



**'Monsters' vs. 'Angels': A Feminist Approach to the Film Brave  
Through the Character of Merida**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Brave (2012) is an animated film produced by Pixar Animation Studios and released by Walt Disney pictures. Set in the fictional medieval times of Scotland, the story follows the journey of Merida, a rebellious young girl who strives to dismantle oppressive social norms and conventional attitudes upheld by her mother. The way in which the film presents powerful feminist ideologies is discussed by providing insight into the importance of solidarity between women, repressive gender stereotypes and the cyclical nature of oppression within the patriarchal social structure. The concept of gender and its complexities are explored within this study to identify dominant patriarchal ideologies that are marginalizing and discriminatory towards women. The trajectory of Merida which is representative of the struggles of women within the patriarchal social structure is analysed while focusing on the mother-daughter relationship. This research aims to present the oppressiveness of socially constructed gender identities through the challenges faced by Merida in her fight for freedom and self-expression. The feminist elements of the film are discussed based on the dichotomy of the 'angel' and the 'monster' highlighted by the theorists Gilbert and Gubar in *Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979). Furthermore, the theories of bell hooks, Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray are used to support the central argument.*

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## 1. Introduction

*Brave* (2012) is an animated film produced by Pixar Animation Studios and released by Walt Disney pictures. Set in the fictional medieval times of Scotland, the story follows the journey of Merida, a rebellious young girl who strives to dismantle oppressive social norms and conventional attitudes upheld by her mother, Elinor. Her journey towards attaining individual freedom by defying tradition marks a paradigm shift within the Disney film industry. As cited by Morrison (n.d.), "the construction of Disney's heroines has become a controversial site for discussion in terms of stereotyped femininity and sexuality following the demands of a pervasive patriarchal system" (p. 7). However, *Brave* (2012) challenges such stereotypes by starring a young woman who deviates from her socially imposed identity. Merida's character is a direct contrast to other Disney heroines that are modeled on unrealistic, conventional ideals of femininity. Hence, this film revolutionizes a genre that is governed by patriarchal understandings of gender and sexuality by providing a feminist lens towards understanding female protagonists in Disney films. Accordingly, feminism can be defined as the "struggle to end sexist oppression" (hooks, 1984, p. 51) and the attempt to subvert systems of domination emerging from racial, gender and class biases. The way in which the film presents powerful feminist ideologies is discussed by providing insight into the oppression of women by women themselves, importance of solidarity between women and repressive gender stereotypes perpetuated by patriarchy. The element of magic and fantasy employed in the film helps to bring out the themes effectively. Elinor and Merida grow through their experiences and acquire a deeper level of understanding which allows them to break free from the rigid identities assigned for women within the patriarchal society. Merida's determination to pursue her own hopes and desires despite the many challenges she has to overcome becomes the driving force of the film. The trajectory of

Merida in her struggle for freedom is analysed while focusing on the mother-daughter relationship. The dichotomy of the 'angel' and the 'monster' theorized by Gilbert and Gubar in their ground-breaking text *Mad Woman in the Attic* (1979) is the primary source through which the feminist elements of the film are discussed. Furthermore, the theories of bell hooks, Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray are used to support the feminist ideologies analysed in this research. The need to dismantle socially constructed identities of women that confine and destroy their individuality is the central argument of the study which is explored with reference to the feminist elements in the film *Brave* (2012).

## 2. Materials and Methods

A textual analysis of the film *Brave* was conducted based on a subjective ontological perspective. The main research problem addressed in this research is whether the concept of gender can be seen as a discursive construct that marginalizes and oppresses women within the patriarchal social structure. This idea is examined based on the victimization of Merida and Elinor under a society that maintains and perpetuates rigid norms and conventions. Aspects such as the narrative structure, sounds, genre, characterization, themes, setting, language and dialogues will be analysed in order to identify the ways in which discursive and hierarchical ideologies of gender, sex and patriarchy contain women within their culturally constructed identities. Moreover, these elements will help to identify the socio-political, cultural and historical context the film is set in and its implications to this study. The limitations of conducting a textual analysis will be resolved through a visual analysis. This method will help to focus on aspects such as cinematography, angle, lighting, directing, editing, composition, and actions in order to understand how different characters, situations and spaces have been represented. This research is a non-positivist and qualitative study that is based on the

ontological assumption that patriarchy exists and that it is a biased social system that privileges men over women. Moreover, it also assumes that the concept of gender is constructed through hegemonic discourses and power hierarchies and that gender is fluid and multifaceted. A constructivist epistemological stance has been adopted to understand how the concept of gender is subjectively experienced and constructed. A feminist theoretical framework has been used to analyse the various nuances of gender that can be identified in the film *Brave*. The theories of Gilbert and Gubar, Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir and bell hooks are some of the central concepts referred to within the research.

