



THE QUEERBAITING PRINCESSES: THE CASE OF *RAYA AND THE LAST DRAGON* AND DISNEY'S CONSISTENCY IN MAINTAINING HETERONORMATIVITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate Disney Princess latest release of animated movie, *Raya and the Last Dragon*, which despite of its popularity has invited debates about its possible sexual inclusivity content. The movie is analyzed using queer theory in order to explore the idea whether sexual inclusivity is appropriately portrayed, or the inclusivity is only subtly suggested as a form of queerbaiting. The main source of the data is Disney's animated movie *Raya and the Last Dragon*, while the secondary sources are previous studies discussing the movie and the portrayal of gender and sexuality in Disney Princess movies. The data is presented descriptively. The finding shows that the movie has suggested the existence of sexual inclusivity, by showing a promising non-heterosexual relationship; yet it is never visibly confirmed. This may have been Disney's marketing technique to queerbait the LGBTQ+ community and continuing Disney's long problematic history of preserving heteronormativity.

Keywords: *queer, queerbaiting, heteronormativity, Raya and the Last Dragon*

INTRODUCTION

For decades, Disney Princess has consistently become one of the most influential media franchises among children. The animated movies under the Disney Princess label, featuring young female protagonists, have been constantly watched and used to teach moral lessons to children. For generation to generation, these female protagonists have become the standard example of kindness, particularly among young girls. Despite their popularity, it is also undeniable that these animated movies have also gained constant criticism.

The lack of sexual representation is one of the concerns that is being voiced continuously to the Disney Princess franchise. Disney Princess has been problematic for maintaining the "damsel in distress" idea through its animated movies. The earlier Disney Princess are reduced into weak women, waiting to be saved by men and dreaming of a happy ending through the discovery of love and marriage (Latumeten, 2021). The problem is not only with Disney's persistent portrayal of weak woman protagonists, but also in the idea of how these young women can only obtain self-fulfillment through heterosexual relationship; in this case, by marrying a prince or a more capable male character.

Demands on a more inclusive representation of sexual orientations have been voiced to Disney for years now. The representation of a more diverse sexual representation is needed to create a more positive and a more tolerant vision towards the rights of the minority groups; the LGBTQ+ groups (Sánchez-Soriano & García-Jiménez, 2020). In addition, acceptance to the LGBTQ+ community has been made possible with the increase of its positive portrayal in the media (Steiner, Fejes, & Petrich, 1993). In the 2010s, the LGBTQ+ representation in programs for children has progressively increased. This is a significantly empowering act, because it was generally uncommon for children's program or media to represent the LGBTQ+ community

before. The fact that the Disney Princess franchise has yet to include a more inclusive sexual representation is the reason why Disney has been receiving a lot of criticism lately.

In general, most of the animated movies under the Disney Princess franchise have indeed focused more on presenting heterosexual relationships; a so-called ideal happy ending of a princess marrying a prince. However, it should be admitted that Disney has reduced the tendency to present such plot in its recent releases. Disney has offered strong women protagonists whose life experience is a lot more complex, and these characters have shown their capability to step out of Disney's regular "damsel in distress" narrative (Latumeten, 2021, p. 156).

Disney's latest addition to the Disney Princess line is one of those to resist the "damsel in distress" type of tale. In 2021, Disney released *Raya and the Last Dragon*. The animated movie introduced Raya, as an addition to the list of Disney's lead female protagonists, a new Disney Princess. The story of *Raya and the Last Dragon* takes place in the fantasy world of Kumandra, a place in which humankind and dragons used to live together in harmony. The visual of the movie pays homage to the culture of Southeast Asian countries. Raya is presented as a warrior princess journeying across Kumandra to save the dragons and humankind. While doing so, Raya is challenged by Namaari, her longtime nemesis.

Among the recent Disney Princess movies, *Raya and the Last Dragon* is included in those that do not reflect Disney's long-term history in maintaining heteronormative ideology. Specifically in this movie, Disney presents the idea of female protagonist and female antagonist characters end up saving each other, suggesting a different perspective of female characters not needing to be saved by male characters in times of trouble (Latumeten, 2021). Both female antagonist and female protagonist in this movie are given voices and capabilities to go after what they want, instead of being reduced into passive agents or characters that only conform to the traditional gender roles.

