



FEMALE HEROISM IN RAYA AND THE LAST DRAGON: A GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND FEMALE MASCULINITY PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the construction of female heroism in *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021) through the theoretical perspectives of Butler's gender performativity and Halberstam's female masculinity. Adopting a qualitative descriptive approach, the analysis traces Raya's character development and positions her heroic representation in comparison with earlier Disney warrior heroines, particularly Mulan and Merida. The findings indicate that Raya's heroic identity is not portrayed as an inherent or biologically predetermined quality; rather, it emerges as a socially constituted identity continuously shaped through actions, choices, and interactions. Her transformation into a heroine develops through five interrelated stages: accepting responsibility as the Guardian of the Dragon Gem, demonstrating emotional resilience in the face of betrayal, exercising relational leadership grounded in empathy, choosing trust over vengeance, and ultimately restoring social harmony. Furthermore, the analysis demonstrates that qualities traditionally coded as masculine, such as courage, decisiveness, and responsibility, can be embodied by women without undermining or erasing their feminine identity. The study therefore argues that *Raya and the Last Dragon* marks a significant progression in Disney's representation of female heroism. While Mulan's heroic journey culminates in victory within a military conflict and Merida's centers on resolving familial tensions, Raya's narrative reaches its climax through the restoration of a fragmented social order. In this respect, Raya represents an expanded model of female heroism in which individual courage is intertwined with relational leadership, collective reconciliation, and broader social transformation.

Keywords: *Female Heroism; Gender Performativity; Female Masculinity; Raya and the Last Dragon; Gender Representation*

1. INTRODUCTION

Animated films function not merely as forms of entertainment but also as cultural texts through which social values, identities, and gender expectations are produced and circulated. As cinematic representations reflect and simultaneously participate in broader social discourses, portrayals of women and men can influence how audiences understand

gendered roles and behaviors (Bujgoi, 2025). Within this cultural landscape, Disney occupies a particularly influential position because its animated narratives have contributed to the construction and transformation of popular understandings of femininity, masculinity, and heroism across generations (Karmakar & Bhadra, 2023). Earlier Disney princess narratives frequently

associated femininity with passivity, dependence, domesticity, and romantic fulfillment, whereas more contemporary productions increasingly position female characters as autonomous agents, leaders, and heroes (Sun, 2023). Recent scholarship further suggests that feminist discourse has contributed to transformations in the representation of female characters within Disney animation (AlBassam & Alhamad, 2025).

This transformation is particularly evident in *Mulan* (1998), *Brave* (2012), and *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021), which depart from conventional princess narratives by placing female warriors at the center of conflict and resolution. Rather than constructing female fulfillment primarily through romantic relationships, these films portray women who confront danger, exercise agency, protect their communities, and negotiate social responsibilities. Nevertheless, the forms of heroism represented by these protagonists are not identical. Merida challenges conventional expectations of princesshood and female behavior, while Mulan negotiates patriarchal structures by entering a predominantly masculine military sphere (Aprilia & Sutrisno, 2020; Manaworapong & Bowen, 2022). More recent research also demonstrates that Mulan strategically employs forms of masculine language, further illustrating how gendered behaviors can be performed rather than treated as exclusively determined by biological sex (Liao, 2025). Raya extends this development by locating female heroism not only within individual courage and combat ability but also within trust, cooperation, responsibility, and collective reconciliation. Thus, Disney's representation of female heroism has progressively expanded beyond the traditional association between heroism, masculinity, and male protagonists.

Heroism itself is a socially complex phenomenon whose meaning extends beyond extraordinary physical actions. Heroic figures have historically been associated with courage, sacrifice, leadership, and service to others, although definitions of heroic behavior vary according to social and cultural contexts (Franco et al., 2018). Literary representations similarly demonstrate that heroism emerges through particular configurations of identity, action, and social recognition (Ratna et al., 2020). More recent scholarship emphasizes

that heroic identity is constructed through cultural narratives and systems of meaning rather than simply existing as an inherent personal characteristic (Li et al., 2025). From this perspective, individuals become recognizable as heroes because particular actions, values, and identities acquire heroic significance within specific sociocultural frameworks.

