

**BEYOND THE MAGIC: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE STUDY OF DIVERSITY IN
DISNEY'S CHILDREN'S MOVIES - *LUCA (2021)* AND *RAYA AND THE LAST
DRAGON (2021)***¹**Tooba Mughal,**

MS English Scholar, COMSATS University Islamabad (CUI), Lahore Campus, Email:

toobamughal2468@gmail.com²**Dr. Umara Shaheen.**

Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, CUI, Lahore Campus Email:

ushaheen@cuilahore.edu.pk**Abstract**

The study investigates the complex interplay of diversity, inclusivity, and power dynamics within Disney's Luca (2021) and Raya and the Last Dragon (2021). Despite widespread recognition of the impact of diverse and inclusive representations in children's entertainment media, the underlying power structures and dominant narratives reinforce stereotypes and perpetuate hidden ideologies. It examines how power dynamics related to intersectional identities of class, ethnicity, gender, and race shape representations of diversity and inclusion. It employs Fairclough's 3D model of CDA and draws on intersectionality theory. In Luca, the emphasis on assimilation into human society coupled with the "othering" of sea monsters through language and narrative structure, reinforces a human-centric worldview and perpetuates existing power imbalances. The totality of diminished agency of the female character "Giulia" further highlights intersecting gender stereotypes. Raya and the Last Dragon also exhibit tendencies towards cultural homogenisation and Orientalist tropes. While it features a female protagonist and draws inspiration from Southeast Asian cultures, the representation of different tribes through essentialising metaphors and the reliance on the "chosen one" narrative reinforce existing power structures. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of the role of children's media in shaping cultural discourse and the importance of critical engagement with media messages.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Children's Media, Cultural Representation, Disney, Diversity, Inclusivity, Intersectionality, Power Dynamics.

Introduction

Undoubtedly, Disney movies in popular culture, specifically in children's entertainment, have long been celebrated for their appealing storytelling, engaging characters, and timeless themes (Yang, 2023). In addition to this magic and fantasy, a rich fabric of cultural narratives, societal norms, and representations of diversity shapes young audiences' worldviews and minds (Breuer, 2021). This study focuses on diversity in Disney's animated movies, which is deftly woven into the plots of *Luca (2021)* and *Raya and the Last Dragon (2021)*. The current study explores the themes of diversity concerning inclusion and power dynamics. Moreover, diversity in media has arisen as a central discourse in contemporary society, reflecting the widespread recognition of the pivotal depiction of representation and inclusion beyond many cultural domains (Dotgap, 2023). Disney is a powerhouse in children's entertainment. It influences shaping these narratives, making animated films a compelling subject for critical examination by peeling back layers through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). It furthers the idea that Disney's pervasive influence and level of extraordinary control underscores the contribution of the specialised nature of the topic that necessitates a focused approach to gathering in-depth and meaningful insights embedded within this facade. Studies have demonstrated that Disney movies are not neutral and likely to convey messages about society's linguistic ideologies (Soares, 2017). The unfolding of the underlying ideologies, power dynamics, and cultural references embedded within Disney movies find a way of employing CDA beyond the surface-level analysis and inquiring into deeper layers of meanings by requiring participants to provide a valuable understanding of the subject matter. The act of storytelling in *Luca* and *Raya and the Last Dragon* holds immense power to challenge prevailing narratives and offer counter-discourse to them. The necessity that it

reflects is in the contribution to the discussions on the role of entertainment in fostering diversity and inclusion in communities. As per the above discussion by closely analysing these movies, the researcher creates a framework to explore the underlying ideologies that impact identities and inclusivity, leaving an impression on young audiences.

However, the shift to introduce more diverse characters has sparked discussion, particularly regarding the potential for a facade of inclusivity. The intended research aims to uncover the subtle messages and cultural references that build the narratives through the basic storytelling of these cinematic works. Examining these intricating relationships challenges power structures and real-world issues concerning geopolitics, cultural conflicts, territorial disputes, and discriminatory attitudes. This idea resonates with the rationale of this purposive sampling by *Luca* (2021) that mounts as an evolutionary story set in the picturesque Italian seaside town that offers a fabric of otherness trope between the sea monsters and the human world as “Luca” – A sea monster steps up and experiences a transformative summer adventure (Passa, 2021). *Raya & the Last Dragon* (2021), set in the fantasy world of Kumandra, was inspired by the Indonesian, Philippines, and Thailand, precisely Southeast Asian cultures (Budaya, 2022). The Land was once harmonious, but lately, it has been divided into five distinct regions, which depicts “United we stand, divided we fall.”

Research Objective

1. To analyse how the interplay between character agencies and societal norms in Disney’s selected animated movies influences the development of underlying themes related to diversity and inclusivity and how these narratives align with real-world issues, challenging or reinforcing dominant discourse and prevailing power structures through storytelling.

Research Questions

- 1) How do the intersectionality of character identities and the portrayal of societal norms in *Luca* and *Raya and the Last Dragon* reflect dominant discourses regarding diversity and inclusivity in animation and beyond?
- 2) In what ways do the cultural contexts of Italy and Southeast Asia, as represented in Disney movies, challenge or reinforce dominant power structures within and beyond the movies’ narratives?