With the storyline suggesting something completely new to Disney's classic happily ever after ideals, there has been debate whether Raya and Namaari have already representing the need for gay princesses. Yet when it comes to Raya and Namaari's connection, the movie presents nothing but vagueness. With the absence of potential romantic interest for the main protagonist, a lot starts to wonder whether the bond between the female protagonist character and the female antagonist character actually shows Disney's first ever portrayal of a non-heterosexual relationship.

This paper explores the idea of Disney using its latest Princess movie, *Raya and the Last Dragon*, as a form of queerbaiting. From the very first release of the Disney Princess character in 1937 until today, Disney has yet to publicly display inclusivity in the representation of the sexual orientation through its Disney Princess franchise. With the increase of a positive portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community in the media, it should be considered that there might be possibilities of Disney—up until now—still taking a part in maintaining heteronormativity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Queer theory is a strong reaction upon the traditional heterosexuality as the privileged form of sexuality. It challenges the main idea of heterosexuality being the default or the only "normal" form of sexuality. It challenges the stigmatization towards homosexuality and queerness. One of the main arguments in queer theory is based on Judith Butler's view of sexuality. To Butler (1999), not only gender, but sexuality is—in fact—a social construct. Therefore sexuality—like gender—is something performed, and it is not a rigid biological reality. Queer theory challenges heteronormativity, and urges to push the idea that heterosexuality should not remain superior when it is compared to either homosexuality or bisexuality. In one of her famous essays about sexuality entitled "Thinking Sex", Gayle Rubin also fights against the idea of one sexual behavior being the "good" or the "natural". In the

essay, Rubin (1984) points out how Western culture is responsible for what she called “sex negativity”; a view that suggests sex as a destructive force. Sex negativity claims that sex is good only when it is performed in a heterosexual marriage; with reproduction as its main goal. Therefore, all sexual behavior outside of what considered as the “good sex” is assumed to be “bad”; or simply wrong, in a way. “Thinking Sex” is widely accepted as one of the founding texts for the queer theory.

The rise of queer theory has created a more active and positive portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community in the media. As mentioned previously in the background, this positive portrayal is crucial in order to grow acceptance and support to the sexual minorities. According to Butler (1991), heteronormativity has been reinforced through social and cultural conditioning with the help of the media, to the point that it has created what is called homo-invisibility. This had affected how the LGBTQ+ community was represented in the media; from being stereotypically represented with certain characteristics, to being disadvantaged and sometimes being completely non-existent. A call to end homo-invisibility has become even more intense, for it is also a way to put a stop to the concerning discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community (Freakley, 2019). Queer theory and activism has made it possible for the media to be more aware of how important sexual inclusivity is.

Unfortunately, the case of representing the LGBTQ+ community becomes heated in the face of queerbaiting. Businesses and media are aware of the LGBTQ+ representation impact; how the more inclusive they are, the more favored they would be (Ellis & Zafar, 2022). Therefore, in order to reach a more inclusive market, queerbaiting is oftentimes used as a marketing technique. Queerbaiting is a suggestion of the possible LGBTQ+ plot within cultural products; it can be found in books, video games, movies, series, and others. However, to avoid a strong protest from the conservative consumers, these suggested plots never visibly happen (Brennan, 2016). The term “queerbaiting” itself appeared in the 2010s (Brennan, 2019). Queerbaiting has been used by many to appeal to more progressive audiences, yet still minimizing the risk of losing the conservative ones. In other words, queerbaiting does not portray sexual inclusivity. In addition, Sánchez-Soriano and García-Jiménez (2020, p. 98) add that queerbaiting helps maintaining “hegemonic heteronormativity within audiovisual products” and it also hides sexual diversities.

The Disney Princess franchise has been receiving a lot of criticism when it comes to the portrayal of gender and sexuality. In presenting the image of gender, for instance, Disney Princess tends to show the stereotypical traditional gender roles. Though in its recent movies, Disney Princess has managed to show a consistent attempt to move away from the image of the traditional gender to the non-stereotypical gender qualities (England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011). Reilly (2016) also documented the evolution among the Disney Princesses; he categorized the princesses into four categories. The categories are: 1.) prettiness punished, 2.) sacrificial lambs, 3.) exoticized ethnics and 4.) mighty maidens breaking free. Reilly notes that the evolution leaning towards leaving the traditional gender roles, and it shows a promising trajectory for the future princesses with a space to grow with progress. It is important to highlight that Reilly also notes how Disney still struggles when it comes to representing diversity. The diversity that Reilly points out, however, only concerns on the racial diversity and it has yet to touch the sexual diversity.