Such constructions of heroism are inseparable from gender. Conventional heroic narratives have historically privileged masculine-coded characteristics, including physical strength, assertiveness, dominance, and combat ability, while women have frequently occupied supporting, vulnerable, or protected positions. Consequently, the cultural image of the hero has traditionally been closely associated with masculinity. Female characters, by contrast, have often been expected to embody emotionality, nurturance, dependence, and relationality rather than physical power or authoritative leadership. However, contemporary representations increasingly challenge this binary division. Heroism may encompass emotional resilience, moral responsibility, empathy, collaboration, and the capacity to sustain relationships alongside courage and physical competence. Research on gender representation in Disney narratives similarly demonstrates that female characters increasingly negotiate, appropriate, and transform characteristics traditionally coded as masculine (Jung & Kim, 2024).

Raya and the Last Dragon provides a particularly significant example of this transformation. Raya is represented as physically capable, decisive, courageous, and proficient in combat, yet her heroism cannot be reduced to these conventionally masculine attributes. Her heroic development is progressively constructed through responsibility, emotional resilience, empathy, relational leadership, trust, sacrifice, and reconciliation. Rather than defeating an individual antagonist as the ultimate demonstration of heroic achievement, Raya must confront the consequences of distrust and social fragmentation among the divided lands of Kumandra. Her journey therefore shifts the meaning of heroism from individual conquest toward collective restoration. Raya repeatedly performs actions through which her heroic identity becomes intelligible, culminating in her willingness to choose trust despite the

possibility of betrayal. Heroism in the film can consequently be understood not as an innate quality possessed by Raya from the beginning, but as an identity constituted through repeated actions, relationships, decisions, and socially meaningful practices.

Several previous studies have examined *Raya and the Last Dragon* from different theoretical perspectives. Tawakkal et al. (2021), using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, examined the moral messages embedded in the film and emphasized trust and cooperation as essential foundations for social harmony. Fatimatuzzahra and Setiansah (2021) investigated the representation of women through discourse analysis and demonstrated how the film challenges conventional gender stereotypes by positioning female characters in roles and activities traditionally associated with men. Similarly, Sihole and Kusuma (2022) analyzed female leadership in the film and showed that its female characters challenge assumptions regarding women's vulnerability and inability to exercise authority. These studies establish that *Raya and the Last Dragon* constitutes an important site for examining changing representations of femininity, leadership, and gender within contemporary Disney narratives.

More recent scholarship has extended this discussion. Jung and Kim (2024) examined social identity and gender representation across *Moana*, *Frozen II*, and *Raya and the Last Dragon*, demonstrating how contemporary Disney heroines increasingly assume subjective roles and develop autonomous identities. Aini and Adiyanto (2025) specifically examined the reception of female masculinity in *Raya and the Last Dragon*, identifying characteristics such as courage, physical strength, fighting ability, leadership, and optimism within Raya's characterization. Pramesniradjati and Widyahening (2025), meanwhile, approached the film through relational empowerment and highlighted trust, cooperation, and leadership as important dimensions of Raya's empowerment. These recent studies demonstrate growing scholarly attention to Raya as a progressive female protagonist and reveal that her characterization combines conventionally masculine qualities with relational forms of agency.

Despite these contributions, an important analytical gap remains. Existing studies have predominantly examined isolated dimensions

of Raya's characterization, including moral values, female representation, leadership, masculinity, gender identity, or relational empowerment. They have paid considerably less attention to how Raya gradually becomes recognizable as a heroine through repeated performative acts across the narrative. Moreover, female masculinity and gender performativity have rarely been integrated into a single analytical framework for explaining the construction of Raya's heroic identity. This distinction is important because identifying masculine characteristics in a female protagonist does not, by itself, explain how such characteristics become meaningful as heroism or how they interact with relational practices such as empathy, trust, sacrifice, and reconciliation.

