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Subverting the Prince Charming Trope: Female Empowerment in the *Disney Frozen* Series

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how contemporary feminist reinterpretations of classic fairy tales subvert traditional gender stereotypes. It focuses specifically on the "Prince Charming" and "waiting-for-rescue" narratives to represent female empowerment and autonomy. Using *Disney*'s animated films *Frozen* and *Frozen II* as case studies, the study employs qualitative content analysis integrated with feminist visual text analysis, informed by feminist theory, postfeminist media culture, gender performativity theory, and contemporary feminist media studies. Through the analysis of selected scenes, dialogue, song lyrics, and visual elements, the research examines the transformation of women's passive roles within 21st-century feminist discourses shaped by neoliberal individualism and fourth-wave critiques of representation. Special attention is given to the character development and identity formation of the heroines, Elsa and Anna, to show how the films retell classic fairy tale themes through a feminist lens. The findings show that *Frozen* and *Frozen II* challenge entrenched gender norms, foreground female agency, and offer a contemporary framework for understanding women's empowerment and self-determined autonomy in popular media.

INTRODUCTION

For decades, fairy tales have been critiqued by feminists for reinforcing gender stereotypes and patriarchal ideals through the "Prince Charming" trope. This archetype refers to a psychological pattern in which individuals, particularly women, expect a perfect partner to rescue them or solve their problems (Borst, 2022; Gill, 2016; Lieberman, 1972). In classical fairy tales, female characters are often depicted as dependent on male heroes, typically princes, to secure their happiness and social validation. As Bettelheim (1989) explained, these stories carry symbolic and psychological significance rather than offering literal prescriptions for real life. Lieberman (1972) and Zipes (2006) similarly argued that such narratives socialize girls to believe that their ultimate fulfillment and self-worth derive from romantic rescue. The "Prince Charming" archetype has been a pervasive motif in Western literature and media for centuries (Haase, 2004; Zipes, 2006).

Over the past decade, feminist theory has undergone significant transformation, influenced by intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), postfeminist media culture (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009), and fourth-wave feminism,

characterized by digital activism and renewed attention to representation, embodiment, and structural inequality (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Cochrane, 2013; Munro, 2013). Contemporary feminist scholarship no longer focuses solely on women's liberation from overt patriarchy; it also interrogates neoliberal individualism, commodified empowerment, and the politics of visibility within global media industries (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill & Orgad, 2018; Rottenberg, 2018). Within this context, *Disney*'s evolving princess narratives must be analyzed not only for their oppositional stance toward patriarchal ideals but also for the ways they operate within postfeminist and neoliberal frameworks, which celebrate individual empowerment while potentially leaving broader structural power relations intact (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2016; Rottenberg, 2018).

For instance, films such as the *Frozen* series (Buck & Lee, 2013, 2019), *Moana* (Clements & Musker, 2016), and *Brave* (Andrews & Chapman, 2012) show heroines who achieve empowerment through personal growth, self-discovery, and emotional resilience. In these stories, problems are often solved through inner change rather than by directly challenging larger social or institutional systems. The characters move away from passive roles waiting to be rescued and instead make their own choices and pursue their own goals. In this way, empowerment is mainly presented as something achieved through individual endeavor and self-transformation rather than through collective action or wider social change (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Gill & Orgad, 2018; Rottenberg, 2018).

Traditional narratives of "waiting for the prince" present women as passive and dependent, fostering unrealistic expectations of romance and potential disillusionment when reality fails to match these ideals (Le Clue, 2024; Zipes, 1993). In response, late 20th- and 21st-century feminist rearticulations, including intersectional, postfeminist, and media-critical approaches, have increasingly challenged and reconfigured these storytelling frameworks. *Disney*'s contemporary adaptations often build upon its own classical films rather than directly retelling older fairy tales, reimagining female characters with greater subjectivity and agency. For example, the *Frozen* series (Buck & Lee, 2013, 2019) foregrounds self-reliance, personal growth, and the significance of familial and social bonds, rather than positioning romantic rescue as the central narrative resolution.

This study analyzes the character development of Elsa and Anna to examine how the *Frozen* series reinterprets classical fairy tale motifs from a feminist perspective. The analysis emphasizes how the films foreground female empowerment, autonomy, and sisterhood over traditional romantic salvation.

At the same time, given *Disney*'s role as a global commercial media corporation, there is ongoing debate about whether its narratives can be considered fully feminist. Scholars have questioned whether such narratives go beyond portraying independent or empowered female characters to interrogate deeper structural gender inequalities (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Kanai, 2019; Rottenberg, 2018).

Nonetheless, the series provides a compelling example of how modern media can challenge gender stereotypes, promote female agency, and offer new frameworks for understanding the representation of women in popular culture. As widely circulated cultural texts, animated films like *Frozen* influence how audiences understand women's roles and possibilities. Repeated exposure to such fictional representations can help shape real-world attitudes and expectations about women's lives (Gill, 2016; Gill & Orgad, 2018; Kanai, 2019; Tasker & Negra, 2007).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Feminist scholars have long critiqued traditional fairy tales for portraying women as passive and dependent on male saviors, often reinforcing patriarchal values and gender stereotypes (Lieberman, 1972; Tatar, 1993, 1999; Zipes, 1993, 2006). Such narratives instill the belief that a woman's value lies in her beauty, obedience, and

passivity, while framing men as active rescuers (Rowe, 1979; Saha & Safri, 2016; Zipes, 1993). These repeated representations help shape and normalize gendered expectations about how women and men should behave.

Butler (1990) argued that gender is a socially constructed performance rather than an inherent trait. This idea helps explain how such narratives contribute to the ongoing production of gender norms, as audiences learn and reproduce these patterns through cultural texts like fairy tales.

Classic fairy tales, such as *Sleeping Beauty* and *Rapunzel*, exemplify how princesses were often depicted as lacking agency, passively awaiting men to determine their destinies (Geronimi, 1959; Grimm & Grimm, 1884; Lieberman, 1972; Zipes, 1993). The recurring motif of "waiting for the prince's rescue" is particularly pervasive, portraying men as courageous protectors and women as submissive and reliant (Le Clue, 2024; Saha & Safri, 2016; Sneha & Rahmath, 2018). This trope, often referred to as the "Prince Charming" syndrome, reflects a psychological and cultural pattern in which women are socialized to believe that their happiness and self-worth depend on finding a perfect male savior (Bettelheim, 1989; Demir et al., 2021; Dowling, 1981; Lieberman, 1972).