Following the portrayal of gender, Disney is also problematic when it comes to its portrayal of sexual representation. As mentioned, Disney tends to be consistent to preserve the traditional gender roles into their characters, and in presenting sexual representation, Disney also tends to stick into the traditional. Disney seems to appreciate its conservative audience compares to the queer viewers (Moore, 2020). Disney has the tendency to play safe when it comes to the representation of queer characters. Either Disney presents the queer character with a message of a wider and a more universal individual freedom, or shows the character by not

having an actual sexuality to begin with (The Economist (Online), 2017). Meanwhile, recent research by Nabila and Surwati (2021) notes how Disney has managed to display a representation of LGBTQ+ through *Raya and the Last Dragon*, following its previous failed attempt in *Frozen II*. By using a semiotic analysis to the animated movie, the research concludes that the use of the official pride flag colors in the movie as one of the main findings, enough to show how the movie has successfully represented the LGBTQ+ community. Other findings include the existence of the same-sex relationship in the movie and the rejection of the traditional gender roles by some of the characters in the movie. This paper takes a different direction with the previous research on *Raya and the Last Dragon*. Instead of seeing the movie in its so-called success to portray sexual inclusivity, the perspective offered by this paper is how ironically Disney has used queerbaiting as a marketing technique without actually pushing forward sexual inclusivity in the movie's storyline.

METHODOLOGY

This is a descriptive study. This paper uses one of the animated movies in the Disney Princess franchise, *Raya and the Last Dragon*, as the main source of the research data. The secondary sources in this research are previous studies discussing the movie and the portrayal of gender and sexuality in Disney Princess movies. The analysis in this research is based on queer theory. The findings and discussion of this paper are to be presented descriptively as well.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Similar to the previous Disney Princess movies, in *Raya and the Last Dragon*, a female character takes the lead as the main protagonist. Raya continues the family legacy to protect the dragon gem, as the princess of Heart. As the story progresses, she soon meets her enemy, Namaari. Namaari is introduced as someone who is just as capable as Raya, especially in martial arts. Though before suggesting Raya and Namaari as enemies, the movie shows how both characters bond with one another over their fascination with the dragons and how both young Raya and young Namaari believes that the world will become a better place once humans and the dragon live together in harmony again. Nabila and Purwati (2021, p. 17) perceive this particular scene as both characters hypothetically showing romantic interest to one another.

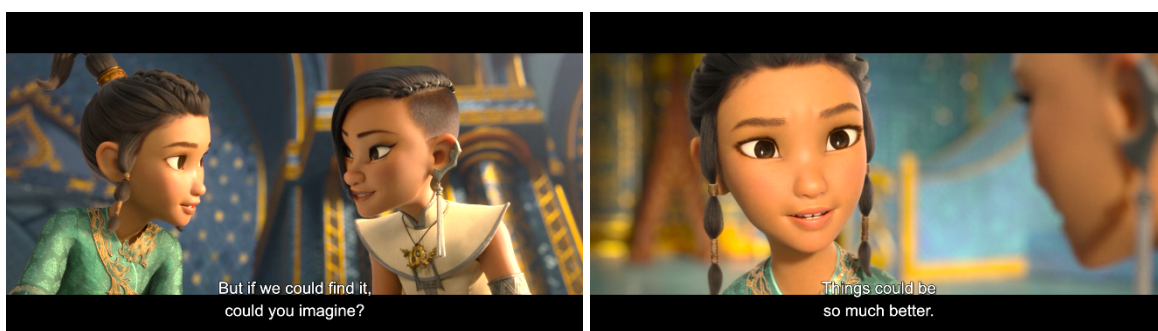


Figure 1. Raya and Namaari talking about the dragons
Source: from *Raya and the Last Dragon*, frame 00:14:26 to 00:14:34

One of the possible reasons that may have created an idea of Raya and Namaari being queers is how both characters are presented differently as adults. Physically, Raya is presented as an average height Southeast Asian girl, with a slenderer figure, yet still muscular because of her martial arts training. On the other hand, Namaari is noticeably taller than Raya, well-muscled and gives off a tough image by having a side shave cut. Viewers have appreciated how recently Disney is aware of the variety types of bodies and no longer portrays single body type

for girls in its Disney Princess franchise. Both Raya and Namaari are depicted as two strong opposing forces capable of taking each other down, despite their differences in physical built.