To address this gap, the present study integrates Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity with Jack Halberstam's concept of female masculinity. Butler (1990) challenges the assumption that gender constitutes a stable, pre-existing essence, arguing instead that gender becomes socially intelligible through the stylized repetition of acts, gestures, behaviors, and discursive practices. Gender identity, from this perspective, is continually constituted through performance rather than simply expressed from an internal and predetermined essence. Contemporary applications of Butler's framework continue to demonstrate its relevance for examining how cinematic and literary characters negotiate, reproduce, or subvert established gender norms (Saraswati & Engliana, 2023; Kamila & Maulidya, 2025; Sirait et al., 2025).

Complementing Butler's framework, Halberstam's (1998) concept of female masculinity challenges the assumption that masculinity naturally or exclusively belongs to male bodies. Female masculinity makes it possible to examine how women embody qualities culturally coded as masculine without interpreting these performances merely as imitations of men or as a rejection of femininity. Subsequent scholarship has reinforced the usefulness of this concept for examining the relationship between gender performance, masculinity, and female identity (Huq, 2022). Applied to Raya, these theoretical perspectives enable heroism to be understood as an identity constructed through repeated performances of courage, decisiveness,

responsibility, emotional resilience, leadership, empathy, and trust. They also make it possible to examine how conventionally masculine qualities coexist with relational and affective practices without invalidating Raya's identity as a woman.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine the construction of female heroism in *Raya and the Last Dragon* by tracing the performative acts through which Raya's heroic identity develops across the narrative. It further investigates how the film reconfigures female heroism beyond physical strength, individual conquest, and conventional masculine models of heroic leadership. To achieve these objectives, the study addresses two research questions: (1) How does *Raya and the Last Dragon* construct female heroism through Raya's performative acts and relational practices? and (2) In what ways does Raya's model of heroism extend beyond the leadership and bravery conventionally associated with earlier Disney warrior princesses? By integrating gender performativity and female masculinity, this study seeks to contribute to scholarship on gender representation in animated cinema while offering a process-oriented interpretation of female heroism as an identity constituted through action, relationality, and collective social restoration.

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design with a descriptive-analytical approach to investigate the construction of female heroism in Disney's *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021). Qualitative inquiry provides an appropriate framework for examining gender representation and socially constructed meanings within visual and cinematic texts (Sirait et al., 2025). In addition, descriptive content analysis facilitates a systematic interpretation of meanings conveyed through narrative structures, dialogue, character interactions, and visual representations (Yuliasari & Virtianti, 2021). This methodological approach was selected because it enables the study to explore not only how Raya is represented as a female heroine but also how her heroic identity is progressively constructed through actions, relationships, and narrative development.

2.2 Data Source

The primary data source for this study is Disney's animated feature film *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021). The data consist of selected scenes that provide evidence of Raya's heroic development, including her actions, dialogue, behavioral responses, interactions with other characters, and significant moments of character transformation. Particular attention is given to scenes that demonstrate responsibility, emotional resilience, leadership, empathy, trust, courage, decisiveness, and reconciliation, as these elements are central to understanding the gradual construction of Raya's heroic identity.

To contextualize Raya's representation within the broader development of Disney's female warrior characters, the study also draws on selected comparative examples from *Mulan* (1998) and *Brave* (2012). These films are employed exclusively as comparative references rather than as primary data sources. The comparison is intended to identify similarities and differences in the representation of female heroism, particularly regarding the nature of conflict, expressions of courage and leadership, and the ultimate objectives of each heroine's journey. This comparative dimension therefore provides a broader interpretive context for assessing how Raya extends the representation of female heroism established by earlier Disney warrior princesses.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The analysis is primarily informed by Judith Butler (1990) theory of gender performativity and Jack Halberstam (1998) concept of female masculinity. Butler's framework is employed to examine Raya's heroic identity as something constituted through repeated actions, choices, gestures, interactions, and social practices rather than as a fixed or inherently gendered attribute. From this perspective, Raya does not simply possess a heroic identity; instead, her identity as a heroine becomes progressively recognizable through the repeated performances that structure her development throughout the narrative.