### 3. Results and Discussion

Merida's character becomes a powerful embodiment of feminist ideologies that challenge patriarchal notions of femininity. She strives to escape the confinements of her identity as a woman by dismantling gender stereotypes. Her struggle can be explained through the dilemma faced by her in fulfilling her personal desires while functioning within her identity as a woman subjected to the patriarchal rule. This conflict between the self and the society can be analysed based on Gilbert and Gubar's theory of the two antithetical identities that society has attributed to women. Within the limited world women can inhabit they are given two options; "if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 2023). Merida refuses to be categorized into these extremes. Instead, she sheds the socially constructed identity she was forced to embrace and forms one that is untouched by convention, stereotypical beliefs and social restrictions. Merida's wild, free-spirited nature and her rebelliousness helps to bring out the tension between the traditional, submissive Disney princesses symbolizing the 'angel' and the progressive, industrious and strong princesses like Merida who run the risk of becoming a 'monster' in the eyes of society. The legend Elinor narrates

to Merida to persuade her to come to terms with her impending betrothal echoes how following one's own path will bring destruction. In a male dominated society, women who act against social norms will have to suffer the consequences as Elinor points out when she asks Merida if she is "willing to pay the price your freedom will cost" (*Brave*, 2012). The declarations of war by the clans if Merida refuses marriage is metaphorical of the conflict created within society when women refuse to adhere to social norms. This is also linked to how women who defy convention are seen as 'monsters' and are alienated. Moreover, Fergus' insatiable thirst to kill Mor'du and his attempt to kill Elinor in her bear form even though by mistake, is an example that highlights the merciless nature of society that penalizes those who violate social norms. Additionally, Mor'du becomes a monster and is preyed upon by society because he refuses to follow tradition. Mor'du being a young prince generalizes the idea of how anyone irrespective of gender who goes against conventions is victimized. Nevertheless, Merida does not lose sight of her goals in life despite the many obstacles she faces primarily as a woman within a male-dominated society. This shows how women have the strength and power to change their fate by taking control of their own lives, thereby dismantling stereotypical gender identities. Furthermore, Merida has a strong personality and possesses the ability to think independently. She gathers the courage to make decisions on her own and she takes responsibility for her actions as seen through how Merida is determined to correct her mistakes by reversing the spell that turned her mother into a bear. Merida's unwavering self-efficacy and belief in the possibility of change and freedom shatters the fatalistic notions that continue to confine and oppress women. Therefore, as Saladino states, "Merida's story works to revise the perceptions of women's roles in society, by illustrating ways to counter the dominant ideology" (2014, p. 89). Throughout the film

Merida is challenging patriarchal values that oppress women. Merida's perseverance in resisting social norms and fighting for what she believes in gives a strong feminist message.

The pattern of domination that results in the continual oppression of women within the patriarchal social structure is another aspect through which the feminist elements in the film *Brave* can be analysed. Elinor appears to be a conservative woman who follows rigid social practices and expectations. The concept of performativity discussed by Judith Butler becomes applicable to the way in which Elinor performs the role of a conventional woman. As Butler argues, "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, 2006, p. 45). Elinor has been conditioned into 'being' a woman through repetitive practices of her gender role. Her behaviour is a result of culturally constructed identities and gender performances that mould one into a 'woman'. The way in which she tries to feminize Merida by drawing her away from physical activities such as horse riding, archery, rock climbing, etc. that she believes are more masculine, exemplifies how women like Elinor carry "patriarchal definitions of femininity" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 2031). She is conditioned by society to think and behave in a way that allows her to fit into the role ascribed for a woman. Hence, she strives to become the gentle, submissive and domesticated woman or the 'angel' that society expects her to be. The tension in the mother-daughter relationship comes to the forefront when Elinor attempts to thrust social norms and conventions that she has internalized upon Merida. In doing so, she becomes a representative of the patriarchal society that inscribes certain values, behaviour and norms upon women. The way in which women oppress women themselves is powerfully brought out through this. Moreover, the transformation of Elinor into a