Figure 2. Raya and Namaari profile shots
Source: <https://disney.fandom.com/>

Yet the fact that Disney chooses to display Raya and Namaari differently in physique but almost similar in the complexity of their personality somehow has left a room for vagueness. Neither Raya nor Namaari truly has villainous intentions, both characters fight one another as their ways to fight for their people because they both are leaders. They are both shown as strong and vulnerable characters at the same time. This has left a space for viewers to speculate, whether a romantic direction could bloom between the main protagonist and main antagonist. Some fans have taken this ambiguity to insert their own interpretation into thinking that these two could potentially be an item.

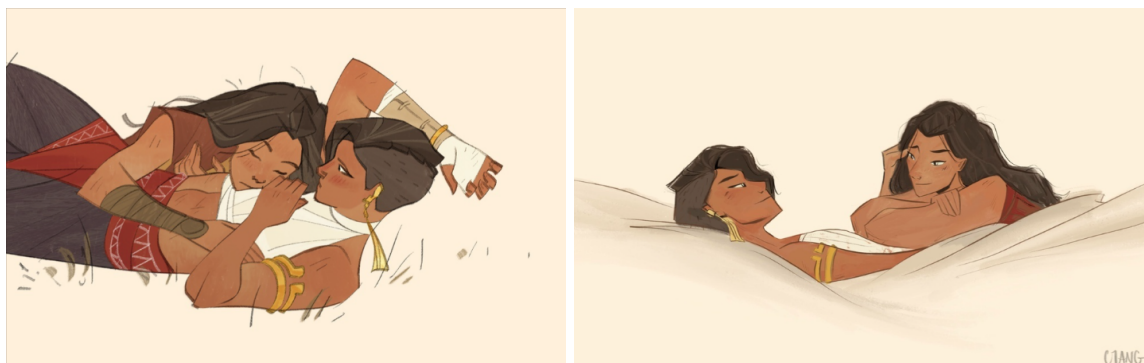


Figure 3. Some examples of Raya and Namaari's fanart
Source: <https://www.inprnt.com/gallery/ctang/raya-and-namaari/>

In the case of Namaari, viewers are easy to assume that she is in the list of Disney's hypothetical gay villains, because there is no clear explanation of her sexuality. Though never publicly addressed by Disney, a lot of research has shown Disney's tendency to queer-coding its villains. Queer-coding is a strategy used by creators to introduce a character as being queer by giving them strikingly queer-associated behavior and visual depiction, without explicitly stating that they are queers. Disney has received a lot of criticism on queer-coding some villains; like Scar from *The Lion King* (1994) (Caballero, 2022), Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* (1989)—who is claimed to be based on a drag queen, Captain Hook from *Peter Pan* (1953), and some others (Adelia, 2021). Visually presented as a warrior and in an image that is slightly more masculine compared to Raya, obviously it is easy to assume that Namaari is another one to be included in Disney's gay villains list. This is also supported by Robinson (2021), who specifically stated that Namaari's physical image is "intentionally designed to catch the eye of a queer audience".

Indeed, Disney Princesses have moved past the idea of having a romantic interest at the end, and have focused more on the development of the character. In recent releases of the Disney Princess movies, Disney leans towards showing dominant female characters who do not wait to be rescued by male characters. In movies like *Moana* (2016), for example, no romantic interest is being introduced to the main protagonist. It is safe to assume that *Raya and the Last Dragon* might be included in those movies focusing more on the complexity of the plot.

However, the fact that Disney does not concentrate on pushing forward the classic princess-meets-prince storylines raises question about its attitude towards the sexual minorities. Is it true that heterosexual agenda is the only possible option for the Disney Princess franchise? Since when it comes to romantic relationship of its characters, Disney either suggests heterosexuality or does not include it into its plot completely. Disney actively puts forward the heterosexual agenda, yet at the same time remains silent about the homosexual agenda.