The term "syndrome" is used here to emphasize its internalization as a psychological and cultural pattern shaping women's beliefs and desires, drawing on scholarship that highlights how romantic ideals are culturally produced and internalized (Gill, 2016; Illouz, 1997) as well as research on gendered dependency and internalized romantic expectations (Demir et al., 2021; Dowling, 1981). As a result, individuals may internalize unrealistic expectations about romantic relationships, emphasizing male intervention over female autonomy.

Although these tales often reinforce traditional binary gender roles, depicting masculinity as aggressive and protective and femininity as passive and dependent, exceptions exist. For instance, in the Grimms' version of *Rapunzel*, the heroine ultimately rescues herself and restores the prince's sight, demonstrating that agency can emerge even within conventional narratives (Grimm & Grimm, 1884). Nevertheless, the overall pattern of classic fairy tales contributes to the internalization of patriarchal norms, teaching women to prioritize romance and passivity over independence and self-determination (Beauvoir, 2010; Borst, 2022; Mulvey, 1975; Vučković, 2023; Zhou et al., 2022).

While early feminist scholarship (e.g., Lieberman, 1972; Zipes, 1993) focused primarily on exposing patriarchal ideology in fairy tales, contemporary feminist media studies have expanded this critique to examine how empowerment itself has become culturally commodified (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2007). Postfeminism is understood here as a cultural sensibility that stresses personal choice, confidence, and self-management, while often downplaying structural critiques of gender inequality (Gill, 2016). Related to this, neoliberalism highlights ideas of individual responsibility and autonomy, in which empowerment is framed as the outcome of individual effort rather than collective change (Rottenberg, 2018).

Accordingly, postfeminist culture frequently presents women as autonomous, confident, and self-choosing subjects, while framing this autonomy within neoliberal ideals of individual responsibility. In contrast, fourth-wave feminism is understood as a contemporary movement shaped by digital activism, intersectionality, and global gender justice initiatives, with a strong focus on voice, visibility, and structural critique (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). Rather than simply categorizing heroines as "passive" or "active," contemporary feminist scholarship interrogates how agency is constructed, circulated, marketed, and constrained within global media industries.

Agency, as defined by Kabeer (1999), is the capacity to make meaningful decisions and operate within social boundaries. Empowerment refers to how this agency is understood and valued, either as personal self-

realization or as a way of challenging wider gender inequalities (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2016; Rottenberg, 2018).

Writers such as Carter in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) reimagined heroines with agency and subjectivity, challenging the passive female archetype. Similarly, *Disney*'s modern adaptations, including *Beauty and the Beast* (Condon, 2017), *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013), and *Frozen II* (Buck & Lee, 2019), present female protagonists with greater complexity and autonomy. In *Frozen*, Elsa and Anna reject dependence on male saviors, achieving personal and collective transformation through self-awakening and sisterhood rather than romantic intervention (England et al., 2011; Mollet, 2019).

However, these characters do not represent feminism in the same way. While Belle shows intellectual independence and emotional strength, her story still follows a traditional romantic pattern, in which her happiness is ultimately tied to her relationship with the male protagonist.

The *Frozen* series, in particular, subverts the traditional romantic salvation narrative by redefining true love not as heterosexual romance but as sisterhood and self-discovery. Elsa's character arc exemplifies the pursuit of female empowerment and subjectivity, resisting patriarchal constraints through self-acceptance and personal agency. Here, personal agency refers to meaning the ability to make independent choices and act within social constraints rather than simply follow external expectations and gendered norms. Anna's journey similarly disrupts the trope of dependence, as she rescues her sister through self-sacrifice and emotional resilience rather than relying on a prince's intervention (Do Rozario, 2004; Mahnaz, 2019). In this way, Elsa differs from earlier *Disney* heroines because her story does not follow the usual romantic ending. Unlike characters such as Belle, she is not defined by a relationship with a male partner or a traditional love plot.

However, feminist scholars have also questioned the idea of self-sacrifice, suggesting that it can reinforce the expectations that women should prioritize others' needs over their own. From this perspective, Anna's actions can be seen as both challenging romantic dependence and still reflecting traditional ideas of femininity centered on care and self-denial (Gill, 2016; Kanai, 2019; McRobbie, 2009).

Traditional fairy tale discourse has often centered on European narratives such as *Cinderella* (Perrault & Hague, 1989), *Snow White* (Grimm & Grimm, 2019), and *Sleeping Beauty* (Perrault & Hague, 1989). However, positioning *Frozen* as singularly transformative risks overlooking a broader transnational and cross-cultural history of female-centered storytelling.

While *Disney*'s earlier animated canon drew heavily from Western fairy tale traditions, alternative narrative models have long existed both within and beyond Western media industries. For instance, the works of *Studio Ghibli* in Japan present female protagonists whose strength emerges not through romantic validation but through moral resilience, community responsibility, and ecological consciousness. In *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki, 2001), Chihiro's growth is neither romantic nor dependent on male rescue. Similarly, *Princess Mononoke* (Miyazaki, 1997) portrays complex female characters whose narratives foreground environmental and political struggle rather than romantic destiny.

Within *Disney*'s evolving canon, several works also complicate the passive heroine trope. *Mulan* (Bancroft & Cook, 1998) reconfigures female agency through cross-dressing and martial competence, while *Beauty and the Beast* (Condon, 2017) reframes masculinity by requiring the Beast to undergo moral transformation. Furthermore, sisterhood and non-romantic familial bonds were depicted prior to *Frozen*: *Lilo & Stitch* (Sanders & DeBlois, 2002) foregrounds the Hawaiian concept of 'ohana, centering sisterly care and chosen kinship.

