First issued in hardback). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Collinson, D. L., & Hearn, J. (2005). Men and masculinities in work, organizations, and management. In M. S. Kimmel, J. Hearn, & R. W. Connell (Eds.), *Handbook of studies on men & masculinities* (pp. 230–248). SAGE Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452233833.n14

Duncanson, C. (2015). Hegemonic masculinity and the possibility of change in gender relations. *Men and Masculinities*, *18*(2), 231–248. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X15584912

Franklin, N., & Hägerdal, H. (2024). Indonesian heroes and villains: National identity, politics, law, and security. *Politics and Governance*, *12*, 8383. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.8383

Hall, S. (1997). The spectacle of the "other." In S. Hall (Ed.), *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices* (pp. 223–290). Sage Publications.

Ji, J. (2021). Analysis of gender stereotypes in Disney female characters. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, Proceedings of the 2021 3rd International Conference on Literature, Art and Human Development (ICLAHD 2021)*, *594*, 451–454.

Longhurst, B. (Ed.). (2015). *Introducing cultural studies* (Second edition, first issued in hardback). Routledge.

Malhotra, G. (2019). A comparative study of gender roles in animated films. *Research Review International Journal of Multidisciplinary*, *4*(10), 57–61.

Morris, E. W., & Blume Oeur, F. (2018). *Unmasking masculinities: Men and society*. SAGE.

Rachman, N. A., Wardani, P. A., & Farhan, M. (2026). The symbolic meaning of the jasmine ronce necklace in the film "Jumbo" (2025): Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis. *Journal of English in Academic and Professional Communication*, *12*(1), 30–43.

Traesar, L., & Saktiningrum, N. (2024). The portrayal of female villains: A representation study on Cruella. *Rubikon : Journal of Transnational American Studies*, *11*(2), 327. https://doi.org/10.22146/rubikon.v11i2.94900

Wellman, N. S. (2020). Disney's portrayal of women: An analysis of female villains and princesses. *Concordia Journal of Communication Research*, *7*. https://doi.org/10.54416/SEUY6814

Woodward, K. (Ed.). (2008). *Identity and difference* (Reprint). Sage [u.a.].