Literature Review

Disney is a synonymous name for childhood treasure and wonder. It holds a significant influence and a long history of impactful journeys in children’s media (Smith, 2015). Disney’s animated movies have captured young audience’s interest and captivated them from dreams to reality (Johnson, 2020). Indisputably, it shapes imagination and cultural norms as it clicks from sketching to constructing magical kingdoms on the global stage, showing its worldwide popularity (Hilt, 2023). However, the narrative that shapes young minds also evolves as societal attitudes toward diversity and inclusivity (Moran et al., 2021). Disney was founded in 1923. Undoubtedly, it became the media from producing simple animated shorts to creating complex stories. Observingly, that resonates with audiences around the globe, and history highlights that Disney movies reflected the cultural norms of their time frequently, including limited representation and reliance on stereotypes. However, societal values have shifted to the bigger picture of dissimilarity in Disney’s approach to storytelling (Rauscher et al., 2020). The animated movie *Luca* by Pixar has the power to be reviewed as a bildungsroman situated on the Italian Riviera. This tale builds the narrative of the adventure of a young mind in the form of Luca’s character. He, the protagonist of the story depicts an indigenous young sea monster (who experiences a life-changing summer). “Luca” camouflaged himself as a human body to experience life on land and get acceptance. According to the audience reviews it was an overall well-received movie that nurtured the thoughts of friendship, identity, and the fear of the unknown. However, some critics felt that

Disney's production of *Luca* did not reach the emotional depth and was not fully convincing. Similarly, *Raya and the Last Dragon* is an action-packed and epic fantasy production by Disney. The audience reviewed it as an adventure-pulling and a visual feast feministic movie. This Disney's modern-day princess movie is set in the fantasy world of Kumandra. Moreover, critics identified its visuals as being inspired by Southeast Asian cultures. However, it also faced criticism from them as they felt that the pacing was uneven and found certain elements reminiscent of previous Disney work.

The movie follows a typecast notion: "Raya" is considered a young lone warrior, presented as a tough, heroic stamp/impression seeking to unite the divided land by finding the last dragon (Sisu). She wanted to save her Kumandra kingdom from an ancient evil just by the restored magic of the dragons. For instance, according to Lipovetsky (2019), when children watch Disney movies with diverse characters playing leading roles, it causes them to embrace (otherness) differences logically and automatically develop empathy towards others. This is further supported by the researchers Choi and Kim (2020), who found that children explicitly (exposed) to inclusive media tend (natural inclination) to have open-minded traits and accept peers from diverse backgrounds. Its exemplification is that in the movie *Raya and the Last Dragon* - the main character, "Raya" (a strong female lead), works (interaction) with a diverse group of characters from diverse backgrounds (tribes) to save her world (depiction of teamwork to have success). Likewise, in the movie, *Luca* - the titular character becomes friends with "Alberto" and learns to love him, who initially feared him because of his community differences. Both the movies received okay feedback from the critics and audiences. Viewers praised the similarities in themes of Diversity and Representation by just following the connotative meaning and neglecting all the other core parts or types of meanings (linguistically) in the matter. They remarked on these crafts as per Disney's agenda, needing to understand their power to react, raise questions, or not be manipulated by it. They keep it a simple canvas and lens of these underrepresented groups. According to the UCLA Center for Scholars and Storytellers report, these movies feature characters from marginalised groups as they examine trends in entertainment media. At the same time, the viewers considered Disney for challenging traditional stereotypes, which is the apparent target of Disney. O'Brien (2018) states in his book "The Importance of Diverse and Inclusive Representation in Children's Media" that the observers also talked about differences in cultural contexts and narratives of these movies. Ramzan and Khan (2019) analyzed the stereotyped ideology of Nawabs and concluded they are exercising power through a hidden agenda. Ramzan et al., (2020) comparatively discussed the news headlines agenda in print media discourse and found out the ideological underpinnings. Ramzan, et al., (2020) studied print media statements for ideological purposes and found veiled ideologies.

Despite these developments, challenges continue to exist. Critics argued that Disney still needs to successfully depict and represent in describing and presenting the complete complexities of diverse cultures. For example, In *Raya and the Last Dragon*, there was a criticism of the portrayal of Southeast Asian cultures as too generalised, depicting a mix of clothing, weapons, and visual elements from various cultures without knowing the depth of the region's distinct traditions and histories (Chow, 2021). Some critics argued that the movie does include a diverse cast of characters and language consultants (Dy, 2021). However, a debate about whether it fully embarrasses the complexities of Southeast Asian culture needs to be investigated. Similarly, *Luca's* critiques were at the Italian culture while set up in Italy. They claimed that it does not fully attempt the nuances of this culture and instead relies on stereotypes, i.e., the idea of loudness and passion (all Italians are loud and passionate - the race scene). Additionally, critics observed that the movie's portrayal of the seaside town of Portorosoo is quite generic (a missed opportunity to explore authentic Italian culture). It turns out that it lacks the specificity of a real Italian region (Madden, 2021). Ramzan, et al., (2023)