Halberstam (1998) concept of female masculinity complements this perspective by providing a framework for interpreting qualities conventionally associated with masculinity, including courage, decisiveness, physical competence, responsibility, and leadership, when they are embodied by a female character. Rather than interpreting these characteristics as evidence that Raya imitates or assumes a male identity, female masculinity allows them to be understood as gendered qualities that can exist independently of the male body. The integration of Butler's and Halberstam's perspectives consequently enables this study to examine how *Raya and the Last Dragon* reconstructs female heroism as a socially performed identity in which conventionally masculine attributes coexist with empathy, emotional resilience, relational leadership, trust, and reconciliation.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted through several interconnected stages. First, the film was viewed repeatedly to identify scenes relevant to Raya's heroic development. Second, selected scenes were documented and categorized according to Raya's actions, dialogue, interactions, responses to conflict, leadership practices, and significant character transformations. Third, these data were interpreted through Butler's concept of gender performativity to determine how repeated acts contribute to the gradual construction of Raya's heroic identity. Fourth, Halberstam's concept of female masculinity was applied to examine how Raya embodies conventionally masculine-coded qualities without relinquishing her female identity. Finally, the resulting patterns were interpreted comparatively with selected representations of Mulan and Merida to determine how Raya's heroic trajectory extends or differs from earlier models of Disney female heroism.

Through this analytical procedure, the study conceptualizes Raya's heroism not as an innate or biologically determined characteristic but as an identity progressively constituted through repeated performances, interpersonal relationships, and socially meaningful actions across the narrative.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings on how Raya's heroic identity is progressively constructed throughout *Raya and the Last Dragon*. The analysis identifies several interconnected stages, beginning with responsibility and emotional resilience, followed by identity transformation, relational leadership through empathy and cooperation, and culminating in trust, reconciliation, and social harmony. These stages are analyzed through Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and Jack Halberstam's concept of female masculinity. Comparisons with Mulan and Merida are also used to contextualize Raya's heroism within Disney's representation of female warriors and conventional masculine models of heroism.

A. The Construction of Identity: Female Heroism Raya Through Performance

From the perspective of humanistic psychology, heroism is considered the highest form of self-actualization, where a person does something meaningful despite having to face great risks (Franco et al., 2018). This sense of heroism is portrayed by Disney at the start of the film. An example can be seen in Figure 01:



Figure 1. This shows that humans and dragons live together until the Druun emerges.
(Source: *Raya and the Last Dragon* 2021)

This scene, taken at (00:01:47-00:01:57), establishes the foundation of heroism in the movie. It is evident that the actions of the dragons in sacrificing themselves to protect humans from druun represent the earliest manifestation of heroism. Where protecting others becomes more important than personal safety. This sacrifice is also behind an object in the form of the Dragon Gem, which eventually becomes the moral legacy passed down to future generations, especially to Raya as the next guardian of Kumandra. The continuation of these heroic values can be seen in Figure 02.



Figure 2. Raya engages in combat with Chief Benja in order to qualify as the Guardian of the Dragon Gem.

(Source: *Raya and the Last Dragon* 2021)

This scene (00:05:43-00:07:23) depicts Raya, who has been striving since childhood to be recognized as the guardian of the dragon's gem. In order to pass, Raya must reach the center of the Dragon Gem area by facing her father in a martial arts trial. Through her dialogue, Raya reaffirms her ambition:

Raya : *"Chief Benja, I know it's your job to try and stop me, but you won't."*

This moment is not only a test of skill but also a symbolic step in the construction of her identity. Here, Judith Butler's theory 1990 becomes relevant, gender is socially constructed, not a natural process, through repetitive performance and actions. Raya's evolution into a Guardian exemplifies this process, as her identity is shaped through demonstrated abilities and recognition, as shown in Figure 03.