More recent films expand representational diversity. *Moana* (Clements & Musker, 2016) foregrounds Polynesian cosmology, while *Encanto* (Bush et al., 2021) centers a Latinx protagonist whose struggles involve intergenerational trauma rather than romance. These works demonstrate that the interrogation of patriarchal romance and traditional gender norms is part of a broader transnational trajectory. The *Frozen* series (Buck & Lee, 2013, 2019) should therefore be understood not as an isolated feminist breakthrough but as one node within a longer history of representational change.

Before proceeding to the analysis, it is necessary to clarify several key terms: "feminism," "female empowerment," and "female agency." In this study, feminism is not treated as a singular or fixed ideology. Rather, it is understood as a historically evolving and internally diverse intellectual tradition. Liberal feminism emphasized legal equality; radical and Marxist feminisms foregrounded structural patriarchy; contemporary feminist scholarship incorporates intersectionality and critiques of neoliberalism, reflecting ongoing debates about power, representation, and social transformation.

Female empowerment likewise requires careful and context-sensitive consideration. In earlier feminist usage, empowerment signified collective resistance and the redistribution of social and political power. In contemporary media culture, however, empowerment is frequently reframed in individualized terms, emphasizing confidence, self-expression, and personal choice. Such reframing reflects the influence of postfeminist and neoliberal cultural logics, in which empowerment is often aestheticized or commodified (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2007).

Against this shifting understanding of empowerment, it becomes necessary to clarify how female agency is conceptualized in narrative representation. Female agency does not merely refer to a character performing actions. Drawing on Butler's (1990) notion of performativity, agency operates within regulatory norms rather than entirely outside them. In this study, agency denotes the capacity of female characters to influence narrative outcomes, make meaningful choices, and assert subjectivity, while remaining situated within broader ideological and cultural constraints (Kabeer, 1999; Mahmood, 2019).

By clarifying these terms, the analysis avoids treating feminism, empowerment, and agency as self-evident categories. Instead, it positions them as contested, historically situated, and culturally embedded concepts (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2016; Rottenberg, 2018), allowing for a more critical and precise examination of the *Frozen* series.

METHOD

This study adopts a feminist visual text analysis, integrated with qualitative content analysis, to examine the *Frozen* series (Buck & Lee, 2013, 2019). The analysis focuses on selected scenes, dialogue, song lyrics, and visual elements relevant to the "Prince Charming" syndrome, the "waiting-for-rescue" motif, female agency, and sisterhood. Feminist visual text analysis is particularly suitable for animated films, as it enables systematic interpretation of visual symbolism, character framing, narrative sequencing, and representational politics within gendered cultural texts (Borst, 2022; Hall, 1997; Mulvey, 1975; Vučković, 2023; Zhou et al., 2022).

This methodological approach complements the theoretical frameworks outlined in the study, including feminist theory, postfeminist media culture, and gender performativity (Butler, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; Gill, 2007). These frameworks help explain how gender identities and power relations are formed, performed, and circulated through contemporary media cultures (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Rottenberg, 2018). Feminist theory provides the interpretive lens for examining gender ideology, while qualitative content analysis ensures

procedural rigor in systematically identifying recurring thematic patterns (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Schreier, 2012).

The study examines how the heroines Elsa and Anna challenge traditional gender norms and achieve female empowerment and individual autonomy. The analysis specifically examines how the *Frozen* series subverts motifs such as the "Prince Charming" syndrome and the trope of "waiting for the prince to rescue," while critically interrogating how empowerment is framed within contemporary postfeminist and neoliberal discourses of self-realization (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill & Orgad, 2018).

Rather than assuming that depictions of strength or independence automatically constitute feminist empowerment, the study evaluates whether the films reconfigure structural gender hierarchies or primarily relocate empowerment into individualized psychological transformation (McRobbie, 2009). By combining feminist visual text analysis and qualitative content analysis, the study investigates how *Frozen* rearticulates traditional motifs, such as "Prince Charming" and "true love's kiss", within postfeminist and neoliberal frameworks.

The analysis emphasizes close reading strategies derived from feminist film and media analysis, focusing on dialogue, narrative progression, song lyrics, visual symbolism, and character development, following established approaches in feminist visual and narrative analysis (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Mulvey, 1975; Rose, 2016). This approach allows for a detailed understanding of how the films challenge conventional gender roles and redefine female agency in popular culture (hooks, 2000; Tasker & Negra, 2007).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents six interrelated discussions of how *Frozen* and *Frozen II* represent the "Prince Charming" and "waiting-for-rescue" motifs. Drawing on selected scenes, dialogue, song lyrics, and character development, it examines romantic rescue, female agency, self-realization, and sisterly solidarity in the two films.

Prince Charming

In traditional *Disney* princess films, the "Prince Charming" syndrome refers to narratives in which a female character pins her life's happiness on a romantic encounter with a man, often framed as "love at first sight", and achieves fulfillment primarily through the man's rescue (Gill, 2007; Illouz, 1997). This concept comes from feminist critiques of romantic love and media portrayals of gendered dependency. In this study, it is used as an analytical category based on recurring patterns observed in the selected films (Lieberman, 1972; Llompart, 2024).

In classic Western fairy tales, the prince symbolizes the ultimate fulfillment of love and functions as the redeemer, determining the heroine's fate (Lieberman, 1972; Salmansohn, 2009). This archetype appears in tales such as *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*, where the prince arrives at a decisive moment to rescue the heroine from danger, poverty, or misfortune. Such narratives consistently portray women as passive figures awaiting salvation, while reinforcing the stereotype that men possess redemptive power and agency. Even in contemporary revisions, some scholars argue that *Disney* narratives may retain subtle gender asymmetries despite apparent empowerment (Streiff & Dundes, 2017).

In *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013), the first meeting between Anna and Hans initially evokes the classic "Prince Charming" scenario through visual and narrative cues. Hans is introduced as "handsome and regal," and

presents himself with the title "Prince Hans of the Southern Isles" (Buck & Lee, 2013, 00:17:25–00:17:28). His opening line: "I'm so sorry. Are you hurt?" exemplifies chivalrous concern (Buck & Lee, 2013, 00:17:06–00:17:09). Anna responds with a curtsy: "Princess Anna of Arendelle," while Hans kneels in greeting, and even the horse bows, recreating imagery associated with medieval courtly love (Buck & Lee, 2013, 00:17:28–00:17:30). Together, these visual and narrative cues position Hans as an idealized royal figure and Anna as the recipient of his attention.

