

Rebellious Princesses: Epistemic Injustice and the New Wave of Disney Heroes

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Abstract

Using Miranda Fricker's moral philosophy, this paper is an examination of how the Disney films *Encanto* (2021) and *Turning Red* (2022) combat the conventionally marginalizing male-dominated narrative template and disrupt the oppressive stereotypical archetypes that heroes have been subjected to for generations. This paper argues that the films addressed the enduring andro-centric values, dominant norms, and biases that restricted, silenced, limited, and deflated the fictional characters' experiences. This warrants a breakthrough in 21st-century Disney films' new wave of rebellious princesses as they represent women in an inclusive, diverse, egalitarian, and positive light. This study explores the renewal of the postfeminist ideals portrayed in the narratives of *Encanto* (2021) and *Turning Red* (2022) from the perspectives of cultural representation, giving voice to the silenced perspectives and recognizing shared vulnerability and solidarity.

Keywords: 21st-century Disney films, Miranda Fricker, postfeminist ideals, and epistemic injustice

Storytelling is a way to challenge dominant narratives which erase, oversimplify, and universalize women's voices and experiences.

- Woodwise et. al.¹

Introduction

Walt Disney Princesses have been iconic role models to their young audience for generations. At an early age, children are told of the stories of Cinderella's kind-hearted generosity to Mulan's bravery-teaching important lessons about friendship, love, resilience, and kindness. The stories of these protagonists and heroes emulate the values that parents hope to instill in their children. Beyond figures on screen or bedtime stories, it is also highly likely to find a kid or even the young at heart doing a Disney-themed celebration and dressing up as their favorite princess. More than admiration, children would sing films' theme songs, mimic their gestures, and even embody the qualities of these fictional characters. The global reach and the fascination of various audiences with Disney films as an iconic part of their childhood for eight decades now attest to the contribution of fictional narratives to society's knowledge and values formation.

However, it is difficult to ignore that some of these narratives have been "Disneyfied" to cater to its young audience. Some of the original stories where these regional folktales were lifted from ended tragically.² More so, these early Disney Princess narratives suffer from the criticism of having been branded to be of service to patriarchal values. The first wave of Disney princesses, beginning with Snow White in 1937, had become a medium projecting the idealization of femininity as subservient to patriarchy's whims. Then, a gradual shift from the traditional standards of femininity promoting role reversal became evident in the 90s to 2000s.³

¹ Woodwise et. al (2017) also cited by Rosa de Nooijer and Lillian Sol Cueva, "Feminist Storytellers Imagining New Stories to Tell," *Gender, Development and Social Change*, 2022, pp. 237-255, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-82654-3_11, 234.

² See summary of some of the original story of these children stories: <https://www.esquiremag.ph/culture/books-and-art/original-fairytale-endings-disney-didnt-tell-you-about-a2330-20190719-lfrm>

³ Bridget Whelan, "Third Wave Princess: Reconstructing and Redefining the Traditional Princess Narrative" (dissertation, 2012). <https://lrc.benilde.edu.ph/user/login?dest=?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/third-wave-princess-reconstructing-redefining/docview/1282367017/se-2> .

It was only during the turn of the 21st century when Walt Disney Pictures' animated movies were notably popular due to their perceived promotion of progressive, inclusive ideals. Labeled as plot twists to the damsel in distress tropes, today's Disney characters are disrupting male-directed storytelling, thus, contributing to the clamor of what can be deemed unladylike or rebellious feminine portrayals. The dilemma of the female protagonist transitioned from the linear narrative of finding true love and living happily ever after to the 90s' adventurous warrior-princes, and then to the 2000s empowered royalties emerged. Eventually, they forge their narrative and are freed from the damsel in distress Disney trope.

Pop culture, particularly film, plays an important role in challenging and disrupting conventional epistemic values. Aimed to tackle the enduring and disruptive social and gender-based ideologies, this paper employs a critical approach using the lenses of epistemic injustice theorized by Miranda Fricker in her work published in 2007 entitled *Epistemic Injustice: Power & the Ethics of Knowing*. This paper adheres to Miranda Fricker's philosophy of epistemic injustice that extends from social epistemology to politics that is critical to the violence deemed as an injustice done to the agent based on their capacity and experience as a knower.⁴ Moreover, Fricker identifies two kinds of epistemic injustices, namely, testimonial, and hermeneutic injustice. Using Fricker's feminist epistemological theory of epistemic injustice, I examine the struggles,⁵ disruptions,⁶ and reimagination of the feminine ideals in the portrayal of the central protagonists' values and archetypes of the 21st Century Disney's *Encanto's* (2021) Mirabel Madrigal,⁷ and *Turning Red's* (2023) Meilin "Mei" Lee.⁸

⁴ Kelly Louise Agra, "Epistemic Injustice, Paralysis, and Resistance: A (Feminist) Liberatory Approach to Epistemology," *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (January 2020): pp. 28-44, <https://doi.org/10.25138/14.1.a.2>, 30.