studied the psychological discursiveness in language use and concluded hidden agenda is way to be polite (Ramzan & Kahn, 2024). There is a positive us and negative them ideology (Nawaz, et al., 2021) and ideology works also in advertisement (Nawaz, et al., 2022). The diversity portrayal in Disney's Children's animated movies has become a topic of massive scrutiny because audiences demand more inclusive narratives that reflect the demographic realities of the world (Raju et al., 2023). Interestingly, recent studies on Disney movies have illustrated the picture of familiar motifs and topics. As Soares speculates, "Disney movies are not neutral and likely to convey messages about society's linguistic ideologies" (Soares, 2017, pp. 44-46). In this realm and magical world, Disney is a dominant force that creates a facade of inclusivity and presents characters from divergent backgrounds without addressing the complexities of their identities and experiences (Singh & Baker, 2021; Jhally, 2018). Those studies more precisely, scholars have recently examined Disney's representation of diversity and cultural identity in *Raya and the Last Dragon*. This movie incorporates Southeast Asian cultural elements, including life values, character designs, and customs, to build perceptions about the region (Agni Saraswati et al., 2021; Nirwana, 2023). While it acknowledges and challenges some dominant narratives through its portrayal of female warriors and unconventional dragon characters. It also potentially marginalised antagonists (Adaninggar et al., 2024). The film's release coincided with anti-Asian incidents in Western countries, highlighting its massive role in American trade politics (Agni Saraswati et al., 2021). Indeed, this provides more context for understanding the film's themes of diversity and inclusion. More broadly, the landscape of Disney's approach to diversity has evolved, with some classics occurring as exalting films of Western norms while overshadowing otherness (Monleón, 2021). Buckingham (2019), on the other hand, used reception studies to investigate how young viewers understand and engage with diverse representations in media. As discussed above, the topic is evolutionary and historically faced criticism for Disney's portrayal of diversity. Experts like Giroux (1999) have argued that Disney studios, when analysed in the category of film critique, set the benchmark of homogenised portrayals of race and culture, failing to capture the standard of the richness of real-world experiences in his study. Disney's legacy in Representations of Diversity has been marked by progress and controversial stances (Sulanto, 2022). Early films often relied on stereotypical notions, as seen in *Dumbo* and *Song of the South*, which have faced significant consequences of criticism for their racial insensitivity (Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). However, recently released films, such as *Moana* and *Raya and the Last Dragon*, have attempted to present more delicate portrayals of diverse cultures (Monleón, 2021). Scholars argued with that and claimed that while these films show improvement, they still grapple with underlying issues of representation and authenticity (Klein, 2020; Lee, 2021). The representation of Asians in Disney films has faced criticism for perpetuating stereotypes. One of those is the model minority (Loh, 2020). This stereotype presents Asian people as hardworking and obedient, often ignoring the rich diversity of Asian cultures. The character *Mulan*, whose name is also the title of the Disney film, exemplifies this stereotype in her portrayal (Giroux, 1999; Benshoff & Griffin, 2004). This representation is harmful as it imposes unrealistic expectations on members of the Asian communities. According to Yang (2024), given the potential harm that these stereotypes can cause, it is crucial to examine or gain insight into the representation of Asians, their identity, and inclusivity to other parts as diversification in Disney films, which is the prime objective. Such stereotypes can have a profound impact on the development of children's perceptions of various ethnic groups, potentially leading to harmful consequences (Chin & Brown, 2003). When perpetuated or reinforced in children's media, these stereotypes can contribute to the development of biases and discriminatory attitudes. This can be particularly damaging, as young viewers may internalise these underlying messages and begin to view members of the Asian community through a reduced

understanding that fails to acknowledge the rich complexity and diversity of Asian cultures (Giroux, 1999; Loh, 2020).

Critical Discourse Analysis - Methodology of the Research

The Critical Discourse Analysis (approach) provides an immediate focus and coherence to discussion and is useful in analysing written, and spoken, to uncover hidden meanings (embedded in language). Carvalho (2008) believes that CDA examines how language is used (as a tool) to construct, maintain, and challenge social, political, and cultural power structures, i.e., shaping power dynamics, recognising power imbalances, and exposing hidden ideologies. It examines how language in media texts shapes and reflects social power dynamics, ideologies, and identities (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Moreover, Wodak (2016) clearly states that CDA is an interdisciplinary approach that investigates how various discourses influence public reception and contribute to societal norms in such a way that reveals underlying multiple biases or interests (assumptions that shape discourse). CDA focuses on textual analysis and sociocultural practices, emphasising the pivotal role of examining micro/macro-level influences (young audiences' thoughts and behaviours) on media representations (Thane, 2024). Furthermore, in the context of Intersectionality Theory presented by Kimberle Crenshaw (a black feminist) in legal studies, a sociological analytical framework was developed to understand multiple social stratifications such as class, race, gender, caste, ethnicity, appearance, and others. Central to Crenshaw's idea that intersects and contributes to the unique experiences of discrimination and privilege. Intrinsically, she coined this theory to emphasise that individuals are experiencing overlapped and interconnected systems/patterns of oppression (broadly refers as an intellectual framework). The underpinning paradigms of the present study adopted a *qualitative, critical, and interpretive approach*. Hence, it covers *constructivist-interpretivism and critical paradigms*, having the focus on the emphasised nature that reality is socially constructed and subjective, which is shaped by human interactions, cultural contexts, and individual experiences, concerned with uncovering power imbalances, challenging hegemonic structures, and promoting social change, respectively. The present study uses a qualitative research design and deductive reasoning to examine the insights derived from the data and materials (in-depth analysis of textual data). The primary data sources are the selected Disney movies *Luca* and *Raya and The Last Dragon*. Relevant secondary data sources are scholarly literature on diversity in media to contextualise the analysis of critical reviewing academic articles and film critiques or reviews.

Data Analysis

Intersectional Identities: Multifaceted Exploration of Class, Ethnicity, Gender, and Race Dynamics

In this section, the analysis's findings were examined through the intersectional lens highlighting the complexities of identity and power dynamics represented to shape the characters. The study reveals the movies' potential to reinforce dominant narratives by examining the characters' multifaceted identities and experiences. This section explores how these movies while attempting to represent diversity, inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes and misrepresentations.

Firstly, "Luca's" transformation into a human figure suggests the *negation of his sea monster identity and symbolises societal conditioning*. This reinforces *essentialist* notions of "humanness" as superior, rather than a celebration of hybridity (as a unique quality of his identity) and understanding that every existence has its reason for existence and acceptance. The emphasis is placed on his ability to "blend in" and pass as a human being but be accepted first by humans according to them, too. This moment perpetuates the idea that non-human identities are inferior and must be concealed to be accepted in society. Moving on, it

reinforces the dominant *human-centred narrative*, which is problematic from an intersectional perspective.

Extract 1

Alberto: “You, see? You are just like me now! You are a human!”

Luca: “But...I'm not human.”

Alberto: “Oh, do not be silly. Of course, you are! Look at you! Look how well you blend in with the humans!”