From feminist media and cultural studies perspectives, which examine how films shape gender roles and emotional expectations, this scene initially appears to reinforce the traditional romantic narrative model, wherein women are socialized to trust and become attached to attractive, distinguished, and unfamiliar men (Gill, 2007; Illouz, 1997; Radway, 1991). However, this initial impression is later challenged when Hans is revealed to be deceptive. This twist exposes the risks of idealized romantic love and weakens the "Prince Charming" archetype. As the narrative progresses, *Frozen* thus subverts this archetype by showing alternative forms of female agency and empowerment, based on self-awareness, critical judgment, and sisterhood rather than reliance on male rescue.

Waiting for the Prince to Rescue

"Waiting for the Prince to Rescue" is a theme identified in fairy tales, in which female characters are often shown depending on male characters to save them from danger or resolve major problems. By examining character behavior, narrative structure, and key moments of conflict resolution, the analysis shows a repeated pattern of male rescue across the stories.

Traditional fairy tales often depict women in submissive roles, waiting for a prince to rescue them from hardship, danger, or social limitation. In *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi, 1959; Perrault & Hague, 1989), Princess Aurora falls under a curse that confines her to a deep, inescapable sleep. She remains passive and helpless until Prince Phillip, aided by the three good fairies, vanquishes Maleficent and awakens Aurora with a kiss (Geronimi, 1959; Perrault & Hague, 1989). Similarly, in *Rapunzel* (Grimm & Grimm, 1884; Zipes, 2015b), the heroine is imprisoned by an evil witch in a high tower. Although the prince assists her escape, the Grimms' version ultimately emphasizes Rapunzel's own resourcefulness, as she contributes actively to resolving the conflict and restoring the prince's sight. Taken together, these narratives illustrate the gendered expectation that women rely on male intervention for salvation while men occupy positions of agency and authority.

The persistence of this narrative model can also be observed in Anna in *Frozen* (Buck & Lee, 2013). Having grown up in isolation after being separated from Elsa, Anna develops an acute desire for connection, rendering her vulnerable to idealized notions of romantic fulfillment. On Elsa's coronation day, she encounters Hans, a prince from a neighboring island. Hans's courteous demeanor, attentive gestures, and formal titles position him as the archetypal rescuer. Anna interprets his affection as love almost instantaneously, leading to their impulsive engagement. This scene reinforces the romantic myth of "love at first sight" by portraying quick emotional attachment and immediate commitment, a pattern often found in *Disney* and other popular media (Illouz, 1997). Anna's hasty decision further exemplifies the "Prince Charming" syndrome, wherein women are depicted as seeking external salvation and fulfillment through a male figure (Dalfonzo, 2014).

However, the "waiting-for-rescue" pattern becomes most visible later in the story, when Anna is struck by Elsa's powers and is convinced that only "an act of true love" can save her. In this moment, she looks to Hans' kiss as the way to thaw her frozen heart, revealing her reliance on male intervention to resolve her crisis. The scene reflects a traditional rescue narrative in which a female character depends on a male figure to restore her life and agency.

From a feminist perspective, these scenes reveal how two related patterns, i.e. the "love-at-first-sight" trope and the "waiting-for-rescue" motif, persist in contemporary media, particularly in narratives that blend fairy tale conventions with postfeminist aesthetics. Anna's vulnerability highlights the cultural and psychological mechanisms through which romantic ideals are internalized, including repeated exposure to Western popular media narratives (e.g., *Disney* and *Hollywood* romance), the normalization of heterosexual romantic fulfillment as an emotional endpoint, and affective identification with narratives that frame love as rescue and resolution. Scholarship on postfeminist media culture and gendered subjectivity helps explain these mechanisms (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Gill, 2016; Tasker & Negra, 2007). These dynamics set the stage for later narrative subversion, in which female characters assert agency and redefine empowerment beyond male intervention.

Elsa's Skepticism and the Challenge to Romantic Myths

Elsa's reaction to Anna's impulsive engagement offers a direct critique of the romantic myths of "love at first sight" and "true love." When Anna excitedly announces her engagement, her tone reflects romantic longing and idealized fantasy, as she imagines a perfect future with her new fiancé and his family. This enthusiasm illustrates her deep yearning for love and emotional connection, shaped in part by her isolated upbringing. Her longing reveals the tensions of a young woman navigating emotional dependence and her sense of self within a patriarchal framework (Gill, 2007). Elsa's response, however, challenges these cultural expectations. The following dialogue excerpt illustrates this interaction:

Elsa: Fine. You can't marry a man you just met.
Anna: You can if it's true love.
Elsa: Anna, what do you know about true love?
Anna: More than you. All you know is how to shut people out.
Elsa: You asked for my blessing, but my answer is no. Now, excuse me.
Hans: Your Majesty, if I may ease your--
Elsa: No, you may not. And I-I think you should go (Buck & Lee, 2013, 00:26:25–00:26:57).

This interaction shows different attitudes toward romantic love in the narrative. While Anna believes in the fairy-tale idea that true love can happen instantly, Elsa questions this assumption. Elsa's skepticism functions as a deliberate challenge to patriarchal romantic narratives. Her question, "What do you know about true love?", directly interrupts Anna's certainty and calls for reflection rather than immediate romantic commitment. By refusing to endorse Anna's impulsive engagement, Elsa rejects the myth of "true love" as an unquestioned ideal, emphasizing the importance of critical reflection and emotional discernment. Anna's firm belief in "true love" illustrates how young women, socialized into the "Prince Charming" archetype, can be particularly susceptible to these myths. The contrast between Anna's certainty and Elsa's refusal therefore places romantic fantasy and critical judgment in direct opposition.