⁵ Struggles in the form of injustices caused by the conventionally marginalizing male-directed templates that limited the characters' identity, agency, and experiences.

⁶ Disruptions represented by the characters' reconstructed identity, agency, and experiences. The renewal and brave attempt to reclaim one's narrative without invalidating the characters' identity and experiences depict epistemic sensibility and thus, promotes epistemic justice.

⁷ The female protagonist of *Encanto* is Mirabel Madrigal, a bright and spirited young woman who is part of a magical family living in a Colombian village. Mirabel is independent and curious, with a keen sense of responsibility towards her family. She is also determined and resourceful, using her wit and intelligence to help her family

The overarching aim of this paper is to investigate Disney's retelling of this new breed of "rebellious" feminist characters whose struggles are about reclaiming their agencies and identities engendered by epistemic injustice. The discussion centers on the narratives' recognition and correction of the characters' deflated credibility and the lack of knowledge and resources needed to make sense of their experiences⁹ set in their fictional world. Following Miranda Fricker's feminist epistemological theory, this paper attempts to answer the question: *How do the 21st-century Disney films *Encanto* (2021) and *Turning Red* (2022) contribute to recognizing and combating epistemic injustices against the intersectionality of gender and race in contemporary society?* To respond to the main question, this paper sought to address the following sub-questions: (1) How do the films confront the conventionally marginalizing, oppressive, and antiquated epistemic norms and biases?; (2) How do the films disrupt the epistemic injustices by offering alternative narratives that challenge epistemic tropes and norms?, and; (3) What postfeminist values were established in the films' attempt to resist dominant epistemic norms and biases, and consequently, its impact on the audience's understanding of the intersectionality of gender and race in contemporary society?

Through Fricker's feminist philosophy, this paper underscores how these films challenge the conventionally marginalizing narrative template viewed as epistemic, and reimagination of oppressive stereotypical archetypes characters have been subjected to for generations. This paper intends to expose the persisting dominant norms and biases that restricted, silenced, limited and deflated the protagonists' experiences. This Thus warrants warranting a

overcome challenges. Mirabel is also empathetic and caring, always willing to help those in need and put others before herself.

⁸ The female protagonist of *Turning Red* is Mei Lee, a teenage girl who can transform into a giant red panda whenever she gets too excited or emotional. Mei is shy and introverted, struggling to navigate the challenges of adolescence and her changing relationship with her mother. However, she is also creative and artistic, using her talents to express herself and connect with others. Mei is determined to break free from her mother's expectations and discover her own identity, while also learning to embrace her unique abilities and find balance in her life. The paper shall henceforth refer to Meilin Lee as Mei Lee in the rest of the discussion.

⁹ Examined following Fricker's notion of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, respectively.

breakthrough of 21st-century Disney films' new wave of hero portrayals in the characters of Encanto and Turning Red as they represent women¹⁰ in an inclusive, diverse, equal, and positive light.

Miranda Fricker's Theory of Epistemic Injustice

Miranda Fricker, in her work *Epistemic Injustice: Power and Ethics of Knowing* published in 2007, argues that there is a distinctive form of injustice that is epistemic. In the immediate sense, epistemic injustice could be understood as having to do with "thoughts about distributive unfairness in respect of epistemic goods such as information or education... and whether everyone is getting their fair share."¹¹ This view assumes that the object of epistemic injustice concerns the problem of democratization and fair access to knowledge, particularly the knower/agents' participation in the knowledge-formation and exchange process. However, Fricker contends that her epistemic theory of injustice distinctively emanates from the "wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower."¹² Alternatively; therefore, justice ensues from the recognition of the agent's capacity as a knower and their participation in the exchange and knowledge-creation process.

The moral implication of Fricker's philosophical study of knowledge, Kelly Agra purports, lies at the intersections of epistemology, ethics, and political life.¹³ It is in this intersectionality that one may find the relevance and promise of Fricker's epistemic framework in realizing feminism's solitary plight "as it bravely insisted on epistemology's lack of theoretical framework"¹⁴ to make sense and contribute to the advancement of its cause. With the theory of epistemic injustice as a theoretical lens, feminist studies would be

¹⁰ As well as men, but also not limited to the gender binary.