Figure 3. Raya is recognised and confirmed as the Guardian of the Dragon Gem.

(Source: *Raya and the Last Dragon* 2021)

This moment was captured from (00:07:23-00:08:03), showing Chief Benja officially recognizing Raya's abilities after she had undergone training and discipline and demonstrated her abilities from a young age. Finally, in this moment, Raya is able to fulfill the responsibilities placed on her, as seen in the following dialogue:

Chief Benja : *"For generations, our family has sworn to protect the gem. Today, you will join that legacy."*

Chief Benja : *"Raya, Princess of Heart, my daughter, you are now a Guardian of the Dragon Gem."*

Such conversations can be seen as means of social validation of the performance shown by Raya. In this regard, the argument of Butler (1990), who states that identity is constantly constructed and sustained through social action, can be used, where the case of how the individual acquires the certain identity through constant performance is depicted (Kamila & Maulidya, 2025). In other words, it shows that being a hero is not only the name given from birth, but also a created identity.

The results obtained here clearly show that there is a distinct difference between the way in which Raya forms her sense of heroism and the heroism of other Disney heroines like Merida in *Brave*. While Raya builds up her sense of heroism through voluntary acceptance of the responsibility of safeguarding the Dragon Gem since she was very young, Merida builds her sense of heroism through rebellion against society. According to Barbosa (2023), Merida's refusal of the marriage that is expected of her proves her personal agency and ability to control her fate. It helps her build the courage to be true to herself, although her rebellion unintentionally curses Queen Elionor and makes her responsible for saving her mother (Sumana, 2022).

In this regard, this comparison highlights Butler's (1990) concept of performativity, as identity is not innate to us; rather, it is performed through social acts. The heroism of Raya is performed at an early age through discipline and responsibility, while that of Merida is formed by agency and rebellion.

B. Emotional Strength: as Raya's Heroism Value

After confirming herself as the Guardian of the Dragon Gem, she is put through a test in the form of betrayal and failure. Instead of depicting women as fragile beings, Raya shows that resilience is performative. From this point, Disney challenges the gender stereotype that women are usually depicted as passive beings who are tied to the domestic space (Bassam & Hamad, 2025). However, Raya's actions during moments of conflict contradict these assumptions, as illustrated in Figure 04.



Figure 4. The moment Raya was betrayed by Namaari

(Source: *Raya and the Last Dragon* 2021)

This scene (00:15:32-00:16:07) depicts the moment when Raya and Namaari attend an inter-clan meeting in an attempt to reunite Kumandra. Betrayal marks the beginning of Raya's emotional development. According to Judith Butler (1990, as cited in Saraswati & Engliana, 2023), gender or identity is not seen as something innate or intrinsic, but as something that emerges through social action or performance. Therefore, Raya's first instance of betrayal marks the beginning of her heroism as the moment when she starts to develop a new approach to trust, loss, and accountability. In accordance with Joshua OKI (2025), emotional vulnerability is associated with any situation where an individual tries to establish trusting and personal connections. Thus, it is shown that one does not have to fight physically as most masculine heroes do to become a hero, but also be able to withstand emotional struggles (Jin et al., 2024). This theme continues in the scene depicted in Figure 5.



Figure 5. shows Raya attempting to defend the Dragon Gem, but he fails.