From a feminist perspective, Elsa's skepticism represents a rational challenge to patriarchal romantic ideals, questioning the societal expectation that women subordinate their judgment to fantasy-driven notions of love (Do Rozario, 2004; Radway, 1991). Kristoff's humorous remark, "Wait. You got engaged to someone you just met?" (Buck & Lee, 2013, 00:40:44–00:40:48), further critiques hasty romantic decision-making. Kristoff's comment is humorous rather than theoretical, but it briefly interrupts the romantic storyline and draws attention to how unrealistic an impulsive engagement can be. By questioning Anna's decision, he also shows how fairy tales often present instant romantic commitment as normal, without encouraging critical reflection. This highlights the risks of prioritizing external validation over self-determined agency (Friedan, 1963; Pateman, 2018).

Elsa's skepticism and Kristoff's commentary reveal that *Frozen* critiques not only superficial romantic ideals but also the broader social mechanisms that encourage women to prioritize romance over self-determination, advocating instead for autonomy, deliberation, and conscious choice. This critique also prepares the narrative for the later exposure of Hans's false romantic persona.

Feminist Critiques of Fairy Tales

The preceding analysis of Anna's response to Hans can be situated within a longer tradition of feminist critiques of fairy tales. For decades, fairy tales have been the focus of feminist critique, often being seen as reinforcing traditional gender norms and patriarchal ideologies. Lieberman (1972) analyzed how such stories encourage girls to internalize culturally prescribed gender roles, showing women as passive figures whose fates rely on male intervention. Stories like *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi, 1959; Perrault & Hague, 1989) exemplify this pattern: the heroine remains dormant and helpless until rescued by a prince. Lieberman (1972) argued that such narratives socialize girls to adopt passive roles, waiting for male approval and assistance.

Lieberman (1972) conceptualized the "Prince Charming" syndrome, in which women are culturally conditioned to view their worth as contingent on male validation and intervention. Contemporary feminist scholars note that this narrative persists in subtler forms, reframed through discourses of "choice," "romantic destiny," and individualized empowerment within media culture (Gill, 2007). Across fairy tales, romance literature, and visual media, these narratives reinforce binary gender roles: men as active agents, women as passive recipients. Such repetition leads women to internalize the belief that love and rescue define their value, echoing Beauvoir's (2010) assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (p. 330). Internalizing this belief constrains women's aspirations, directing them toward romance and marriage rather than autonomy and achievement (hooks, 2000). By socializing women to wait for rescue rather than enact change, patriarchal structures are reproduced and sustained (Mulvey, 1975).

Feminist theory provides a multi-layered critique of the "Prince Charming" archetype, which shapes both personal relationships and broader social power structures (Illouz, 1997). Prince Charming symbolizes male authority, positioning men as agents of change while women's destinies are dependent upon them (Lieberman, 1972; Rowe, 1979; Warner, 1995). As Beauvoir (2010) noted in *The Second Sex*, patriarchal societies construct men as the universal subject or "Self," while women are positioned as the relative and subordinate "Other." The "Prince Charming" syndrome exemplifies this process of Othering, depriving women of agency and reinforcing male dominance (Mulvey, 1975).

Zipes (1993) further observed that traditional fairy tales often reinforce patriarchal values by portraying women as passive and dependent on male saviors. Such narratives suggest that a woman's value lies in her beauty, obedience, and passivity. Butler (1990) added that gender itself is socially constructed through performance, rather than an inherent trait, highlighting how these narratives encode cultural expectations of femininity.

While early feminist scholarship (e.g., Lieberman, 1972; Zipes, 1993) primarily focused on exposing patriarchal ideology in fairy tales, contemporary feminist media studies have expanded this critique to consider how empowerment itself has been culturally commodified (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2007). Postfeminist culture often presents women as empowered, independent, and able to make their own choices. However, this form of empowerment is usually framed through ideas of personal responsibility and individual success, rather than through attention to wider social inequalities.

In contrast, fourth-wave feminism, shaped by digital activism and global movements for gender equality, focuses more on visibility, representation, and the voices of marginalized groups, along with a more

intersectional understanding of gender issues. Contemporary feminist scholarship moves beyond binary questions of whether a heroine is "passive" or "active" to examine how agency is constructed, circulated, and constrained within global media industries. This shift is relevant to the present analysis because it allows the discussion to consider not only whether Elsa and Anna act independently, but also how their empowerment is framed within *Disney*'s media context.

Within this evolving feminist landscape, *Disney*'s *Frozen* series (Buck & Lee, 2013, 2019) can be interpreted not merely as a rejection of patriarchal romance but as a complex negotiation with postfeminist media culture. The films simultaneously critique traditional romantic rescue narratives while embedding empowerment within individualized discourses of self-realization and emotional authenticity.

Empowerment and Subjectivity: Rebellion Against Patriarchy

Building on the preceding feminist critiques of passive femininity and male rescue, *Frozen* presents Elsa as a character whose difference and autonomy are initially treated as dangerous. In *Frozen*, Elsa is born with extraordinary ice powers, symbolizing women's unique potential and abilities. However, patriarchal norms suppress recognition of such qualities, positioning her difference as dangerous. Despite her royal status, Elsa is stigmatized as a "monster":

Duke:	There she is! Stop her!
lsa:	Please, just stay away from me. Stay away!
Duke:	Monster… Monster! (Buck & Lee, 2013, 00:28:15–00:28:25)

Similarly, Hans warns her in the ice palace: "Don't be the monster they fear you are" (Buck & Lee, 2013, 01:11:45–01:11:53). These labels frame Elsa's powers as a threat rather than as a source of agency.

Elsa's father, the king of Arendelle, enforces patriarchal control from childhood, teaching her to conceal her powers rather than master them. His injunction, "Conceal it, don't feel, don't let them know" (Buck & Lee, 2013, 00:31:57–00:32:03), exemplifies the suppression of female emotion and potential (Butler, 1990). The gloves he provides serve as tangible symbols of restraint, making visible the societal constraints that limit women's agency.

This early paternal repression establishes the psychological conditions that culminate in Elsa's self-imposed exile, transforming external patriarchal control into internalized isolation. After inadvertently harming Anna, Elsa flees to the mountains. In her soliloquy, "The snow glows white on the mountain tonight, not a footprint to be seen. A kingdom of isolation, and it looks like I'm the queen" (Buck & Lee, 2013, 00:31:21–00:31:35), the "isolated kingdom" metaphorically represents women's self-enclosure when unable to conform to societal norms (Butler, 1990). Her withdrawal therefore reflects both an attempt to escape external judgment and the internalized effects of earlier control.

