

Chapter 12

The Marginal Woman: Representations of Female Characters Trapped in Cultural Dilemmas

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ABSTRACT

*Representations of female characters are prone to marginalization and misrepresentation in films and TV series. This chapter examines how two female representations in Disney's children's movie *Mulan* (1998) and Netflix's teenage Spanish series *Elite* (2018) resonate with the concept of the marginal man. This study draws on the concept of the marginal man developed by Robert Park, which was introduced in *The Stranger* by Georg Simmel (1908). It refers to the state of a person who is not determinedly affiliated with a dominant community. This chapter contributes to the scholarship about the marginal man by conceptualizing the marginal woman as a prototype of a social oddity. In what ways do these characters portray the notion of marginal woman? The female characters in *Mulan* and *Elite* are discussed as manifestations of the marginal woman who are deemed strangers by their own communities.*

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INTRODUCTION

With the growing demand for global media as a platform to engage many diverse cultures, either by representing them on screen or by actively targeting them as potential viewers, female characters are prone to marginalization and misrepresentation. Drawing on the concept of the Marginal Man (Park, 1928; Stonquist, 1935; Cheng & Lively, 2009), this Chapter examines two female representations in two shows: Disney's Children's Movie *Mulan* (1998) and Netflix's teenage Spanish series *Elite* (2018). Despite their differences, both shows could be analyzed through a psycho-socio-cultural lens. This study builds on the concept of The Marginal Man developed by Robert Park (1928), which was introduced in *The Stranger* by Georg Simmel (1908). It refers to the state of a person who is not firmly attached to nor affiliated with a dominant community. This Chapter contributes to the Marginal Man scholarship by conceptualizing the Marginal Woman as a prototype of perceived strangeness. The female characters in *Mulan* and *Elite* are discussed as manifestations of the Marginal Woman who are deemed strangers by their own communities. In what ways do these characters portray the notion of Marginal Woman? This Chapter first aims to introduce the notion of the Marginal Woman as informed by social distance and dissimilarity (Rogers, 1999, p. 60). Second, it applies the notion to two shows by examining (1) *Mulan*'s verbal and non-verbal cues as an unconventional Chinese woman, and (2) an *Elite*'s female character; an Arab and Muslim Palestinian teenager living in Spain.

Two female characters will be analyzed. The first character is *Mulan* from the Disney movie *Mulan* (1998), and the second is *Nadia* from the Netflix teenager Series *Elite* (2018). The first case speaks of internal marginalization whereas the second is emblematic of external marginalizing forces. Despite both shows' different genres, styles, audiences, contexts, and cultures, the chosen female characters have a common alienating experience where they feel foreign and distant within their communities. Such common marginalizing characteristics resonate with everyday women regardless of ethnicity or cultural background. *Mulan* is forced to become a perfect Chinese bride according to her community's high standards. At the same time, *Nadia* is an Arab Muslim girl who is pressured to conform to Spanish/Western norms.

The Marginal Woman concept has not been more relevant than in today's world. With the increase of globalization and the boundless connections that social media platforms have caused, more focus is being shed on what is perceived to be a 'perfect girl' or the 'it girl'; a perfect nonexistent persona that social media trends and movies/series often create, which leads society – and especially women – to believe that there is a specific criterion that will make women be further accepted into a social group. When women do not conform to these physical and mental criteria and social norms,

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