¹¹ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1.

¹³ Kelly Louise Agra, "Epistemic Injustice, Paralysis, and Resistance: A (Feminist) Liberatory Approach to Epistemology," *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (January 2020): pp. 28-44, <https://doi.org/10.25138/14.1.a.2>.

¹⁴ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2.

able to investigate the discriminatory origins of inequality methodologically.¹⁵

To assist the investigation of the origins of inequality, Fricker's epistemological theory identified two forms of injustice: testimonial and hermeneutical. Her work defined the two respectively as follows: testimonial injustice occurs when "someone is wronged in their capacity as a giver of knowledge;"¹⁶ while hermeneutical injustice emanates from the experience of being "wronged in their capacity as a subject of social understanding."¹⁷ Elaborating further on the experience of testimonial injustice, "it occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated credibility to a speaker's word."¹⁸ It is an assault on the agent's capacity as bearers and transmitters of knowledge. Fricker identified this harm on the grounds of testimonial injustice as a case of "identity-prejudicial credibility deficit"¹⁹ whereby the judgment about the legitimacy of speech-act is evaluated according to the speaker's social identity rather than on the testimony's truth content. The challenge, however, in detecting discrimination at the testimonial level is that it is fundamentally intrinsic. Hence, only the knower may (or may not) be aware of the offense done.

On the other hand, the second kind is hermeneutical injustice which is more significant in scope and lies in the background (as a knowledge resource) for a testimonial (in)justice to come into play. Fricker argues that hermeneutical injustice "occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretative resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences."²⁰ Agra additionally asserts that the second form of injustice manifests if there exists a collective epistemic resource gap and hermeneutic deficiency in comprehending the agent's experience, "on account of their identity, are not being allowed to contribute to the

¹⁵ Kelly Louise Agra, "Epistemic Injustice, Paralysis, and Resistance: A (Feminist) Liberatory Approach to Epistemology," *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (January 2020): pp. 28-44, <https://doi.org/10.25138/14.1.a.2>.

¹⁶ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

stock of meaning necessary to make sense of the experience.²¹ Therefore, the agent is hermeneutically marginalized and suffers from “structural identity prejudice”²² due to the obscured systemic or collective understandings of one’s social experience. In conclusion, Fricker’s distinction of the two forms of injustice that is epistemic kind operates as follows: testimonial injustice intrinsically “operates on the level of the individual economy of credibility”²³ whereas hermeneutic injustice fundamentally “operates at the structural level of the economy of collective hermeneutic resources.”²⁴

Given the intersectionality of ethics, epistemology, and politics in this theory, Fricker maintains that stereotypes are the entry point for injustices.²⁵ Her theory suggests epistemic marginalization ensues when the presupposed prejudice and biases someone bears (i.e., race, gender, religion, or class) eclipse or diminish the other person’s capacity to convey and transmit information. For Fricker, albeit the complexity of the nature of (in)justice, its rehabilitation at the epistemic level referred to as virtue epistemology is not far-fetched from how ethics operates. She analogized epistemic conduct to moral conduct, particularly the habitual training, and mental fortitude to pursue what is right or good in the epistemic transactions, comparable to that of practicing ethical behavior.²⁶ In other words, if justice between the hearer and interlocutor’s communicative discourse is the end goal, then the suspension or abandonment of credibility deflating stereotypes and biases are also the starting point of this endeavor. Like moral cultivation, virtue epistemology can be trained and harnessed by the agent, thus encouraging the correction of epistemic harm/insult. Delving deeper into the analogous nature of the ethical and epistemic pursuit, Fricker suggests that akin to how a moral agent views the world in a morally informed or upright outlook, the virtuous or responsible listener/hearer (epistemic agent) should also perceive

²¹ Kelly Louise Agra, “Epistemic Injustice, Paralysis, and Resistance: A (Feminist) Liberatory Approach to Epistemology,” *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (January 2020): pp. 28-44, <https://doi.org/10.25138/14.1.a.2>.

²² Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). p. 155.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁶ Testimonial perceptual sensibility equates to a person’s moral perceptual capacity. *Ibid.*, 81.

their communicative and interpretative discourses in an epistemically charged or upright manner- something like a coalescence of the mental and psycho-social demonstration of compassion that operates in the level of knowing.

