Deconstructing Otherness and Gendered Power: A Feminist Discourse Analysis Of Judy Hopps in Disney'S *Zootopia* (2016)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the portrayal of identity and gendered power through the female character Judy Hopps from Disney's Zootopia (2016). The study employs theories of Simone de Beauvior's "Otherness" and Rosemarie Tong's Liberal Feminism as theoretical orientation. Feminist critical discourse analysis is used as a method where CDA analyzes the ways Judy Hops is portrayed in relation to societal expectations of women in animated or children's movie through language, narrative and dialogues. Judy dreams of becomg a police officer in Zootopia Police Department (ZPD), a career in law enforcement which is a male-dominated organization. This alters the stereotypical roles that are usually assigned to female characters in animated/children's movies. Her character reflects ideas from liberal feminism i.e. Independence, equality to men and excelling in career. However, the analysis of the study also reveals that Judy in the beginning is positioned as an "Other" by male-members and colleagues in both Zootopia Police Academy and Department. She is treated as different because of her specie (rabbit) and gender (woman). This highlights the barriers that she seeks to overcome. Moreover, this paper explore significant moments from the movie where power is redefined and challenged by Judy Hopps. It is done through an in-depth examination of dialogue exchanges, character roles, and language patterns. The findings reveal that Zootopia (2016) present a strong and empowering representation of a female protagonist who breaks the societal gender norms by focusing on the personal choices and efforts rather than changing a larger system. The study contributes in the field of gender studies and feminist media studies by showing that animated narratives can both reflect and construct discourses about gender, power, and belonging.

Keywords: *gender representation, liberal feminism, feminist critical discourse analysis, otherness, empowerment*

INTRODUCTION

The representation of women in the media especially in animated movies which are made for children or younger audiences, plays an important role in establishing the ideas about gender roles, identity, and power. Previously, female characters in animated movies have been depicted as submissive or passive, highly sensitivel and dependent on male characters for protection, direction, or romantic fulfillment. However, in recent years, there is a drastic shift in the represenation of female character, portrayed as independent, ambitious, and courageous. Disney's animated movie *Zootopia* (2016) serves as a great example of this change through its female protagionist Judy Hopps. She is a young female rabbit who aspires to become the first rabbit police officer in Zootopia Police Department (ZPD) which is a completely male-dominated urban law-enforcement system. *Zootopia* (2016) is more than a children's

movie. Its narrative is enriched with the themes of race, speciesism, social justice, and most importantly for this study, it is gender roles. Judy Hopps emerges as a character who challenges traditional gender expectations, breaks the stereotypes and reflects ideas of liberal feminism: right to equal opportunity, meritocracy and individual determination. However, her narrative also reveals the some form of gendered power that define female protagonists as 'Other', a term introduced by Simone de Beauvoir in his work *The Second Sex* (1949/2011)

Problem Statement

Judy Hopps seems progressive but the surroundings and discourses around her raise some critical questions regarding her representation that whether her career journey truly challenges the patriarchal norms or does it represent the patriarchal structure powers under the guise of empowerment. Whether her success is a reflection of systemic change, or does it rely on neoliberal ideals that place the burden of progress on the individual woman.

Research Objectives

　　i.　To analyze Judy's narrative positioning in relation to male authority and social structures.
　　ii.　To assess the ways Judy represents liberal feminist values of autonomy and equality.
　　iii.　To explore the language, narrative, and interactional patterns that how they reflect and reproduce gendered power relations.

Significance of the Study

This research contributes to feminist media studies by moving beyond binary representations of female empowerment as either wholly progressive or wholly regressive. By combining de Beauvoir's existential feminist theory and Tong's liberal feminist perspective with CDA, this study shows that empowerment is both enabled and constrained by discourse. Moreover, in an era where media literacy and gender sensitivity are more important than ever, critically analyzing media texts provides insights into the ways media targeted at children can perpetuate or resist dominant ideologies. Understanding these discourses is vital for developing more inclusive, conscious storytelling that does not merely place women in male roles, but genuinely reimagines the structures of power and identity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist media scholars have critically examined that media representations produce and reproduce gender ideologies. According to Gill (2007), representation is not a neutral process but one loaded with ideological implications that either reinforce or resist power structures. Media texts often construct women as passive, emotional, and subordinate. These are the traits that function to uphold patriarchal power (Van Zoonen, 1994). These representations serve to define femininity within narrow, socially acceptable boundaries. Hall's (1997) theory of representation emphasizes that meaning is constructed through language and culture. From this perspective, the portrayal of a female character like Judy Hopps must be understood not only in terms of her actions but also in the way she is discursively framed by the narrative, visual codes, and dialogues within the film. Disney's animated productions have undergone a significant transformation in the portrayals of female characters. Early Disney princesses, Snow White and Cinderella, epitomized submissive femininity, awaiting rescue by male heroes (England et al., 2011). These films relied on heteronormative romantic conclusions and emphasized the idea that a woman's worth was determined by her relationship with a man. Recent Disney movies like *Brave* (2012), *Frozen* (2013), and *Moana* (2016) feature heroines who are independent, motivated, and not exempted from a romantic plot. According to Davis (2006), this change marks a move away from the traditional 'damsel in distress' toward the idea of a 'self-rescuing princess.' However, not everyone sees this as entirely positive. Orenstein (2011) points out that while these characters break old stereotypes, they usually reflect a kind