Her song "Let It Go" (Buck & Lee, 2013, 00:31:50–00:34:30) marks a turning point in which Elsa casts off imposed expectations:

Don't let them see,
Be the god girl you always have to be.
Conceal,
Don't feel,
Don't let them know.
Well, now they know.

[…]
I don't care what they're going to say.
Let the storm rage on!
The cold never bothered me anyway.
[…]
Let it go! Let it go!
I am one with the wind and sky.
Let it go! Let it go!
You'll never see my cry.
[…]
That perfect girl is gone.
Here I stand in the light of day (Buck & Lee, 2013, 00:31:50 –00:34:30).

By declaring, "It's time to see what I can do, to test the limits and break through. No right, no wrong, no rules for me... I'm free" (Buck & Lee, 2013, 00:32:37–00:33:07), Elsa asserts female subjectivity, rejecting patriarchal constraints and performing self-defined agency (Foucault, 1978; hooks, 1984; Narayan, 1997). The song encapsulates feminist ideals of autonomy and self-realization, subverting the "Prince Charming" syndrome by emphasizing self-awakening rather than dependence on male rescue (Dalfonzo, 2014).

A postfeminist reading, however, complicates this interpretation. Elsa's empowerment is framed through aesthetic transformation, emotional release, and self-confidence, which are hallmarks of neoliberal self-branding (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill, 2007). While the narrative celebrates personal liberation, it does not directly challenge structural patriarchy, instead, empowerment is mainly shown at the level of personal feelings and inner change. In this way, empowerment becomes individualized and affective, reflecting postfeminist and neoliberal ideas that privilege self-regulation over structural change.

At the same time, Elsa's characterization also allows for other possible interpretations. Myren-Svelstad (2022) further suggested that Elsa's characterization opens space for queer and feminist readings, particularly through her non-conformity to heterosexual romantic expectations, her self-imposed isolation in response to difference, and her refusal to resolve her narrative through marriage or romance. Positioned outside the traditional romantic plot, Elsa is not defined by a male partner and instead finds resolution through self-acceptance. In doing so, she challenges conventional princess narratives, while still remaining within *Disney*'s commercial framework.

This shift away from romantic resolution is also reflected in Anna's narrative. Anna's journey reframes "true love" through sisterly solidarity rather than romantic rescue, reflecting a reconfiguration of female characterization in *Disney* films (Llompart & Brugué, 2020). Her actions highlight relational strength and mutual recognition, demonstrating empowerment through female bonds rather than male validation. However, like Elsa's arc, Anna's agency operates within a commercially produced, global media context, where feminist ideals are negotiated alongside postfeminist and market-driven imperatives.

Elsa and Anna embody a tension central to contemporary feminist media: they reject traditional male-rescue narratives while negotiating empowerment within individualized, emotionally authentic, and relationally mediated forms. *Frozen* thus exemplifies how modern media can simultaneously critique patriarchy and embed empowerment within postfeminist, neoliberal cultural logics.

Subversion of the "Prince Charming" Archetype

Lieberman (1972) argued that fairy tales socialize girls into traditional gender roles, teaching girls to be meek, obedient, and attractive while socializing boys to be bold, heroic, and agentic. This "waiting to be rescued" syndrome reinforces female dependency and patriarchal inequality.

While traditional narratives often position women as passive recipients of male heroism, contemporary retellings increasingly portray independent, proactive female characters (Bacchilega, 2013; Tatar, 1993, 1999; Zipes, 2006), challenging these normative roles, as seen in Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) and in more recent *Disney* films such as *Brave* (Andrews & Chapman, 2012).

The *Frozen* series (Buck & Lee, 2013, 2019) actively subverts this archetype. Through the narrative arc of Prince Hans, the films expose the risks of women placing their happiness in male validation. Hans initially appears as a classic "Prince Charming," embodying courtly charm and romantic allure. However, his betrayal reveals his self-serving motives, demonstrating that external rescue is unreliable and that women must discern genuine intentions and exercise autonomous agency (Dalfonzo, 2014; Wright, 2017). The later revelation of his motives gives these initial romantic cues a different meaning.

Anna: Hans, you have to kiss me.
Hans: What?
Anna: Now. Here we go
[…]
Anna: Elsa struck me with her powers.
Hans: You said she'd never hurt you.
Anna: I was wrong.
Hans: Anna.
Anna: She froze my heart and only an act of true love can save me.
Hans: A true love's kiss.
Oh, Anna. If only there was someone out there who loved you.
Anna: What?
...You said you did.
Hans: As thirteenth in line in my own kingdom, I didn't stand a chance. I knew I'd have to marry into the throne somewhere--
Anna: What are you talking about?
Hans: As heir, Elsa was preferable, of course. But no one was getting anywhere with her. But you-
Anna: Hans?
Hans: You were so desperate for love you were willing to marry me, just like that.
Hans: I figured, after we married, I'd have to stage a little accident for Elsa.
[…]
Hans: All that's left now is to kill Elsa and bring back summer.
Anna: ...You're no match for Elsa.
Hans: No, you're no match for Elsa. I, on the other hand, am the hero who is going to save Arendelle from destruction.
[…]
Anna: Please, somebody help (Buck & Lee, 2013, 01:15:08 –01:16:59).

The film's climax delivers a decisive subversion of the romantic myth. When Anna facing imminent death because of her frozen heart, Hans, upon learning that "only an act of true love can thaw a frozen heart," pretends to kiss her but then sneers coldly, "Oh, Anna. If only there was someone out there who loved you" (Buck & Lee, 2013, 01:15:41–01:15:48). Rather than fulfilling the expected role of rescuer, Hans refuses the romantic gesture on which Anna's survival appears to depend.

Hans' sarcastic wording ("if only there was…") and his lack of emotional reassurance deny Anna the recognition she expects in that moment. What should sound like care instead becomes emotional withdrawal.