bear is symbolic of how oppression breeds oppression. It depicts how the rigorous attempt taken by society to contain women within the identity of the 'angel', ironically drives them to become the 'monster'. In following the rigid social norms perpetuated by the patriarchy, Elinor stifles her own creativity as well as her daughter's. This results in the dehumanization of the self and the exercise of violence on others which is symbolized through how Elinor loses her true self and gradually embraces the animalistic qualities of a bear, which leads to her almost physically hurting Merida. Merida herself refers to her mother as a "beast" (*Brave*, 2012) when expressing her refusal to marry, elucidating the destruction of humanity within the patriarchal social structure. Hence, this can be linked to the way in which "patriarchal socialization literally makes women sick, both physically and mentally" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979). Elinor in her bear form is a symbolic representation of the demonization of women through 'patriarchal socialization'. They are either consciously or unconsciously forced to alter their ways of thinking and behavioral patterns in order to conform to the socially constructed female identities. Therefore, Elinor too suffers from what Gilbert and Gubar (1979) claims to be a 'sickness' or the results of having to transform herself into a woman who functions within the parameters of socially imposed gender roles. The lack of choice and freedom of Merida as a princess and as a woman trapped within a patriarchal society is intensified by illuminating how Elinor as a mother oppresses her own daughter. Elinor loses her sense of compassion as a result of the incessant mistreatment she endures as a woman. The moment where Merida says "I will never be like you [Elinor]" (*Brave*, 2012) and cuts the tapestry portraying their family in half, dividing herself from Elinor symbolizes Merida's break from tradition, social norms and gendered expectations that form a cycle of oppression for women that is continued through generations. These actions put Merida at the risk of being "branded as a

monster” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979) by society since her fierce retaliation is a deviation from the patriarchal notion of femininity. However, she is able to rise against these challenges as made evident in the film. It is in defying hegemonic practices that Merida finds the strength to take control of her own life and pursue her desires without passively accepting the role ascribed to her by society. While Elinor ironically becomes a perpetrator of oppression by agreeing to follow patriarchal ideologies, Merida finds the strength and courage to end the “pattern of domination” (hooks, 1984, p.52). The conflict between the binary of the ‘angel’ and the ‘monster’ is resolved at the end when Elinor is turned back into her own body but also into someone with a transformed perspective. This brings out the feminist perception of how changing the attitudes of women and understanding their position in society as oppressive are important to achieve liberation. Thus, the theme of oppression of women that results in the creation of a cycle of violence is examined through the relationship between Elinor and Merida.

The sexual stereotyping of women within the patriarchal social structure is a theme that can also be analysed through the mother-daughter relationship. Accordingly, Elinor who has been conditioned to accept the role assigned to her by society and Merida who suffers within an environment that stifles her creative and vibrant personality can be discussed based on the oppressive stereotype of the ‘angel’ and the ‘monster’ (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979). The way in which Elinor attempts to raise her daughter according to dominant societal expectations is established at the beginning of the film itself. Elinor fails to identify the unique qualities Merida possesses and attempts to mould her into what she believes to be the standard identity of a woman. Interestingly, the treatment of women by the male community is revolutionized in the film by showing how male characters also emulate feminist ideas. Merida’s father is open-minded unlike her

mother and is supportive of Merida’s interests as seen through how he presents her a bow and arrows and says “learning to fight is essential” (*Brave*, 2012). Furthermore, Fergus does not force Merida to get married and his actions reflect the changing social perceptions about women. This also shows how Merida’s rebellious nature was shaped by the influence of her father. However, Elinor’s disapproval of Fergus supporting Merida is reflected when she says that Merida is “a lady” (*Brave*, 2012) and that women should not use weapons. Elinor’s words echo stereotypical gender identities where women are expected to be docile, domestic beings whereas men are expected to be adventurous, brave or even violent. This submissiveness attributed to femininity is equated to the image of an ‘angel’. Hence, young women like Merida are compelled to embrace such marginal positions in order to be accepted by society or face the threat of chastisement. This sexual stereotyping of women is further examined through Merida’s role as a princess. As Butler theorizes, “gender is the cultural interpretation of sex” (Butler, 2006, p. 10). It is a construction that establishes a hierarchical relationship between men and women upon the basis of their biological sex. Gender becomes a concept that is construed in a way that marginalizes women and locates them in the periphery, while their male-counterpart always remains at the center. However, the way in which Merida regains authority over herself is reflective of the idea that the marginal position she occupies in her society becomes “a site of radical possibility, a space of resistance” (hooks, 1990, p. 341) through which she is able to challenge dominant patriarchal ideologies. Moreover, Beauvoir (1949) explains how social values are inscribed upon women thereby denouncing them of the agency over their own bodies. Furthermore, women are regarded as an “incidental being” with a “natural defectiveness” (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 33). Women are viewed as beings who should be refined by society to be made acceptable and able to perform their social roles. Thus,