of feminism that focuses on personal success rather than challenging larger social systems. Judy Hopps from *Zootopia* (2016) is part of this new wave of female leads. But unlike the princesses on magical adventures, Judy's narrative is rooted in real-world systems like the police and government. This makes *Zootopia* more directly connected to real issues about work, race, and gender.

Scholars have already studied *Zootopia* (2016) from different perspectives. For example, Lester (2016) finds the movie as a symbol of post-racial liberalism, where racism is shown as just personal bias instead of a bigger structural issue. Therefore, the movie promotes diversity as well as hide the deeper causes of inequality. From a gender perspective, Becerra (2020) argues that Judy challenges male dominance by becoming a successful cop without needing a love story. However, her success is presented as something that she earns by working hard in a fair system. This highlights liberal feminism but is not a radical challenge to the system. Howard and Jackson (2021) agree, saying that Judy's narrative reflects the limits of liberal feminism because her success is personal. It is not part of a broader (societal) change. The police force or city politics don't actually become more equal. The progress depends solely on Judy's effort and values. Other researchers like Schanoes (2013) and Pomerantz et al. (2013) warn against celebrating "strong female characters" too quickly. They note that these characters are praised only when they act like men or take on traditionally male roles, which can unintentionally suggest that feminine traits or alternative ways of resisting are less valuable.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a useful tool in feminist media studies for analyzing the ways language and media reflect and shape the power dynamics. Fairclough (1992) explains that discourse doesn't just describe the world, it also helps build it. Media language always carries ideology and influences how we see social structures. In studies of animated films, CDA has been used to reveal how characters' dialogues, institutional roles, and narrative structures reproduce social hierarchies (Machin & Mayr, 2012). For example, Götz and Lemish (2012) explore gendered discourse in children's media can either reinforce or challenge patriarchal norms through subtle linguistic patterns. Applying CDA to *Zootopia* (2016) allows researchers to investigate how Judy Hopps is positioned not just visually but linguistically. Is she a subject of power or the Other. Her repeated need to 'prove herself' the language used by male colleagues to undermine her, and the framing of her success as exceptional are all discursive strategies that reveal the film's underlying ideological assumptions.

The existing studies provide valuable insights into *Zootopia*'s race and gender themes, there remains a need for a focused analysis that integrates Simone de Beauvoir's theory of the 'Other' with liberal feminist ideology using Critical Discourse Analysis. Most feminist readings either celebrate Judy as a feminist icon or critique her through postfeminist or neoliberal lenses. This paper aims to build on that work by exploring how Judy's discursive positioning reflects both the promise and limitations of liberal feminist representation in mainstream animation.

METHODOLOGY

The study uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its main analytical tool. CDA is a method used to decode the language or discourse implicated in the reproduction of power, ideology, and inequality (Fairclough, 1992). In particular, this research draws on Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of discourse, which analyzes texts on three interconnected levels:

  i.   **Textual analysis** (language use, vocabulary, and syntax)
  ii. **Discursive practice** (production, distribution, and consumption of discourse)
  iii. **Social practice** (ideological and institutional contexts)

This approach allows for a systematic exploration Judy Hopps's position as a subject or an 'Other,' not just through dialogue but also through narrative structure, character relationships, and institutional framing.

The primary data for this study is Disney's *Zootopia* (2016), directed by Byron Howard and Rich Moore. The film was selected due to its explicit focus on institutional power (police, government, media) and its framing of a female protagonist who confronts gendered and species-based discrimination. Key scenes were selected based on their relevance to themes of gender, power, exclusion, and empowerment. These include. The selection scenes ensure a balanced representation of Judy's interactions in both private and public spaces.