(Source: *Raya and the Last Dragon* 2021)

The moment, taken from (00:16:31-00:17:43), depicts Raya struggling hard to protect the Dragon Gem from clan disputes. Although he ultimately fails and the gem breaks into five pieces, each taken by different clans, Raya remains steadfast thanks to a message from his father:

Chief Benja : *"Raya, you have to listen. You are the Guardian of the Dragon Gem. There's still light in this. There's still hope."*

This is what drove Raya to search for the Dragon Gem. Despite losing both the Dragon gem and her father, she is still determined in her pursuit and shows that she acquires her emotional resilience as opposed to being inherently resilient. As suggested by Aggarwal (2024), even though women are viewed by the society as emotionally weak, they are emotionally resilient. This representation also differs from earlier Disney heroines such as Mulan and Merida. Mulan's heroic journey begins with a clear moral decision to replace her father in the military, making self-sacrifice and filial devotion the foundation of her heroism (Ding, 2024; Krisnawan, 2024; Gong, 2021).

Meanwhile, Merida's heroism develops after she takes responsibility for the consequences of the curse placed on Queen Elinor, prompting her to protect her mother and restore their relationship (Aprilia & Sutrisno, 2020). However, while it is Raya's experiences that teach her emotional toughness, betrayal, loss, and disappointment are among the main ingredients of her journey. The reason

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why Raya's heroism is not associated with one major decision or event is that it emerges gradually through coping with such experiences and going ahead with her mission regardless of the challenges she encounters.

C. The Evolution of Identity: as gender Performance

After the clash between the clans and the demolition of the Dragon Gem, the identity of Raya starts changing during her journey to collect the pieces of the gem to restore Kumandra. The development of Raya is evident not only from her activities but also from the alteration in her appearance during the next six years after the demolition of the Gem. This alteration is understandable through Butler's gender performativity theory (Butler, 1990, as cited in Axeena, 2025), according to which the identity of a person is constantly formed by their actions and expressions. as illustrated in Figure 06.



Figure 6. Raya's transformation into adulthood during her quest for the Dragon Gem
(Source: *Raya and the Last Dragon* 2021)

This scenario happens at 00:29:53-00:30:20, where we can see that Raya has a different look. She has donned a cloak meant to protect her, is carrying a sword, and has donned a conical hat which is worn by travelers. The way she looks is because she has changed since the Dragon Gem was shattered. She is not the same young girl tasked with the protection of the gem but has become an experience warrior who has been handling the effects of the clash for many years now. Her appearance has thus been affected by the tasks and responsibilities she has handled. On her journey, Raya visits the Tail region in search of the pieces of the Dragon Gem and meets Namaari, as shown in Figure 07.



Figure 7. Namaari's transformation into adulthood during her hostile reunion with Raya.
(Source: *Raya and the Last Dragon* 2021)

Namaari's look has been changed as well, with a half-shaved hairstyle and a military uniform that makes her look strong and resilient. This image contradicts the usual stereotypes that link women with gentleness and compliance. Unlike Disney *Mulan*, who had to conceal her identity as a woman to join the army and be recognized as a warrior (Liao, 2025). Raya and Namaari know their identities as women from the beginning. Nevertheless, both are portrayed as possessing combat skills, leadership, and courage without having to adopt a male identity. As explained by Manaworapong & Bowen (2022), the recognition of Mulan's heroism was initially tied to her performance as a male soldier. Conversely, *Raya and the Last Dragon* shows that women can be heroes without hiding their gender identity but through their bravery, fighting skills, leadership, and optimism.

This supports Jack Halberstam's 'female masculinity' theory, which states that masculinity is not only the domain of men, but can be performed by women through performance, actions, and appearance (Sunny & Sreenivasulu, 2025). Thus, the transformation of Raya and Namaari not only demonstrates a visual change, but also illustrates how their heroic identities are continually constructed through social experiences and repeated performances. This also supports Judith Butler's belief that gender identity is not permanent, but rather is produced through consistent acts performed in a social context.