In the case of *Raya and the Last Dragon*, the casts may also contribute to the idea of the movie suggesting the possibility of the characters being Disney Princess' first ever gay princesses. The voice actor for the character Raya, Kelly Marie Tran, specifically mentioned that her interpretation of Raya and Namaari's relationship is something "more than platonic". Even though Disney has never officially confirmed it (Robinson, 2021). Tran mentions that viewers could come up with any conclusion regarding to the relationship between Raya and Namaari, but she personally decided that there are "some romantic feelings going on" between the two characters (Russian, 2021). In addition, the selection of one of the voice actors for this animated movie has also made a significant queer history for Disney. Disney has casted Patti Harrison to voice the chief of Tail. According to Chichizola (2021), the selection of this openly transgender performer to voice one of the characters, has become a significant history for Disney's queer audiences. Even though no on-screen representation of the LGBTQ+ appears so far, this is considered to be a step forward for a conservative major studio like Disney.

Thus, with the casts suggesting possibilities of *Raya and the Last Dragon* representing the viewers' long request of queer representation, the fresh plot of woman saving woman offered by the story may invite the probability of Raya and Namaari's bond being seen as romantic. For instance, Nabila and Surwati (2021, p. 18) interprets how Raya and Namaari's interpersonal communication shows their emotional attraction to one another.



Figure 4. Raya and Namaari's conflict resolution
Source: from *Raya and the Last Dragon*, frame 01:23:59 to 01:28:09

This can be seen more specifically as the story progresses to its climax, as seen in the previous figure. The conflict resolution between the protagonist and the antagonist are displayed in ways that may invite the viewers to make assumptions about the two women having “some romantic feelings going on”.

Finally, with Disney's zero response to the viewers' claim of *Raya* and *Namaari* being its first queer princesses, it is easy to accuse Disney of queerbaiting through *Raya and the Last Dragon*. The movie has presented a plot and scenes that may have suggested the existence of a possible non-heterosexual relationship, yet it is never visibly confirmed. The additional comment by the main cast about *Raya* and *Namaari*'s “more than platonic” relationship has also further supported the view that this comment was mentioned so the movie appeals to queer viewers. The selection of a transwoman as one of the voice actors for this movie also may have been one of the strategies used to suggest that Disney has progressed into sexual inclusivity. As mentioned by Moore (2020), Disney has been playing safe by showing queer characters in a subtle way; disguised or vague enough to be unnoticeable. This gives Disney enough openings to queerbait the LGBTQ+ community into believing the company has stepped into inclusivity and diversity of representation, without jeopardizing the conservative audiences.

In addition, it becomes more disturbing when queerbaiting is used in a problematic franchise like Disney Princess, which for decades has been responsible in maintaining heteronormativity to its loyal viewers. Disney Princess franchise so far has only been portraying either successful loving heterosexual relationships, or not suggesting any relationships at all. If sexual inclusivity is indeed what Disney Princess aims for, the job is simple; it should be able to portray homosexuality and/or bisexuality positively as it has been positively portraying heterosexuality. Otherwise, Disney Princess will always be accused of preserving heteronormative ideology.

CONCLUSION

For years, Disney Princess has gained strong protest about the plots of its movies. In line with the emergence of gender theory and queer theory, Disney Princess has long been criticized for its portrayal of gender roles and sexual orientations. Though credits must be given to Disney for slowly evolving—moving into a more positive portrayal of genders and opening rooms for complexity of characters outside a mere pursuit of a heterosexual relationship. Yet, it is still pressed for the fact that sexual inclusivity has yet to be seen, even in the latest release of the princess character. This is upsetting, considering that the media has moved into showing a more positive image of the LGBTQ+ community; due to the attempt of creating a more tolerant understanding towards the sexual minorities. The newest addition to the princess line-up has not answered the demand for gay princesses; icons needed by the young queers to feel represented and to feel a sense of relatability. At the end of the day, although it may have heavily suggested queer possibilities, *Raya and the Last Dragon* is not Disney's queer-friendly animated movies. The queer-related content in the movie may have only been Disney's queerbaiting agenda, to appear more positively in the LGBTQ+ community.

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