the idea of women as the 'Other' discussed by Beauvoir can be highlighted through how Merida is shaped by the values imposed by society. She is groomed from a very young age to fulfil the duties of a wife and a mother. Society has declared that women are destined for nothing else but marriage, bearing and rearing of children and performing household activities. Marriage symbolizes oppression for Merida because it marks the "the end of the world" (Brave, 2012) of joy, self-expression and freedom Merida enjoys despite certain restrictions. Merida is taught how to hide and destroy her 'true' personality to form one that is acceptable within the patriarchal society. Thus, she is forced to embrace the identity of the 'angel' that Gilbert and Gubar (1979) discusses. Moreover, Elinor is also trapped within her role as a woman. The way in which Elinor is victimized makes the audience sympathize with her character. Her inability to denounce the social responsibilities thrust upon her is evident when she says "we can't run away from who we are" (Brave, 2012). Thus, women are conditioned to think that they are unable to exercise control over their lives and fight for their own freedom. The film powerfully reverses this through Merida's rebellion against the fate imposed on her by society and her journey to find liberation from oppressive social conventions.

The film further dismantles the dichotomy of the 'angel' and the 'monster' by showing how Merida and Elinor are able to form an identity for themselves that is uninfluenced by rigid social rules and beliefs. At the beginning of the film, Elinor seems to be in control of Merida's fate as shown through how she instigates Merida's engagement ceremony by sending invitations to the lords to present their sons as suitors. The way in which she justifies her actions by saying how "this is what you have been preparing for your whole life" (Brave, 2012) reflects how women are trained to be domesticated and submissive. The suffering of women whose dreams and desires are not recognized is evident in how

Merida has to face many challenges to achieve freedom from the confines of her role as a woman. The power dynamic between the mother and the daughter change when Merida assumes control of her own fate and act towards transforming her life for the better. The active role played by Merida in changing her destiny reiterates feminist notions of female empowerment and independence. As Salih mentions, the concept of agency was of central importance to Butler as "it signifies the opportunities for subverting the law against itself for radical, political ends" (Salih, 2006, p. 55). Merida redefines her status as a woman by 'subverting the law' of her contemporary society that discriminated and oppressed women based on discursively constructed gender biases. She regains power over her own body by refusing to abide by conventions. She fights to secure her freedom which she sees as an important part of her destiny. At the end of the film, Merida succeeds in securing her mother's freedom as well as her own as symbolized when both characters are shown to be riding their horses over the hills. The image of their hair flowing in the wind during this instance marks the carefree and joyous life they have formed for themselves. Moreover, *Brave* stands in contrast with other films where women are in fact portrayed as 'angels' such as the heroines in *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, who are in need of constant guidance and are to be 'saved' by men. Given the fact that the audience of these films primarily consists of children or young adults, the decision to highlight the message of female empowerment marks a significant development within the genre of Disney animations. Merida is an independent, brave young girl who is portrayed as strong, determined and skilful. The film powerfully reverses the docility and vulnerability attributed to women through oppressive gender identities, such as through the instance where Merida walks into the midst of the lords and asks them to let people "follow their hearts" (Brave, 2012). Furthermore, the young suitors agreeing to