How may someone counter epistemic injustice after recognizing its existence? To achieve epistemic justice, Fricker calls for “a form of rational sensitivity that is socially inculcated and trained by countless experiences of testimonial exchange, individual and collective.”²⁷ Training is required to instill epistemic virtue. To be empirically grounded, a series of testimonial exchanges and an epistemically charged view of the world must teach unbiased and objective speaker-interlocutor credibility. In this process of mental cultivation, Fricker cites the Aristotelian principle of habit²⁸ to pattern her idea of such training. The habitual training and practice of epistemic sensibility is a vital skill of a virtuous hearer/listener. To succeed as a sensible/virtuous hearer/listener, one must be able to recognize and correct the influence of prejudice on the agent's credibility judgments consequential to the habitual practice of sensitivity. However, Fricker warns that if one is imbued with the epistemic capacity to perceive and correct injustice, there are also people who (consciously or unconsciously) contribute to the perpetuation and infliction of epistemic violence.

In the case of remedying testimonial injustice, the listener's evaluation of the interlocutor's credibility is significantly affected by their excellent training or flawed upbringing. An agent trained to become a virtuous hearer has an excellent interlocutor perception or judgment, as opposed to those exposed to prejudice, which would, unfortunately, perpetuate the violence. Crucial to the habituated epistemic cultivation of the virtuous hearer is that it requires collective support and effort to instill sensibility. Having said that, testimonial injustice lies in the background of hermeneutical injustice, a sensible, neutral, or objective credibility perception is passively inherited by the hearer as influenced by her community. Fricker writes, “The deliverances of an individual's sensibility, then, are shaped by a set of background interpretative and motivational

²⁷ Ibid., 5.

²⁸ Following Aristotle: “Anything that we have to learn to do we learn by the actual doing of it.” From Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson (London: Penguin, 1976), 91–2; II. 1; 1103a 14–25.

attitudes, which are in the first instance passively inherited from the ethical community, but after that actively reflected upon and lived out in one or another way by the reflective individual.”²⁹ To develop a keen intuition to avoid succumbing to injustice, testimonial sensibility necessitates habitual training, which entails ongoing correction and adjustment of the interlocutor's credibility economics informed by the responsible hearer's experience. Training oneself necessitates both passive inherited knowledge and active learning through an ethical support system and critical evaluation. The intersectionality of ethics (moral value training), politics (community effort), and epistemology (critical thinking) in advancing epistemic justice are demonstrated here. When this is juxtaposed with a moral appraisal of one person's character, the sensible hearer is called upon to have a more objective and compassionate perception of the other.

Furthermore, how can a responsible hearer/listener counter injustice at the hermeneutical epistemic level? Arising from the impoverished knowledge resource, the hearer or interlocutor's ignorance and/or lack of appropriate interpretative tools may commit or subject oneself to hermeneutical injustice. In the ideal sense, this ingrained epistemic deterrent could not be resolved at the individual level alone but instead demands a collective realization of the limited outdated belief systems and renewal of knowledge resources of the community. However, if the level of praxis for justice is to be rehabilitated from a singular individual's epistemic encounter and perspective, the corrective effort would be (more than the evident requirement of objectivity) a kinder intellectual outlook allowing an open and safe space for humility to realize the hearer/interlocutor's unintelligibility (which is not necessarily caused by ignorance), and; 2) grasp that the inability to make sense of one's social experiences that could be most likely owing to a lack of shared hermeneutical resources.³⁰ Fricker describes reflexive critical sensitivity as the “acknowledgement of one's relative unintelligibility in oneself as a function or result of collective hermeneutic impoverishment or knowledge resource gap.”³¹ As a result, a trained mental attitude is

²⁹ Here's where intersectionality of ethics, politics and epistemology could be observed. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 82.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

urged by the agent/hearer to change or suspend the credibility judgment towards another person accordingly. To recapitulate, the diagram below depicts the corrective process of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice as derived from Fricker's thesis:

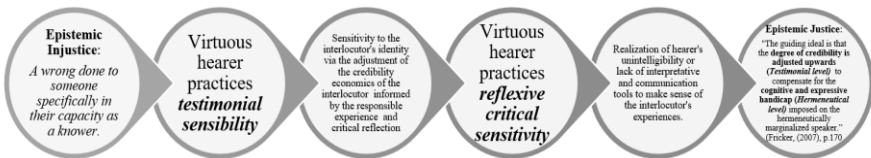


Diagram of Miranda Fricker's Epistemic Justice Corrective Process (Miranda Fricker 2007), pp. 169-170.