The study follows a two-tiered analysis: CDA and Qualitative content analysis.

Lexical choices are analyzed to reveal the constructed gendered meanings through word choices including:

    i. **Speech roles and power**: Examining who initiates dialogue, interrupts, commands, or frames conversations.
    ii. **Metaphors and ideologies**: Identifying underlying metaphors (e.g., prey vs predator, small vs strong) that map onto gendered hierarchies.
    iii. **Narrative positioning**: Analyzing how Judy's character is framed—through narration, plot structure, or character reactions.

In addition to linguistic elements, the study uses content analysis to interpret:

    i. **Visual signs**: Costumes, posture, camera angles, lighting
    ii. **Symbolic representation**: Judy's badge, carrots, trains, uniform as metaphors of authority and resistance
    iii. **Absence of romantic narrative**: Noting its significance within the context of liberal feminist representation

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in feminist theory of Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the "Other" **and** Rosemarie Tong's liberal feminist perspective to analyze gendered subjectivity in *Zootopia* (2016). De Beauvoir's existential feminist theory, as articulated in *The Second Sex* (2011), provides a critical lens for understanding the ways women are historically and discursively positioned as "the Other" in a male-defined world, "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute, she is the Other" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 6). In this binary, women are not seen as autonomous beings but as relative to male norms. This framework is particularly relevant in examining the ways Judy Hopps, as a female and non-predator character, is marginalized within the patriarchal structure of the Zootopia Police Department. Her need to constantly prove her worth and legitimacy mirrors what de Beauvoir describes as the imposed distance between women and institutional power, where femininity is constructed as inherently "less than" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 330).

Alongside Beauvoir, the study also draws on Rosemarie Tong's liberal feminism, which advocates for equal rights and opportunities for women through institutional reform and individual merit. Tong explains that liberal feminism focuses on eliminating legal and social barriers that prevent women from achieving equality, emphasizing autonomy, rationality, and access to education and employment (Tong, 2009, p. 15). This perspective is especially useful in analyzing Judy Hopps as a liberal feminist figure that she is ambitious, self-reliant, and gains professional success not through romantic involvement or physical strength, but through intelligence, hard work, and determination. Tong also notes the limitations of this framework, particularly its focus on individual success within existing systems rather than structural

transformation (Tong, 2009, p. 22). This duality is central to the analysis of Judy's character, who simultaneously challenges gender norms while also being confined within the boundaries of neoliberal, merit-based discourse.

The combination of Beauvoir's existential critique of woman as "Other" with Tong's liberal feminist emphasis on individual power and influence. The study develops a critical framework for understanding that *Zootopia* constructs female empowerment within a patriarchal narrative structure. This allows researcher for the discourse analysis of *Zootopia* (2016) recognizing both the film's progressive portrayal of a strong female lead and the ideological limitations embedded in its liberal feminist logic.

ANALYSIS

From the outset, Judy is framed as an outsider, a small, optimistic, and female, in a world dominated by larger, often male, predator species. Her position reflects de Beauvoir's notion of woman as the 'Other', defined in contrast to the male norm: "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other" (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 6). This ideological positioning is not only reinforced through language but through social attitudes embedded in *Zootopia*'s institutional systems.

Judy's entry into the Zootopia Police Academy visually and verbally constructs her difference. The instructor refers to prey officers as a 'joke' and her struggle to physically match predator recruits is underscored by music and framing. She is never neutral, she is a symbol of exception, of failure-turned-success, constantly juxtaposed against predator-male norms. The physical trials are discursive metaphors of patriarchal gatekeeping: to 'become' part of the system, Judy must over-perform. Despite graduating top of her class, Chief Bogo relegates her to meter-maid duty, saying, *"Let's not be too ambitious, Carrots."* This phrase, belittling and infantilizing, reflects a gendered discourse of containment. As de Beauvoir argues, woman's ambitions are often framed as 'unbecoming' or 'unnatural' when they mirror male-coded aspirations (2011, p. 644). Judy, by merely existing within this space, is marked as an intruder.

CDA reveals that Judy's linguistic positioning often mirrors broader gendered power relations. She is interrupted, dismissed, or patronized especially by male authority figures. When Judy volunteers during the missing mammals case meeting, Bogo's response, *"You're a meter maid, not a detective"* is not just procedural; it is ideological. He invokes institutional authority to reinforce exclusion, while the term *"meter maid"* linguistically feminizes and trivializes her role. According to Fairclough (1995), such lexical choices are crucial in shaping power hierarchies. This consistent undermining parallels what de Beauvoir calls the 'internalized inferiority' that women are expected to accept to maintain social peace (2011, p. 37). Yet, Judy resists through assertive, formal speech, often reasserting her qualifications and legal grounding, a tactic that mirrors liberal feminist strategies of proving one's worth within the rules of the game (Tong, 2009, p. 18).