this suggestion universalizes the oppressive nature of social norms and gendered identities. The incidents where Elinor and Merida save themselves from being attacked by Mor'du, Merida preventing Fergus and the others from killing Elinor in her bear form and Elinor saving Merida from Mor'du at the end of the film are examples that reflect how women are physically as well as emotionally strong. They are resilient, brave and self-reliant. This becomes a clear example of how "sex is as culturally constructed as gender" (Butler, 2006, p. 9). Additionally, while previous Disney movies were always centred on love and a male hero saving the helpless princess, Merida's story revolves around a woman's struggle to fight for freedom by resisting patriarchal values. The focus is on the mother-daughter relationship rather than on a romance. Merida inspires Elinor to become a stronger woman by disrupting socially constructed identities. Her shedding of oppressive traditions is symbolized in the instance where Elinor in her bear form removes her crown and learns to adapt to her situation. Moreover, the development of the mother-daughter relationship is brought out when Merida uses her archery skills to fish and teaches Elinor who has turned into a bear how to use her natural abilities to fend for herself. By understanding how the aspects of her daughter that she did not approve of before helped them survive, Elinor is able to recognize Merida for her strength of character. The transformation Elinor undergoes reflects the potential of women who are imprisoned within the image of the 'angel'. As Morante (2016) states;

Merida and Elinor shift traditional narratives that eclipse women behind the deeds of male heroes; they avoid being silenced and powerless, as their predecessors were, by challenging and transgressing the long-established representations of femininity and female relations (p. 50).

The dichotomy of the 'angel' and the 'monster' can be used to portray Merida and Elinor as women who break free from such

marginalizing stereotypes and embraces an identity that embodies freedom, creativity and self-expression. Thus, the film renegotiates the representation of female characters in Disney films by providing a revolutionary portrayal of a heroine.

The idea of femininity as a social construction that oppresses women is discussed through how Merida blurs the boundaries between conventional ideals of masculinity and femininity. In asking the question "what is a woman" (1949, p. 32), Beauvoir argues that possessing a uterus alone does not qualify one as a woman in the eyes of society. Elinor's attempts to 'make' Merida a woman by forcing her to recite poetry, study about the kingdom and learn to play musical instruments exemplify certain other skills and abilities Merida needs to display in order to be accepted as a woman within the patriarchy. The words, "a princess does not chortle, does not stuff her gob, rises early, is compassionate, patient, cautious, clean, and above all a princess strives for perfection" (Brave, 2012) uttered by Elinor elucidates how women are objectified as perfect, gentle beings or 'angels'. These are practices that quell the lively nature of Merida and destroy her individuality. Thus the way in which "one is not born, but rather becomes, [a] woman" (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 330) is clearly brought out through Elinor's tedious attempts to 'refine' her daughter. However, Merida's interests such as archery, rock climbing, horse riding, use of swords and exploring the woods places her character outside socially constructed gender identities. While Merida performs activities that are conventionally regarded as masculine, she does not completely reject activities that are encouraged for women within her society. Instead, her actions reflect the importance of dismantling gender binaries. For instance, Merida stitching the tapestry together to save her mother from turning into a bear permanently does not position her within the stereotypical image of a woman, but rather makes her a stronger, resourceful and independent character. It is interesting to note that she performs this

while riding her horse. This is symbolic of how her character deconstructs the dichotomy between femininity and masculinity. In showing how she is skilled in activities that are considered masculine as well as feminine, the film portrays Merida as a woman who denounces the extremes of the 'angel' and the 'monster'. Furthermore, the objects associated with Merida's character and her appearance supports the argument of how femininity is a social construction that creates sexual stereotypes. The symbolism of the bow and arrows, sword, Merida's attire, body and hair are some of the images that portray her character as a strong embodiment of feminism. The instance where Merida interrupts the contest between the suitors is a climatic point in the film where the theme of freedom and independence of women is discussed. Merida clearly diffuses the idea of women being docile, obedient and dependant on men by saying "I'll be shooting for my own hand" (*Brave*, 2012). Moreover, Merida defeating Fergus when preventing him from killing Elinor in her bear form clearly highlights the physical prowess of women that is undermined through the sexual stereotyping of their bodies. The restrictions Elinor places on Merida- such as her view that "a princess should not have weapons" (*Brave*, 2012)- ironically proves to be futile by showing how it saves Elinor's life. Merida's attire becomes another marker of her socially constructed identity as a woman. She is forced into a tight dress accentuating her body in preparation for the ceremony of presenting suitors. Thus, her attire becomes "an allegory for her oppression" (Morante, 2016, p.58) and it is symbolic of how women are forced into a socially constructed role that persecutes them. Her suffocation reflected through the words "I can't breathe... I can't move" (*Brave*, 2012) can be paralleled to the imprisonment of women's creativity, both physical and mental. Contrasting to Merida's objections, Elinor declares that her dress is "perfect" (*Brave*, 2012) which shows how she unconsciously perpetuates stereotyping discourses on women, their bodies and