Secondly, the character of “Luca’s father,” Lorenzo, as a sea monster, embodies non-human identity and difference. However, his role focuses on reinforcing traditional gender roles and societal expectations in the movie. His strict and authoritative parenting style is reminiscent of *orthodox patriarchal roles* that reflect the dominant societal norms with his insistence on *conformity and assimilation*. **For instance**, Lorenzo’s rejection of “Luca’s” desire for adventure and exploration reinforces the idea that boys should conform to traditional definitions of masculinity, rather than exploring various aspects of their identity. However, the movie’s representation of gender and sexuality limited its potential to challenge dominant narratives.

Extract 2

Lorenzo: “Adventure? Ha! That is not what we do, Luca. We sea monsters stay hidden, safe in the deep. And that is final.”

Luca: “But...why can’t I explore? It is not like humans will find us down here.”

Lorenzo: “You are a sea monster, Luca, and you must act like one. No more of this human nonsense.”

In addition, within this movie character intersectional analysis, “Alberto, and Luca’s” Friendship was portrayed as a positive representation of male friendship. However, the shift in “Giulia’s” friendship representation is problematic and reinforces traditional gender stereotypes. “Giulia” was shown as a strong and independent girl but was *sidelined* as the story progressed. Her role became that of the helper to uplift another character, rather than a fully developed character with her agency.

Extract 3

Giulia: “Wow, you are amazing! You might win this thing!”

Alberto: “We know. But we need a third person for the race. Wanna join us?”

Giulia: “Uh, I am not sure. I am not that good of a racer.”

Alberto: “It doesn’t matter.”

On the other hand, the representatives of the sea monster community are reinforced by the “*othering*” of marginalised groups, despite the movie’s attempt to promote acceptance of diversity. The sea monster world is portrayed as “*barbaric*” and “*uncivilised*” in contrast to the human characters which reinforces negative stereotypes about non-human identities. The “*othering*” was further backed by the movie’s suggestion that the sea monsters must assimilate into human society to be accepted, rather than valued. Besides, the movie’s portrayal of the sea monster community as a homogeneous group of shared culture and language ignores the diversity within non-human identities. This homogenisation reinforces the idea that marginalised groups are inherently different and “*other*,” rather than acknowledging the complexity and variation within these groups.

Extract 4

Luca: “I do not want to be a monster anymore. I want to be human.”

Giulia: “Luca, you do not have to be human to be accepted. You are perfect just the way you are.”

Luca: “But humans are so much better than us. They have bikes, and pasta, and...”

Extract 5

Lorenzo: “Luca, I will not allow you to jeopardise our entire community by fraternising with humans. They are our enemy, and we must stay hidden to survive.”

Luca: “But they are not all bad, Papa! Maybe if we got to know them, they would not be so afraid of us.”

Extract 6

Alberto: “Hey, Luca. We could stay in Portorosso and pretend to be humans forever. That way, we will not have to return to the sea.”

Luca: “But what about our families? We cannot just abandon them.”

Moreover, the movie’s representation of class perpetuates stereotypes too. The human characters, in *Luca*, are portrayed as wealthy and privileged, with access to resources, knowledge, and opportunities that the sea monster community lacked. Lastly, *Luca*, occupies a liminal space between the worlds of sea and land, highlighting the intersection of his “*species*” and “*social class*” identities. It is the struggle of belonging and the experiences associated with him as he navigates both. This *binary* imposed by sea monsters and human categories evokes real-world experiences of *marginalisation and prejudice based on identity markers*.

Extract 7

Alberto: “Look at all these humans. They have everything. Fancy clothes, scooters, gelato... I wish I could be like them.”

Luca: “We cannot change who we are. But maybe if we try hard enough, we can earn their respect.”

Alberto: “Respect is not enough. We need to be one of them.”

Extract 8

Luca (to Alberto): “Do you ever feel like you do not belong here? Like you are caught between two worlds?”

Alberto: “Of course I do. I have always felt like that. But you know what? That is what makes us special.”

Luca: “Special how?”

Extract 9

Giulia (to Luca and Alberto): “Hey guys, I am glad you are my friends, even though you are...well, you know. Different.”

Luca: “Do you think we’ll ever be accepted here?”

Giulia: “Not. But if we stick together, who cares?”

In addition to this, in *Raya and the Last Dragon*, Kumandra’s diverse background (heavily inspired by Southeast Asian cultures) brings into focus the intersection of “*Raya’s*” “*ethnicity and gender*” identities. This character faces additional challenges in her quest for unity and healing within her community as a woman of colour, especially given the patriarchal undertones in the movie’s worldbuilding. Her role as a female leader in a male-dominated society further underscores the intersections between her gender and her position of power and responsibility. “*Raya’s*” role as the last remaining guardian of the dragon stone places her on the pedestal of the movie’s conflict and power dynamics. This positions her role as a symbol of hope and unity, while simultaneously highlighting the challenges she faces in navigating her identity. Her identity traits are inextricably linked to the broader cultural context of Kumandra, necessitating her to negotiate the complexities of her identity as a member of her tribe while also attempting to unify the diverse clans and overcome the distrust or conflict that divides them.

Extract 10

Chief Benja: “Remember Raya, as the last guardian, you must protect the dragon gem from those seekers destroying it. It is a heavy burden, but I know you are strong enough.”

Raya: "I understand, Father. I will do my best to make you proud."

Extract 11

Namaari: "Raya, you think you can just waltz here and take back the dragon gem? You are just a little girl playing at being a warrior."

Raya: "And you are nothing but a coward hiding behind your mother's skirts. I will not let you destroy Kumandra."

Namaari: "We'll see about that."

Extract 12

Raya (to Tuk Tuk): "This journey will not be easy. We will face dangers, obstacles, and enemies at every turn. But we must try. The future of Kumandra depends on it."

Tuk Tuk (chittering): "Krrrrr, krrrrr!"

Raya: "Yes, Tuk Tuk, I know. It is a lot to ask of a girl. But I have faith in us."