Judy's journey is structured around liberal feminist themes: self-determination, equality of opportunity, and success through merit. Tong (2009) explains that liberal feminism seeks to extend the principles of liberty, equality, and individual rights to women (p. 15). Judy embodies these values fully. Denied institutional support, Judy undertakes the investigation independently. Her tools, a carrot pen, her sharp memory, and relentless questioning function as non-violent, intelligence-based strategies that align with feminist resistance. Her iconic line, *"I don't know when to quit,"* illustrates internalized meritocratic ideology. Yet, the framing of her success as exceptional is problematic. As Tong (2009) warns, liberal feminism often personalizes empowerment: Judy succeeds not because the system changes, but because she outperforms others within the same biased structure (p. 22). The system is not dismantled, it merely accommodates her temporarily. This echoes critiques of "neoliberal feminism", where success is seen as a

product of personal resilience rather than collective reform (Gill, 2007, p. 76). CDA shows how Judy's discourse centers around individualism, rarely critiquing the institution that marginalizes her.

Beyond spoken language, the film uses visual elements, framing, costume, and positioning in order to construct Judy's subjectivity. Judy is consistently depicted as smaller both physically and metaphorically than her colleagues. During early scenes in the police department, high-angle shots emphasize her diminutiveness. Over time, as she gains confidence and respect, the angles flatten or shift to eye-level and visually affirms her rise in power. Her uniform itself is symbolic. Initially oversized, it gradually fits, suggesting not that the institution adapts to her, but that she adapts to it. This visual metaphor resonates with Tong's critique that liberal feminism may pressure women to succeed by conforming to masculinist standards of strength, stoicism, and authority (2009, p. 23). Even her weapon, the carrot pen, subverts traditional male weaponry. It is simultaneously a symbol of feminine cleverness and resistance, but also infantilized. This balance between empowerment and containment is key to how *Zootopia* crafts Judy's narrative.

One of the film's most notable feminist features is the absence of a romantic subplot for Judy. Unlike traditional Disney heroines, she does not find true love, instead she finds purpose, professionalism, and friendship. From Tong's liberal feminist standpoint, this is empowering. It emphasizes the idea that women's fulfillment need not depend on romantic attachment (2009, p. 25). Judy's character arc is driven by justice and not love which is a radical move in the Disney canon. Yet, this also aligns with critiques that feminist characters are often 'de-sexualized' or emotionally flattened to be taken seriously in male-dominated narratives (Gill, 2007, p. 81). Judy's emotional world remains largely professional; even her friendship with Nick Wilde is framed as platonic and tactical. While this grants her independence, it also raises questions about what forms of femininity are permitted under liberal frameworks.

Despite Judy's triumphs, *Zootopia* ultimately maintains the status quo. While Judy cracks the case and earns respect, the power structures she works within remain intact. The police force does not become more inclusive, the mechanisms of exclusion are not interrogated but only softened. This reflects de Beauvoir's insight that individual liberation does not equal structural change. "One is not born, but becomes, a woman," she argues, and society continually reasserts the 'Othering' of women through discourse (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 330). Judy becomes a 'real cop' but only by over-performing, constantly reaffirming her value to others. Liberal feminism, as Tong observes, celebrates agency without always addressing the context that limits it (2009, p. 24). Judy is heroic but alone. There is no sisterhood, no structural critique, and no systemic reform. Her empowerment is singular, not collective. This mirrors the broader limitation of liberal feminist discourse in media: it uplifts individuals without transforming the world they inhabit.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the construction gender, power, and identity through the character of Judy Hopps in *Zootopia* (2016), using Simone de Beauvoir's theory of the "Other" and Rosemarie Tong's liberal feminist framework, analyzed through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Through a close reading of the film's narrative, language, character interactions, and visual framing, the analysis revealed that Judy Hopps is positioned both as a challenge to and a product of the patriarchal discourse that defines her world. Judy's ambition to become a police officer in a male and predator-dominated institution places her at the center of a narrative about resistance, meritocracy, and equality. These themes align strongly with liberal feminism, which advocates for women's inclusion into public life through equal opportunity and legal reform (Tong, 2009, p. 15).