D. Relational Leadership: Performing Empathy as Raya's Heroism

Despite betrayal and trauma, Raya's heroic identity transforms to become a form of relational leadership. The male-centered, authoritative form of heroism does not apply to Raya's leadership because she forms her

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leadership through a constant repetition of empathy and trust-building actions. Through this repetition of social actions, as Butler (1990) argues, leadership identity becomes performative. Performativity is seen in all of her interactions. At first meeting with Boun, Raya's doubt vanishes when she relates with him because of their loss due to the Druun:

- Boun : *"What are Druun, anyway?."*
Sisu : *"they're like a relentless fire that consumes everything in its wake until there's nothing left except ash and stone."*
Boun : *"They took my family."*

Instead of letting trauma isolate her, Raya uses shared grief to build trust. A similar pattern unfolds with Little Noi; despite Noi stealing a piece of the Dragon Gem, Raya invites cooperation rather than punishing her.

- Raya : *"Hey, how would you like to earn some- honest loot?"*

Likewise, when meeting Tong from Spine, Raya recognizes his underlying loneliness instead of reacting to his intimidation:

- Tong : *"It's been such a long time since I've last- peered into the eyes of a trembling enemy..."*
Sisu : *"He seems lonely."*
Tong : *"No! I'm not lonely."*

In all the above-mentioned situations, Raya always decides to cooperate rather than dominate and empathizes rather than becoming suspicious. This is how the notion of gender performativity as introduced by Judith Butler (1990) becomes evident in Raya's case. The act of performative trust-building results in one very important moment of solidarity, as seen in Figure 08 below.



Figure 8. Raya's friends from various clans have offered to help her.

(Source: *Raya and the Last Dragon* 2021)

This is evident in Figure 08 at (01:02:08-01:03:03), when Boun, Little Noi, and Tong voluntarily decide to join Raya's mission. The trust placed in Raya was not earned through victory in battle, but through the social relationships she had consistently built. At the same time, Huq (2022) shows that the concept of female masculinity proposed by Halberstam (1998), which involves such characteristics of male leadership as decision-making, negotiation, and responsibility, can be performed while maintaining women's identity.

Compared with previous Disney heroines, especially *Mulan*, Raya presents a different leadership model. While *Mulan* earns the trust of others after demonstrating military competence and strategic success within a masculine institution (Liao, 2025; Manaworapong, 2022). Meanwhile, *Merida's* heroism centers on defending her personal choices and restoring family relationships (Aprilia & Sutrisno, 2020). In contrast, Raya's leadership is constructed through repeated efforts to unite individuals from different clans despite mutual distrust. Rather than proving herself through individual achievement, Raya gains legitimacy because others voluntarily choose to follow her.

Meanwhile, in Disney's *Brave*, Merida develops her bravery by defending her own decisions and healing her ties with her family after a disagreement (Tharini Viswanath, 2017). In contrast to these two, Raya's heroism is focused on her capacity to unite people from all backgrounds so that they are eager to work toward a shared objective rather than on her individual accomplishments or demonstrating her fighting prowess. Indicates that Disney recontextualizes the notion of female leadership as a process of transformation from domination to cooperation (Sun, 2023). Therefore, heroism in this case does not mean superiority over others but rather cooperation and trust.

E. The Culmination of Performativity: Trust and Reconciliation as a Social Construct

Raya's journey's last stage is the climax of her heroic development. Having shown responsibility, emotional fortitude, and empathy throughout her journey, Raya reaches the moment of her greatest challenge, the choice between forgiveness and vengeance. While things were initially going well, Raya's

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hopes are dashed by betrayal on the part of Namaari, resulting in the tragic death of Sisu, as shown in Figure 09.



Figure 9. Sisu was struck by one of Namaari's arrows whilst trying to stop the conflict
(Source: *Raya and the Last Dragon* 2021)

This scene takes place at (01:17:36-01:18:40). Sisu's death causes Kumandra to fall back into chaos because there are no longer any dragons capable of protecting humans from the Druun. Raya, filled with anger, briefly blames Namaari for Sisu's death. However, amidst the situation, Raya remembers Sisu's final message about the importance of trust.

Sisu : *"I don't know why they chose me. It could- have been any of us. All I know is I trusted them, and they trusted me."*

Rather than introducing a new value, Sisu's message reinforces everything Raya has learned throughout her journey. Responsibility, empathy, leadership, and cooperation ultimately converge into one final performative act, trusting others despite the possibility of betrayal.