Another important character "Sisu," the Last Dragon, whose identity is the centre of the movie's conflicts. As the embodiment of stone's magic, her "species" and "power" identities intersect in complex ways. Her light-hearted and eccentric personality underscores the intersections of her identity as a mystical being and her role as a guardian contrast with the harsh realities of the world.

Extract 13

Sisu: "Hey, Raya! You look like you need some help. Do not worry, I am here to save the day. You know, like a hero, but cooler."

Raya: "You're...a dragon?"

Sisu: "Yup! The Last one standing, I am afraid. But fear not, I have plenty of sisu to go around!"

Raya: "Sisu?"

Sisu: "It is a word from the human world. It means bravery, determination, and resilience. And let me tell you, I have a boatload of sisu!"

Raya: "That's why you're called Sisu?"

Sisu: "Yep!"

Similarly, this movie attempted to represent the diverse Southeast Asian culture, also into the trap of homogenising these cultures. The movie's worldbuilding relied on stereotypical "Orientalist" aesthetics that flattened the diversity of Southeast Asian cultures. It presents a unified "Asian-inspired" world rather than engaging with unique histories and cultures of specific regions. For instance, the different lands are depicted in the movie as "islands," which reduces the diverse Southeast Asian culture to a single, homogenised setting. The term "dragon" as a cultural symbol and its depiction of Raya as the "dragon warrior," draws on Orientalist tropes of Asian mysticism and spirituality.

Extract 14

Raya: "We are in Talon now. They are known for their spicy cuisine and hot-headed temperament."

Tuk Tuk (chittering): "Krrrrr, krrrrr!"

Raya: "Yes, I know. All the tribes are different, but they all share one thing in common—a love for dragons."

Extract 15

Benja: "Remember, my daughter, Kumandra is divided into five lands. Each land has its own culture, history, and beliefs. But we must work together to keep the Dragon Gem safe from those, seeking to use its power for evil."

Raya: "I understand, Father. I will do everything I can, to protect the gem and bring peace to Kumandra."

Benja: "You have the heart of a dragon, Raya."

Extract 16

Chief Virana: “We Fangs have always been treated like outsiders by the other tribes. But no more. With the dragon gem in our possession, we will rise and take our rightful place as rulers of Kumandra.”

Namaari: “And what of Raya? She will stop at nothing to reclaim the gem.”

Chief Virana: “Then we must stop her. By any means necessary.”

Furthermore, the movie’s representation of race and ethnicity reinforced problematic essentialist tropes. For instance, the movie’s use of “race-bending” cast non-Southeast Asian actors to portray this region’s characters, perpetuating the idea that all Asian people are interchangeable and indistinguishable. As discussed earlier, the movie’s portrayal of the different lands as a monoculture also reinforces essentialist ideas about race and ethnicity, suggesting that Southeast Asian cultures are homogeneous rather than diverse and dynamic. This movie struggled to avoid essentialist representations. For instance, the land of “Talon” was represented as “evil” and “greedy,” perpetuating negative stereotypes about Southeast Asian culture. Similarly, while “Raya’s” character was portrayed as strong and courageous, she was also represented as the “chosen one,” a narrative trope.

It has also often been criticised for reinforcing the idea of individual exceptionalism rather than collective action.

Deconstructing Disney: Investing Power Dynamics through Fairclough’s 3D Model

In this section, the analysis’s findings were examined through the prism of Fairclough’s 3D Model - Analysing the internal and external relationships within texts and drawing parallels between specific communicative events (concrete occurrences) and broader (abstract) social behaviours, is facilitated by a threefold study of textual meaning. It provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the intricate interplay between character agency, societal norms, and broader cultural contexts within these movies.

The 1st Dimension

The text analysis (language usage in a specific discourse/text) component as the 1st dimension (linguistic features – vocabulary, grammar, metaphors, word choices rhetorical devices, pronouns, repetition etc) of this model revealed that the language usage in Luca suggested explicit power dynamics through the protagonist’s (Luca – the titular character’s) human-centric desire for acceptance and the antagonist’s (Erocole Visconti) portrayal of oppression against sea monsters. Through the linguistic features, the text of the movie analyses to provide an in-depth understanding of how creatively and artistically Disney’s representation is modified to persuade and manipulate people.

The Lexical Choices, Pronouns and Rhetorical Devices

In Luca, the word “monster” in a playful tone carries the weight of cultural preconceptions and prejudices, referring to sea creatures by humans. On the other hand, the sea creatures refer to themselves and each other as “fish.” This word choice creates a clear division between these two (in and out) groups and reinforces the idea that sea creatures are inherently different and inferior to humans. In addition, this movie also used terms like land walkers (referring to humans) and scaly (for sea creatures). It depicts a sense of insult directed at sea creatures as if they were interrupting their lives. These terms extended the reinforcement but suggested that human characters view the sea creatures as lesser for their physical differences. In this movie, the small and choppy sentences create a sense of simplicity or naivety that suggests these characters are not as sophisticated, spontaneous, and intelligent as human beings.