This twist reveals Hans' true intention: using marriage and betrayal as tools for political gain. His later speech becomes more direct and strategic ("As heir… I knew I'd have to…," "I figured… I'd have to stage a little accident"), and the repeated use of "I" highlights his self-interest and calculated thinking. Together, these verbal cues expose the contrast between Hans's earlier chivalrous persona and his political calculation. This undermines the traditional "prince saves princess" narrative pattern and exposes the patriarchal power structure underlying the romantic love myth (Do Rozario, 2004).

From a feminist perspective, Hans exemplifies how patriarchal systems manipulate women's emotions through romantic myths (Do Rozario, 2004; Radway, 1991). His deception subverts the traditional "prince saves princess" motif, exposing the power dynamics embedded within romantic ideals. Notably, Hans is a marginalized figure, as he is "thirteenth in line" in his kingdom and has minimal familial or societal support. His ultimate isolation underscores the failure of patriarchal authority when exercised through manipulation (Buck & Lee, 2013, 00:23:17–00:23:25).

Where Hans's actions expose the unreliability of male rescue, Elsa's narrative offers a contrasting model of female empowerment. Elsa exemplifies female empowerment through self-isolation, self-discovery, and agency. Her retreat to the ice palace is an act of intentional autonomy, allowing her to explore her powers and assert her identity without external control (Rudloff, 2016). Her isolation is not a passive waiting for rescue but an active struggle for self-identification and strength, with her ice castle, snowy landscape, and storm symbolizing spaces of female autonomy and empowerment (Dundes et al., 2018; Rudloff, 2016).

The song *Let It Go* (Buck & Lee, 2013) visually and narratively represents this liberation: "Let it go, let it go, can't hold it back anymore… That perfect girl is gone. Here I stand in the light of day" (00:31:50–00:34:30). By discarding her gloves, a symbol of patriarchal restraint, Elsa rejects imposed norms and asserts her subjectivity (Bacchilega, 1997; Butler, 1990). Her ice castle, self-constructed and free from judgment, embodies her autonomy, power, and redefined femininity (Macaluso, 2018). *Frozen II* extends this trajectory in the song *Show Yourself* (Buck & Lee, 2019), where Elsa affirms her true identity and internalizes the source of her strength.

Every inch of me is trembling.
But not from the cold...
I have always been a fortress.
Cold secrets deep inside.
You have secrets, too…
But you don't have to hide.
Show yourself.
I'm dying to meet you.
Shown yourself.
It's your turn.
Are you the one I've been looking for all my life?
Show yourself.
I'm ready to learn.
I've never felt so certain.
All my life I've been torn.
But I'm here for a reason.
Could it be the reason I was born?...
Show yourself.
I'm no longer trembling.

Here I am.
I've come so far.
You are the answer I've waited for all my life.
Oh, show yourself...
Step into the power.
Grow yourself.
Into something new.
You are the one you've been waiting for.... (Buck & Lee, 2019, 01:03:02–01:07:02).

From a feminist standpoint, these lyrics represent self-subjectivity, self-empowerment, and liberation from patriarchal constraints (hooks, 1984; Narayan, 1997). This transformation is reflected in Elsa's language throughout the song. Repeated commands such as "Show yourself" and "Step into the power" emphasize action and personal growth, while statements such as "I'm no longer trembling" and "I've come so far" express increasing confidence and self-belief.

The lyrics also move from uncertainty ("Could it be the reason I was born?") to certainty ("Here I am" and "You are the one you've been waiting for"), suggesting that Elsa has come to understand and accept herself. Significantly, the "you" in the song ultimately refers to Elsa herself, indicating that the answer she has been searching for comes from within rather than from an external source. This shift from uncertainty to self-recognition supports the interpretation of empowerment as self-acceptance and self-discovery.

These lyrics reflect a feminist interpretation of agency and autonomy by portraying empowerment as a process of self-acceptance and self-discovery. Elsa no longer depends on a male savior; instead, she takes control of her own life and decisions, signaling the transformation from passive object to active subject.

Similarly, Anna achieves agency through her own choices and actions. Her journey to rescue Elsa reframes "true love" not as romantic salvation but as sisterly solidarity. By taking initiative and confronting threats such as Hans and the Duke of Weselton, Anna asserts personal agency and demonstrates that women can enact self-rescue while maintaining relational empowerment (Borst, 2022; Chen, 2020; Mahnaz, 2019; Wu, 2020).

Elsa and Anna dismantle the traditional "Prince Charming" narrative, illustrating that female empowerment arises from autonomy, relational support, and self-realization rather than male intervention. Their journeys redefine feminine roles in contemporary storytelling, exemplifying a feminist negotiation between independence, agency, and emotional authenticity (Bacchilega, 1997; hooks, 2000; Mulvey, 1975).

From Prince Charming to Females' Mutual Salvation

In *Frozen*, Anna is not saved by a prince's kiss but rather through her profound love for her sister and her self-sacrifice, emphasizing women's self-rescue and the power of emotional bonds over male-centered romantic salvation (Law, 2014; Llompart & Brugué, 2020; Zipes, 2015a, 2015b). This sisterly love foregrounds the evolution of *Disney* heroines from passive figures to active agents, emphasizing relational empowerment and mutual recognition (Law, 2014).

Throughout the narrative, the characters initially assume that "true love" must take a heterosexual romantic form, reflecting a traditional belief that happiness and rescue come from a connection between a man and a woman (Butler, 1990; Illouz, 1997). Anna's belief that only a kiss from Hans can save her shows how strongly this idea has shaped her thinking, reinforcing the assumption that romantic love is the key to salvation.

However, when Anna chooses to protect Elsa rather than seek Hans's kiss, the narrative changes the expected meaning of "an act of true love." By risking her life to protect Elsa, Anna enacts a form of "true love" grounded in sisterhood rather than heterosexual romance. This act of sisterly love thaws Anna's frozen heart and conveys a critical message: emotional support and solidarity among women can generate transformative power, independent of patriarchal expectations. In doing so, the film challenges the idea that "true love" must be heterosexual and romantic. Instead, it presents true love as something shown through care, sacrifice, and mutual recognition between people (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill & Orgad, 2018).