personalities. Merida's actions of tearing the dress to allow free movement and comfort is metaphorical of her fight against oppressive notions of femininity. Furthermore, the significance of Merida's bright red, unruly hair becomes a powerful indicator of her rebellious nature. It can also be contrasted with the neatly arranged and well-kept hair of other Disney princesses and that of Elinor. Moreover, Merida's body which is not hypersexualized also shatters the sexual stereotyping of women. She is given realistic body proportions and her face is freckled unlike that of other Disney princesses such as Snow White and Cinderella who are presented as slender, smooth and fair skinned. The moment where Merida hurts her face while shooting an arrow during the contest is a poignant example of how she damages her beauty, which is considered an "essential quality of femaleness in patriarchy" (Tóth, 2017). Therefore, the visual appearance of Merida and the objects used by her are employed to criticise the traditional ideas of beauty, femininity and gendered identities that impound women within the patriarchal social structure. *Brave* (2012) becomes a film that does not devalue femininity or try to replace it with masculinity like in the film *Mulan*, where the female protagonist impersonates a man to join the military forces. Merida's character shows how she is fighting to be respected as a woman and have the freedom to pursue her own desires regardless of gender. Thus, *Brave* (2012) becomes a celebration of her womanhood that is undefined by societal expectations or conventions.

The setting and the use of visual imagery are central to the discussion of the dichotomy of the 'angel' and the 'monster' highlighted in the film. The castle becomes a space where Merida is subjected to the rigid conventions of society which inhibits her creativity and vibrancy. It is ironic how the castle that is generally associated with refinement and royalty becomes a site that breeds repression and discrimination towards women. In contrast, the woods Merida escapes to

become a space for her to explore her own personality, grow through the challenges she faces and emerge as a mature young woman. This binary of the castle and the forest symbolizes the conflict between oppression and liberty that Merida experiences. This distinction of the two spaces can be linked to the dichotomy of the 'angel' and the 'monster' (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979). The social norms and gender stereotypes that are practiced within the walls of the castle stand for the socially constructed identity of the 'angel', alluding to the submissive and docile woman Merida is expected to become. The freedom of creative expression, emotional and physical liberation that Merida enjoys in the forest are sharply contradictory to the values instilled and practiced in the castle, thereby showing how Merida faces the risk of being branded as a 'monster' by crossing social boundaries. These polarities are dissolved in the film by showing how Merida develops into an independent woman. Merida's journey through the forest marks her transition from an impulsive young girl to a mature and understanding woman. Moreover, the cave with the ruins of the old kingdom can be considered a metaphor of the unconscious layer of the heroine's mind. It is within this cave that she understands her conflict with tradition and the patriarchal values that repress her. The inner turmoil she experiences is clearly brought out when she realizes how her actions contradict the social norms upheld by her community. Hence, the moment where Merida falls into the cave is a powerful visual representation of how she is reaching into the deep layers of her mind full of desires, anxieties, fears and hidden aspirations. The joyous ending where Elinor accepts her daughter for who she is and sheds her own biases can be paralleled to how Merida transforms her society into one that is open-minded, inclusive and supportive of the individual personalities of people, specifically of women. The film stresses on the idea that women should be free to make their own choices. Merida is seen as a strong woman who does what she wants and not what

society expects from her. Her rebellion against the fate imposed on her by society and her journey to find liberation from the oppressive social conventions that destroy her true nature shows how the film dismantles stereotypical gender roles practiced within the patriarchal social structure.

The idea of sisterhood and the importance of solidarity between women is another theme addressed in the film through the relationship between Merida and Elinor. Qiu (2009) cites Irigaray to argue that "patriarchy has... destroyed the most precious site of love and its fertility: the relationship between mother and daughter" (p. 34). The film uses the mother-daughter relationship to rebuild this 'site of love' in an effort to challenge hegemonic patriarchal discourses. The estrangement between Elinor and Merida is symbolic of how patriarchy alienates women from their own kind. The instance where Merida declares her frustration at the stables about having to be betrothed at a young age and the instance where Elinor talks to Fergus, instead of directly speaking to her daughter reflects how the lack of communication between Elinor and Merida seems to be the root cause of their tense relationship. Each wants the other to "listen" (*Brave*, 2012) but they are not able to share their feelings, anxieties and needs with each other. The loneliness of Merida and the lack of support provided by Elinor for her daughter reflect the absence of unity between women. As explained by Beauvoir, women remain isolated within society due to their fundamental attachment to men.