For example, when Alberto first meets Luca during the interval time of the movie, he says, “Me? I am a sea monster.” This abruptly developed sense of the sentence meets the criteria of “Alberto’s” difference and reinforces the idea of sea creatures as “others.” Another **example**, when Luca’s parents discover that he easily transformed himself into a hybrid appearance,

they say, “You have turned into a land walker! It is not safe out there. Stay here with us in the sea where it is safe.” The rhetorical devices i.e., euphemisms and metaphors concealed subtle messages about human superiority and the sea monster’s inferiority (covert power dynamics). It reinforces social hierarchies in the movie. **For instance**, in one scene, Visconti threatens the sea monsters by shouting, “If I see one fin in this town, I’ll turn you into fish soup.” This overt message reinforces the hierarchy of human superiority over sea monsters. Similarly, the usage of euphemisms and metaphors in this movie is encountered in the words of “land-hoppers” for humans. This indirect reference to the hierarchal structure between humans and sea monsters, with humans seen as superior because they can “hop” on land. Sea monsters are just relegated to the waterside and move within the confines of their aquatic environment, which reinforces the dominant social narrative. In addition, throughout the movie, there is a recurring theme of conformity and assimilation, particularly when “Luca” strives to be accepted by humans (implicit power dynamics). He tries to mimic human behaviour and mannerisms to blend in and fit in for survival. Consequently, he is thrilled when “Luca” discovers he can transform into a human after drying off in the early movie scenes. His desire for human acceptance is explicit and leads him to conceal his identity as a sea monster – revealing explicit power dynamics. Additionally, in Luca, imperatives are frequently used by “Visconti” and other human characters to assert their dominance over them (the sea monsters). **For instance**, Ercole often commands, “Get out of here!” or “Go back to the sea!” to reinforce his power.

Moving shift to the Raya and the Last Dragon, the explicit power dynamics are seen through the character’s language. The villain, “Namaari,” often uses imperatives such as “Get out of my way!” or “kneel before me!” to assert her dominance. For example, “Namaari corners Sisu” to seize her powers; Namaari uses imperatives “Surrender now, or you will be destroyed!” This explicit command emphasises her dominance over “Sisu,” who is portrayed as an outsider. To specify, the movie’s narrative depicts him as different from the rest of the Kumandra highlighting the implicit power dynamic of humans being superior to other species. Furthermore, when “Raya meets Sisu” for the first time, Sisu’s language and mannerisms are different from Kumandra people. Sisu’s otherness is highlighted when “Raya” initially distrusts her and treats her as a stranger. The overt power dynamics are often emphasised through the imperative usage e.g., Namaari commands her followers, “Bring me the heart stone!” The inverted meanings are seen in the rhetoric of the guardians, who refer to “Sisu” as the “last hope” and “only chance” for the Kumandra. While on the surface, this seems to elevate Sisu’s status, it also implies her difference and lack of belonging. Then, covert meanings are revealed in the use of euphemisms and metaphors. For instance, when Raya refers to Kumandra’s citizens as “tribespeople,” it brings connotations of primitivism and otherness.

This further supports the power dynamics of Humans and Dragons i.e., “Sisu.” The movie uses a flood of lexical items, such as the word “heart,” repeatedly and multiple times, symbolising the unity of the five tribes and their shared humanity. However, this term also implies a division, as those without “heart” are seen as outsiders and threats. Rhetorical devices such as hyperbole, are often employed to emphasise power dynamics. For example, “Namaari” states, “I will destroy everything you hold dear!” This exaggerates her threat and positions her as the formidable villain. Personification creates an emotional connection between the audience and the characters (to show reflection wanted to cultivate).

Similarly, in Raya and the Last Dragon, words like “Dragons (in the title too) and muggles” are repeated numerous times throughout the movie, for dragon characters and humans respectively creating a similar division world. The term “Dragons” resonates with the connotations of wisdom, power, and authority. Conversely, “muggles” suggested a lack of magical ability and a characteristic of dumbness. Besides this, words like “our realm and

world” for reference to the dragon kingdom imply ownership and authority, whereas words like their world create a sense of otherness and inferiority.

Moreover, the complex sentence structures and elevated register (for the dragon characters) contrasted with the more conversational language (for the human characters), reflect a power imbalance and distinction between these two groups. For example, the quotation by “Sisu” demonstrates it by saying: “Long ago, our kingdom was united. A land of Dragons and Humans, where everyone shares the same gem and lives in harmony.” The usage of the dialogue system in this movie sensualises the depiction of established power dynamics between the two groups. It has been seen in the talking style of “Sisu to Raya” with the choice of words/pronouns “we and our” to create a sense of identity and purpose. Another imprint of this dialogue system is that dragon characters used to speak about the past in the movie.

The one prominent pattern and recurring theme was aligned with the use of metaphors and analogies that majorly express the notion of identity and difference. In Luca, the human environment is often described in the scenes as the “surface” while the sea monster world is represented as “depth.” It creates a division between these two switches and reinforces the dimension that human and non-human identities are inherently separate and distinct. Moreover, it provides a binary wall between the human society as “light” and the sea world as “darkness” that sheds light on essentialist narratives.

In Raya and the Last Dragon, the five tribes are described using metaphors that nominally represent their essentialised identity and traits. For example, the “Fang tribe” is referred to as “Cold-blooded” highlighting their barbarity and cruelty, and the “Tail tribe” is represented by the word “slippery” suggesting their perceived deceitfulness. These metaphors reinforce that these rhetorical devices are fixed and unchanging identities rather than shaped by historical and cultural factors.

Furthermore, analogies in “Luca” also help to underscore the differences between sea monsters and human identities. For instance, when Luca’s father explains why he cannot visit the human surface, he says, “It would be like trying to ride a horse with no saddle.” It suggests that sea monsters’ and humans’ experiences are fundamentally different and incapable of accordant, reinforcing the essentialist view of identity.

Besides this, the analogy in Raya and the Last Dragon presents the tension between the tribes. In one scene, “Raya,” compares the conflict to a broken vase, saying, “Just like you cannot put a broken vase back together, it is impossible to fix the damage the Drunn have done.” It suggests that the damage caused by the Drunn cannot be easily repaired, and represents the historical conflict, the enduring divisions, and tensions between the tribes.