Raya : *"Everyone, give me your gems. We can- still put it together..."*

Raya : *"It's not about her magic, It's about trust, To finally trust each other and fix this."*

The decision was the highest form of heroic performance in Raya's journey. According to Judith Butler (1990), identity is not formed through a single act, but through a series of repeated actions that become part of a person's identity. From the beginning of the film, Raya consistently built her identity through responsibility, emotional resilience, leadership, and empathy.

The trust Raya places in Namaari becomes a symbol of the end of the cycle of suspicion that has divided Kumandra for

generations. Consequently, Raya's heroism transforms not only herself but also the social relationships among the five clans through reconciliation and mutual trust.



Figure 10. Raya, Namaari, Sisu, and their companions reconcile after restoring the Dragon Gem.
(Source: *Raya and the Last Dragon* 2021)

The scene in Figure 10 (01:31:46–01:32:04) shows Raya, Namaari, Sisu, and the other characters coming together after the conflict between the clans ends. Their reunion represents more than a moment of happiness. It shows that the relationships between the clans have started to change after years of suspicion and conflict. The ending of *Raya and the Last Dragon* emphasizes forgiveness and trust rather than revenge. In this sense, Raya's heroism is shown not through defeating Namaari, but through her willingness to trust her again and accept her as part of the effort to restore peace in Kumandra.

F. Female Heroism and the Restoration of Social Harmony

The restoration of Kumandra marks the final outcome of Raya's performative journey. Rather than defining victory through military defeat, *Raya and the Last Dragon* portrays reconciliation, mutual trust, and shared responsibility as the true foundations of peace in figure 11.



Figure 11. The world is at peace again, all clans united.
(source: *Raya and the Last Dragon* 2021)

This final scene (01:34:36-01:35:09) is indicative not only of the elimination of the

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Druun, but also of the recreation of social cohesion. In this case, the idea of heroism is portrayed not as an achievement of one person, but of society itself. It can be stated that this example corresponds to the idea of performativity as described by Judith Butler (1990). The identity of Raya is built in accordance with social actions: taking up the role of a guardian and always preferring trust to vengeance.

In addition to this, by means of the concept of female masculinity provided by Jack Halberstam, Raya extends classical heroic attributes; her courage and determination manifest themselves through empathy and communal concern, not dominance, thus proving that the restoration of peace necessitates emotional courage just as much as physical courage.

In this regard, this development points to the larger trend associated with the evolution of the narrative direction in Disney films. Where Mulan's plot ends with victory in war, and Merida's plot ends with harmony within family relationships, the culmination of Raya's plot sees the restoration of a whole social system.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that the construction of heroine identity in Raya and the Last Dragon is not natural from birth, but it is constructed by Raya through repetition of certain actions. Using Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, Raya's identity as a hero is developed in five connected steps, namely, accepting her role as the Guardian of the Dragon Gem, showing emotional resilience due to betrayal, building relational leadership based on cooperation, making a choice between revenge and trust, and restoration of harmony in society. Repetition of these actions helps Raya construct her identity as a hero, which means that heroism is socially performed.

Additionally, Jack Halberstam's idea of female masculinity helped in proving that leadership, courage, decisive and responsibility are not only attributes of masculinity but can also be attributes of women without compromising their femininity. Unlike other Disney heroines such as Mulan and Brave, the new Disney

movie Raya and the Last Dragon provides an expanded depiction of heroism among women by portraying the aspects of collective responsibility, empathy, reconciliation and trust rather than individual success or military success. The findings show that there is a trend in Disney heroines' representations by shifting their focus from physical domination to socially transformational leadership. Thus, this paper makes an important contribution to the gender studies and film studies by providing evidence that heroism in the contemporary era is socially constructed and constantly changing identity, which aims at restoration of collective harmony.

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