They live dispersed among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition, and social standing to certain men - fathers or husbands - more firmly than they are to other women (Beauvoir, 1949, p. 34).

Women lack the opportunity to unite themselves and create change. Elinor's

attachment to her social role is stronger than her understanding of her own daughter. She is constantly striving to fulfil her role as a mother by grooming her daughter to one day become her or the 'angel'; a woman who abides by social norms and stereotypical gender identities. Therefore, in addition to being subjected to different restrictions by Elinor and the patriarchal society, Merida suffers due to her alienation. However, asking for the spell to change her mother's attitudes shows how Merida believes in the possibility of a future where women can enjoy freedom of choice and expression while building a sense of sisterhood. She initiates the struggle for freedom within her community by breaking the pattern of oppression that marginalizes women while illuminating how the "feminist struggle can begin wherever an individual woman is" (hooks, 1984, p. 53). Merida is also able to help Elinor break free from repressive conventions and fight for liberation. It is made evident that Elinor is also a victim of society through the transformation she undergoes. When she magically turns into a bear, her inability to express herself and behave in the way that she believes is acceptable for a woman makes her realize how patriarchal ideologies repress women and destroy their agency to control their own lives. These experiences allow her to build a deeper connection with her daughter. The words "look inside, mend the bond" (*Brave*, 2012) uttered by the witch is suggestive of the need for solidarity between women. Hence, stitching back the tapestry symbolizes the mending of the bond of sisterhood and the strengthening of the relationship between Elinor and Merida. They reach a new level of understanding and maturity which paves the way for mutual growth. As cited by Qiu (2009), Irigaray argues that:

Women must love one another both as mothers, with a maternal love, and as daughters, with a filial love. Both of them.... Achieving, through their relations with each other, a path into infinity that is always open, in-finite (p. 35).

Both Merida and Elinor are able to unite by strengthening their maternal and filial affection towards each other. The mother-daughter relationship shows how two flawed characters undergo a process of change and develops an 'in-finite' connection that surpasses the restrictions placed upon them by the patriarchy. It is by uniting, understanding each other and helping each other that the spell is reversed and Elinor turns back into the human form. The alternate consequence of failing to mend the 'bond' is shown through how Mor'du remains a bear. The frieze of the four rulers split in two separating the prince who has turned into Mor'du, shows how there will be continual suffering in society due to divisions between people. It also emphasizes how oppressive social norms and practices grow stronger and deeper as a result. This fact is reiterated in the speech Merida delivers at the castle where she asks the lords to learn from the mistakes of the past and find ways to form a society that is liberating and nourishing for all, irrespective of gender. This also marks the moment where Elinor supports Merida and enters the path of achieving her own freedom and self-development by letting go of oppressive patriarchal ideologies. The growth of Merida and Elinor through self-awareness, maturity and understanding highlights how they are able to "break tradition" (*Brave*, 2012) and pave way for a new era of freedom. This trajectory of the two female characters can be linked to the title of the film *Brave*. Both women display great courage, determination and strength in their struggle to change fate.

#### 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the film *Brave* successfully dismantles the socially constructed identities of women that confine and compromise their individuality. The way in which Merida struggles to achieve liberation by changing her fate presents powerful feminist ideologies of the possibility for women to overthrow the tyrannical patriarchal rule.

The dichotomy of the 'angel' and the 'monster' discussed by Gilbert and Gubar provides a base to analyse the dilemma faced by both Merida and Elinor in attempting to embrace an identity that is devoid of social influences or conventions. Both characters are able to emerge free from these extremities of the identities that society constructs for women. They refuse to be marginalized and oppressed by prejudiced values propagated by the male-dominated society. The development of the mother-daughter relationship brings out the importance of solidarity between women and the need to dissolve repressive gender stereotypes, conventional beliefs and socio-cultural practices. Although portrayed as a conventional woman at the beginning of the film, Elinor becomes an open-minded woman who is able to adapt to change and learn from her experiences. Merida evolves into a mature, strong young woman from being a stubborn, impulsive young lady. The inspirational ending where the two female characters enjoy the freedom of their newly found identities solidifies the central argument of the study. Thus, *Brave* is richly embedded with feminist notions of identity that are explored through the protagonist, Merida, her relationship with Elinor and the obstacles they are confronted with in their journey for liberation.

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