The 2nd Dimension

In the discursive practice dimension of the analysis, several recurring themes and trends emerged from the data as underlying assumptions and intentions that shape the movie’s production process, distribution (marketing) and critical reception. For instance, in Luca, the movie’s focus on the protagonist’s desire to assimilate into human society reinforces traditional gender norms that prioritise conformity and fitting in over individuality and non-conformity. During the production process the Director, Enrico Casarosa, stated that his inspiration for the movie came from his childhood experiences growing up in Genoa, Italy. This personal connection to the setting and culture has influenced the representation of gender roles, which were shaped by the traditional Italian social norm of the 1970s, at that time conformity and heteronormativity were dominant. On the one hand, some viewers praised the diverse representation of body types among the sea monster characters, with “Luca and Alberto” exhibiting different proportions and physiques.

In the discursive practice analysis of “Raya and the Last Dragon,” the findings related to production emerged as the filmmakers stated that the movie was inspired by Southeast Asia’s

cultural diversity and landscape, with the fictional land of Kumandra modelled after the region's geography. However, some critics have noted that the movie's representation of Southeast Asian culture is shallow and exoticised, potentially reinforcing Orientalist tropes in Western media. One instance of exoticisation is the movie's portrayal of the fictional martial arts called "Hou-chi."

The 3rd Dimension

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the need for media to more accurately, respectfully, and responsibly represent diverse identities and experiences. However, representation of non-Western cultures in popular media remains limited, often relying on stereotypes and essentialist portrayals. For instance, *Raya and the Last Dragon* was marketed as a groundbreaking representation of Southeast Asian cultures. Yet, the movie's representation of the Southeast Asian-inspired world of Kumandra was criticised for oversimplifying and exoticising the diverse cultures and histories of the region. The critics noted the movie's failure to engage with real-world political tensions and ethnic conflicts as essential to understanding Southeast Asian history and politics. This points to a broader issue in popular media and dominant social narratives are centred on Western perspectives or values. It marginalises and erases the voices and experiences of non-Western cultures.

Conversely, "Luca" also fell short in its representation of Italian culture. It moves to perpetuate stereotypes of Italian Americans as loud, boisterous, and overly passionate. The movie's idyllic portrayal of Portrayal lacks the complexity and understanding of Italian culture or history, while just visually stunning. This highlights the persistent issue of cultural appropriation in children's entertainment media. In this entity, non-Western cultures are commodified for Western audiences without considering their complexities and diverse experiences. .

Results

Intersectionality of Character Identities and Societal Norms

In Luca, the element of species and assimilation is the result of Luca's Sea monster identity; presented as a barrier to acceptance within human society. The narrative emphasises his transformation and ability to "blend in" as a human. It suggests assimilation as a condition for inclusion. Extracts 1, 4, and 6 intersect with societal norms that prioritise human identity and marginalise non-human identities. Secondly, the power of gender and patriarchy took place in Lorenzo's character which reinforces traditional patriarchal roles within the Sea Monster community. It emphasises conformity and obedience. Then, extract 2 intersects with societal norms regarding masculinity and control. Again, the token of gender and agency occurs when Luca and Alberto's male friendship is central, and Giulia's initial agency is diminished. It reinforces gender stereotypes where female characters are relegated to supporting roles (Extract 3). Lastly, the class and liminality intersect with Luca's position between the sea and land worlds highlighting the intersection of his species and social class, placing him in a liminal space where he struggles to belong (Extract 7, 8).

On the other hand, in *Raya and the Last Dragon*, the theme of gender and leadership in Raya's role as a female leader in a society with patriarchal undertones highlights the intersection of her gender and her position of power and responsibility (Extract 10, 12). Its challenges to her authority based on her gender are also present in Extract 11. The subtle hidden message of species and power is on the hold of Sisu's dragon identity that intersects with her role as a powerful magical being which creates a complex representation of power dynamics in Extract 13. In addition, the Ethnicity and Cultural Representation of the movie draws on Southeast Asian cultural elements but presents a homogenised "Asian-inspired" world. It potentially flattens the diversity of specific Southeast Asian cultures (Extracts 14, 15) and intersects with dominant discourses of representation in media.

Cultural Context and Power Structures

Firstly, in Luca, the setting of Italy is presented in a fictionalised Italian Riviera town that presents a specific cultural context. The emphasis on fitting into the human community is interpreted as reflecting societal pressures to conform to dominant cultural norms. The depiction of humans as having more resources and opportunities suggests existing power structures within the fictional setting (Extract 7). Moreover, in *Raya and the Last Dragon*, the movie's worldbuilding inspired by Southeast Asian cultures presents a unified setting because this approach, along with the "dragon warrior" trope, has been seen as reinforcing Orientalist tropes and potentially simplifying complex cultural histories and power dynamics. The conflict between different lands (Extract 16) reflects real-world issues and power dynamics. However, this movie's resolution through individual action is analysed to dominant narratives of individualism.

Lexical Choices and Pronouns

Firstly, in Luca, the use of the word "monster" by human characters to refer to sea creatures, contrasted with the sea creatures' self-identification as "fish." It establishes a clear in-group/out-group distinction and reinforces a hierarchy. Additionally, terms like "land walkers" and "scaly" further emphasise physical differences, more likely to suggest a negative view of sea creatures by humans. Lastly, the use of simple and choppy sentences in some sea creature dialogues suggests a lack of sophistication compared to the more complex language used by human characters.

Another thing, in *Raya and the Last Dragon*, the repeated use of "Dragons" and "muggles" creates a similar in-group/out-group division between dragon and human characters. Similarly, the recurrent use of "our realm/world" by dragons and "their world" for humans reinforces a sense of ownership and authority for the dragons. Consequently, the term "tribespeople," used by "Raya," herself carries connotations of primitivism and otherness.