Judy's perseverance, independence, and refusal to accept traditional gender roles are markers of this liberal feminist ideal. She is not rescued, romanticized, or objectified, instead she constructs her own path and asserts her subjectivity. This is something Simone de Beauvoir argues and it is central to genuine female emancipation (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 731). However, the film's portrayal of Judy's success also reflects the limitations of liberal feminist representation. Her achievements, while significant, are framed as exceptional rather than systemic. She gains inclusion into the institution, but the institution itself remains largely unchanged. Her narrative does not critique the structures that marginalized her in the first place; instead, it celebrates her ability to overcome them through individual strength. This mirrors what critics of liberal feminism have noted as a recurring issue: the depoliticization of feminist struggle and the framing of empowerment as a personal, rather than collective or structural, journey (Tong, 2009, p. 22).

Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the 'Other' is critical in understanding that Judy is marked as different not only because of her gender but also her species. The discourses that surround her linguistically, visually, and narratively position her as someone who must prove herself worthy of inclusion. She is initially diminished, infantilized, and doubted. Her transition from 'Other' to subject is contingent on her complete assimilation into the rules of a system that was never built for her. This confirms de Beauvoir's observation that women are rarely seen as equal subjects unless they mimic the norms of male-defined subjectivity (2011, p. 644).

The Critical Discourse Analysis further demonstrated Judy's language, narrative framing, and institutional relationships carrying ideological meanings. Terms like *'cute'* and *'meter maid'* are not neutral, they function as tools of marginalization. Conversely, Judy's strategic use of formal speech, legal references, and assertiveness reflect the ways she navigates and negotiates her discursive positioning. Even visual elements, camera angles, costumes, and scale highlight her journey from exclusion to inclusion, albiet through performance and conformity.

Zootopia offers a contradictory image of feminist empowerment. Judy Hopps represents a significant shift in the portrayal of female protagonists in Disney's canon. She is capable, self-reliant, and morally driven. Yet, the framework of liberal feminism that the film operates within also limits the depth of its critique. The story celebrates personal victory while leaving the broader patriarchal and institutional structures intact.

LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

This study provides a focused and in-depth feminist discourse analysis of Judy Hopps in *Zootopia* (2016) but several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis is limited to a single character within a single media text, which restricts the generalizability of findings. Although *Zootopia* is a culturally significant and widely viewed film, its discourse may not be representative of broader animated media or feminist portrayals across other genres or studios. Moreover, the study draws on Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism and Tong's liberal feminist perspective which are useful in illuminating Judy's positioning as an 'Other' and an agent of meritocratic empowerment but they may not fully account for intersectional or postcolonial feminist critiques. Issues of race, class, and speciesism in *Zootopia* are touched upon only tangentially and merit deeper analysis, especially given the film's allegorical references to systemic discrimination. Furthermore, qualitative nature of CDA and content analysis is subjective which may influence the reading of visual, linguistic, and symbolic elements. Although efforts were made to ensure validity through theoretical grounding and triangulation, the interpretations remain open to alternative readings.

Future studies could expand this work in several important ways. Comparative studies might explore other female characters across Disney films that how are they positioned discursively in relation to liberal, radical, or postfeminist ideologies. This could help determine whether Judy Hopps represents a broader trend or an exception within animated feminist representation. In addition, future research could adopt intersectional feminist frameworks (Crenshaw, 1991) to analyze how *Zootopia* engages with layered identities such as race, species, and class. Since the film constructs a metaphorical racialized world using predator/prey dynamics, a deeper analysis of racial coding, biopolitics, or whiteness in animation may reveal further ideological complexities beyond gender. Lastly, there is room for longitudinal research on how characters like Judy impact youth identity formation, gender role expectations, and career aspirations, especially in younger female viewers. Studying the pedagogical power of animated media could bridge feminist theory with educational psychology, media literacy, and youth studies.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

As this study involves analysis of publicly available media content *Zootopia* (2016) there are no human participants, and thus no formal ethical approval was required. Nevertheless, academic integrity is maintained through accurate citation and theoretical transparency

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AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

Author 1 did the Conceptualization, Theoretical Framework, Data Collection, Critical Discourse Analysis, Initial Draft Writing, Literature Review, and Final Revisions of the study.

Author 2 was responsible for Methodology Design, Content Analysis, Reference Management, Editing and Proofreading, Abstract and Keywords, and Review of Theoretical Alignment.

Both authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript. The contributions were equal in the process of this study.

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