Anna's self-sacrifice expands the concept of true love beyond heteronormative romance, foregrounding feminist ideals that value diverse models of care and relational strength (hooks, 2000). While framed heroically, feminist critiques caution that the trope of self-sacrifice can also reinforce expectations that women should prioritize others' needs above their own (Tong, 2009), illustrating a tension between empowerment and normative emotional labor.

Alongside Anna's redefinition of true love, Elsa's journey similarly reflects female subjectivity and agency. From childhood, she is instructed to "Conceal it, don't feel, don't let them know" (Buck & Lee, 2013, 00:31:57–00:32:03), a directive rooted in familial authority and fear of harm rather than universal patriarchy. Her eventual self-isolation and the songs *Let It Go* and *Show Yourself* (Buck & Lee, 2013, 2019) signify an active struggle for self-identification and liberation.

Through these moments, Elsa rejects societal constraints, claims autonomy over her powers, and affirms her identity, challenging the "Prince Charming" narrative in which women are passive figures awaiting rescue (Butler, 1990; hooks, 1984; Narayan, 1997; Rudloff, 2016). This is reflected in the refrain: "Step into the power. Grow yourself. Into something new. You are the one you've been waiting for" (Buck & Lee, 2019, 01:06:27–01:06:38). This refrain directly shifts the source of rescue from an external figure to Elsa herself. It underscores that true strength and redemption originate within, thereby affirming Elsa's self-determination and consolidating her autonomous subjectivity.

Anna's agency complements Elsa's empowerment. By actively rescuing her sister, Anna foregrounds relational autonomy and mutual support rather than dependence on male saviors (Dalfonzo, 2014; Wright, 2017). Her actions, which are undertaken without waiting for Prince Hans or Kristoff, highlight feminist ideals of sisterhood and collective empowerment. The series emphasizes that emotional bonds between women can function as sources of salvation and self-realization, redefining "true love" in non-romantic terms (Mahnaz, 2019; Zipes, 2015b).

The narrative further subverts traditional romantic tropes through Prince Hans, whose initial appearance as a classic "Prince Charming" masks self-serving intentions. Hans' betrayal reveals the patriarchal manipulation underlying romantic myths and critiques the assumption that male intervention ensures women's safety or happiness (Do Rozario, 2004; Radway, 1991). Similarly, Kristoff, an ordinary ice harvester, supports Anna not as a savior but as a partner in collaboration and mutual trust, emphasizing egalitarian relational dynamics rather than hierarchical rescue (Buck & Lee, 2013, 2019).

This emphasis on female agency and mutual support continues. In *Frozen II*, Elsa promises, "I promise you, I will free this forest and restore Arendelle" (Buck & Lee, 2019, 00:42:36–00:42:42). This promise illustrates her commitment to using her powers responsibly while embracing her destiny. The word "promise" also shows her active role in making decisions and shaping what happens next, rather than being controlled by others.

To this, Anna's responds, "That's a pretty big promise, Elsa" (Buck & Lee, 2019, 00:42:43–00:42:46). Her response underscores the value of emotional support and relational empowerment among women. These

interactions highlight a feminist shift from passive dependence on male rescuers toward active female agency and solidarity (Dalfonzo, 2014; Rudloff, 2016).

This is also consistent with feminist media studies, which have observed that contemporary popular culture often presents empowerment as a matter of personal choice, responsibility, and resilience rather than broader social change (Gill, 2007; Rottenberg, 2018). By centering sisterhood, self-discovery, and non-romantic forms of love, the *Frozen* series reinterprets the fairy tale genre from a feminist perspective. It challenges conventional gender norms, subverts the male-rescue paradigm, and models female-centered narratives of empowerment, autonomy, and relational strength (Bacchilega, 1997; Karmakar & Bhadra, 2023; Llompart, 2024).

The films also show that traditional gender expectations have not disappeared completely. Through family hierarchies, romantic relationships, and social expectations, *Frozen* suggests that female empowerment develops within existing social constraints rather than completely outside them. This reflects a common observation in feminist media studies: contemporary media can challenge traditional gender norms while also continuing to reinforce some of them (Gill & Orgad, 2018; McRobbie, 2009).

Elsa and Anna's journeys, therefore, exemplify feminist themes of self-realization, relational agency, and active resistance to passive dependence. They offer a multifaceted and contextually grounded depiction of female empowerment in contemporary media.

CONCLUSION

Many traditional fairy tales follow a "damsel in distress" narrative pattern, in which a heroic prince rescues a passive female character, reinforcing gender stereotypes and the expectation of female dependence. *Disney*'s *Frozen* series (Buck & Lee, 2013, 2019), however, challenges this convention by presenting strong, independent female protagonists who actively shape their own destinies. The films subvert the conventional "Prince Charming" archetype, emphasizing women's strength, autonomy, empowerment, and self-discovery.

Situated within contemporary feminist discourse, including postfeminist media critique, and fourth-wave feminism's attention to representation, the *Frozen* series can be understood as a transitional cultural text. It meaningfully disrupts the male-rescue paradigm and redefines love through sisterhood and female agency. However, empowerment in the films is often framed as individualized emotional growth rather than structural transformation, reflecting the ambivalent nature of contemporary feminist media.

In this sense, *Frozen* embodies the tensions of 21st-century feminist discourse. It critiques patriarchal narratives of rescue while simultaneously embedding empowerment within neoliberal ideals of self-optimization, personal authenticity, and emotional resilience. Recognizing this duality enables a more critically attentive, context-sensitive interpretation of the series as a text that negotiates the evolving boundaries of feminist representation, illustrating both progress in the depiction of female agency and the limits of empowerment within commercial media.

This study is limited to a textual analysis of two *Disney* animated films and therefore does not examine how audiences interpret the representations of gender, romance, and female agency discussed in the series. Future research may compare Frozen with other *Disney* and non-*Disney* fairy-tale adaptations, examine audience responses across different cultural settings, or consider how commercial production conditions shape representations of empowerment. Such research could further assess whether female-centered narratives challenge broader gender inequalities or primarily frame empowerment as individual self-realization.

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