Rhetorical Devices

The first movie, Luca, uses euphemisms and metaphors, such as threatening to turn sea monsters into "fish soup," to conceal messages of human superiority. Likewise, the term "land-hoppers" for humans indirectly reinforces the idea of human dominance. The other most important device of hyperbole and personification used here such as Giulia's exclamation "The monster-sea creatures have come!" contributes to the marginalisation of sea monsters. When it comes to *Raya and the Last Dragon* the Imperatives used by Namaari ("Surrender now!") assert her dominance. In addition, the rhetoric of guardians referring to Sisu as the "last hope" while elevating her also implies her difference and outsider status (quo). Again, hyperbole is used to emphasise power dynamics, such as Namaari's threat "I will destroy everything you hold dear!" Lastly, Metaphors are used to describe the tribes entitled "Cold-blooded" for the Fang tribe and "slippery" for the Tail tribe potentially reinforcing essentialist identities.

Dialogue and Sentence Structure

The short and abrupt sentences used by some sea creatures in Luca, draw a contrast with more complex dialogue from human characters. The fined dialogues emphasise the desire for assimilation here, with Luca actively seeking human acceptance. Similarly, in *Raya and the Last Dragon*, the complex sentence structures and elevated register are used by dragon characters, contrasting with the more conversational language of human characters. The use of the pronouns "we" and "our" by Sisu creates a sense of shared identity and purpose. In this movie, the dialogue establishes a power dynamic between humans and dragons, with humans often seeking the dragons' help (counterrally).

Narrative Structure and Themes

The narrative of coming-of-age focuses on Luca and his desire to belong to human's contingent on conformity. The climax of this movie, where Luca's identity is revealed

reinforces repeated themes of identity and acceptance. On the other hand, the character of Ercole Visconti reinforces dominant societal power structures through his discourse in the movie. Other examples in “Raya and the Last Dragon” target the “Hero's Journey” archetype positioning “Raya” as a single saviour figure. The resolution of focusing on individual action downplays collective action. Moreover, the “magical negro” trope is present in Sisu’s character. Here, the narrative reinforces themes of redemption and harmony.

Metaphors and Analogies

The human environment is described as the “surface,” while the sea monster world is represented as “depth,” creating a binary opposition in the movie Luca, and the analogy of “riding a horse with no saddle” emphasises the perceived difference between sea monsters and humans. Similarly, in the other movie, metaphors are used to describe the tribes, reinforcing essentialist identities and the analogy of a “broken vase” represents the conflict between the tribes.

Discussion

Connecting 1st and 3rd Dimensions through an Intersectional Lens as Textual Analysis and Dominant Discourses

The textual analysis as Fairclough’s textual dimension reveals how linguistic and narrative strategies in both movies intersect with dominant discourses about diversity and inclusivity as Fairclough’s sociocultural dimension - particularly when viewed through an intersectional lens.

In Luca, the protagonist’s experience of being a sea monster wanting to integrate into human society is not simply about species differences. Moreover, it intersects with class dynamics. The human characters’ access to resources and opportunities highlights a power imbalance that influences Luca’s desire to assimilate, and this intersection of species and class reinforces the dominant ideology. Its upward mobility and acceptance are often contingent upon adopting the dominant group's norms. This resonates and aligns with critiques of Disney’s tendency to homogenise portrayals of culture (Giroux, 1999) and adds the layer of class analysis. While Luca and Alberto’s male friendship is central, Giulia’s initial agency is diminished, highlighting how gender intersects with narrative roles. Likewise, Giulia’s character is relegated to a supporting role and primarily assists the male protagonists. However, it was initially portrayed as independent. This reinforces gender stereotypes and limits the complexity of her character. It also highlights how intersecting identities can be unevenly represented.

In Raya and the Last Dragon, Raya’s position as a female leader in a society with patriarchal undertones highlights the intersection of gender and power. Contextually, her struggles and challenges in power are not solely due to her leadership role but are compounded by her gender within a male-dominated context which indicates an intersectional perspective and reveals how multiple intersecting identities shape power dynamics. The other character, “Namaari” challenges “Raya” - (“You are just a little girl playing at being a warrior”). It directly addresses this intersection. The representation of Southeast Asian cultures (five tribes) in *Raya*, falls into the trap of homogenisation while aiming for diversity. This homogenisation intersects with Orientalist tropes which means creating a simplified and exoticised view of the region. Subsequently, this intersectional analysis reveals how cultural representation is affected by pre-existing power dynamics and stereotypes. The legit use of the term “tribespeople” for Kumandra’s citizens contributes to this “othering” by invoking colonial-era language. Lastly, Sisu’s dragon identity intersects with her role as a powerful magical being. But this power is complicated by her dependence on human characters to restore her magic. This intersection reveals a complex power dynamic where even a powerful mythical being is subject to human influence. This intersects with the “magical negro” trope

and raises questions about agency and representation. **Discursive Practices and Production Context with Intersectional Considerations**

The production context reveals how the lack of diverse representation behind the camera in *Raya* (specifically) contributes to the perpetuation of stereotypes. This highlights the importance of intersectional representation (not only in the characters portrayed) - but also within the creative teams responsible for their creation. The critiques of *Raya*'s cultural representation being "shallow and exoticised" are tied tightly to this lack of diverse perspectives in the production process. Additionally, the marketing of both movies needs to be analysed for diverse audiences while emphasising diversity with the raised question of how diverse cultural groups are receiving these films, Do the intended messages of inclusivity resonate with all audiences, or are they just being interpreted differently based on intersecting identities? The mixed reception, particularly regarding cultural authenticity, demonstrates the need for more comprehensive marketing strategies that consider diverse perspectives.

Conclusion

This study has shown that while Disney's *Luca* and *Raya and the Last Dragon* represent steps towards greater diversity and inclusivity, at the same time, they also reveal ongoing challenges, particularly when viewed through an intersectional lens and Fairclough's 3D Model. The analysis highlights the need for more relatable and authentic representations that challenge dominant narratives, avoid perpetuating stereotypes, and Centre the voices of marginalised communities. This research contributes to a broader understanding of the role/impact of media in shaping cultural discourse and the importance of critical engagement with media messages.

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