Epistemic Injustice in Disney Animated Classics

As a major pop culture player and a rich media resource promoting gender-related themes/issues, Disney's point of departure and conflict persists in the female protagonist's subjection to patriarchal initiatives. As if the woman's dilemma has always been about self-discovery, empowerment, and liberation from the predominantly gender-imbalanced and male-directed narrative template characterized by traditional, antiquated patriarchal values, interests, expectations, hierarchy, and power relations. Samantha Seybold identifies the following patriarchal patterns, which could be classified as the perpetuating source of epistemic injustice evident in Disney narratives that limit the agency of the female protagonists: 1) embodiment of feminine beauty standards informed by male sexual desire; 2) fulfillment of happiness through heterosexual romance; 3) conformity and subordination to patriarchal authority/ society, and 4) dependence on and submission to patriarchal initiatives.³²

These andro-centric values and standards have been a source of conflict that Disney protagonists need to overcome. Like a double-edged sword, Disney simultaneously capitalized and attempted to demolish the andro-centric mold in their storytelling to become more palatable to the contemporary era. The retellings from alternative (more specifically feminist) points of view, the voiceless become heard, and a safe space is created for individuals to tell their tales in

³² Ibid., 72-73.

their own words. Supporting this endeavor, Walt Disney Pictures have become a medium for these stories to promote as well as perpetuate its reliance on dominant androcentric idealizations of femininity to craft its animated female protagonists.³³ Following the sporadic manifestations and progressive attempts to break out from the androcentric mold and narrative evolution, Bridget Whelan attributed the retelling and rewriting of feminine values in today's film industry to have a significant impact on the literary and cultural scene in her dissertation "Third wave princess: Reconstructing and redefining the traditional princess narrative." Beginning with *Snow White* in 1937, Disney is among the significant players in narrating universal human truths and values. Whelan organized the examination of the Disney princess franchise and the values each era produced into waves akin to the feminist waves. Whelan's examination revealed the observable transition and reversal of the first wave (early Disney princesses) to the second wave (90's films). This marked the landmark attempt at role reversal wherein the male took the damsel in distress and softened the stereotypical male portrayal. The third wave (21st century) films, on the other hand, demonstrated a potential initiative of critique and rebuilding of traditional and beyond the seemingly empowered princess narrative. Whelan argued that the continuation of this trend and character progression lies in the efforts of contemporary writers and filmmakers.

Contributing to the evolving narrative reconstruction, the study of Caitlin Kelly, *Feminist Fractured Fairy Tales: Angela Carter, Emma Donoghue, and Heroines Who Embrace Their Desires*, challenged the perspectives of stories, specifically children's fairy tales, that revealed and disseminated characterization of female characters fashioned after the patriarchal values, heterosexual family structures, silencing of women and visions of happy endings. In doing so, a collection of stories retold from a woman-centric lens, namely that of "The Bloody Chamber by Angela Carter and Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins" by Emma Donoghue, "Beauty and the Beast" and "Little Red Riding Hood," "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" and "The Company of Wolves" by Angela Carter, were examined and identified

³³ Samantha L. Seybold, "'It's Called a Hustle, Sweetheart': Zootopia, Moana, and Disney's (DIS) Empowered Postfeminist Heroines," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 34, no. 1 (March 2020) <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-019-09347-2>, 69-71.

by Kelly as “fractured fairy tales.” The study further exposed that Donoghue’s and Carter’s retellings allowed the characters to tell their narratives, changed the endings of their narratives, added a queer twist, and embraced their sexuality and desires. Thus, from silenced women or fractured fairy tale heroes, Kelly argued that the efforts of women writers of today are liberating means of giving voices to fictional but universal truths of the human experience to women's identities from the harmful stereotypical gender boxes, thereby transforming them into three-dimensional people. Despite having the courage to write alternative endings has been challenging the study maintained that such endeavor is only the starting point of a larger battle women must endure in taking ownership of their narratives. Following Kelly’s invitation, this is the research gap in this study to identify and seek what has been accomplished or won in this battle of taking ownership of her-story³⁴ in the Disney 21st-century animated films.

As opposed to Kelly’s celebration of reimagining the feminine character through the renewal of tales, Kailash Koushik, and Abigail Reed’s research entitled *Star Wars: The Last Jedi, Beauty and the Beast, and Disney’s Commodification of Feminism: A Political Economic Analysis* critiqued Disney’s attempts of retelling the above-mentioned films from a women-centric lens as pretentious and pseudo-feminist. They argued that such a trend is a Hollywood capitalistic and profit mechanism that does little to no social impact in rectifying gender issues and representation in feminist film or political economy. Hence, instead of truly uplifting women, the intended feminist agenda was, in turn, commodified. Although Hollywood may have benefited from these films, certainly, the impact of the message of these films depicted from the women-centric lenses created some kind of advantageous epistemic impact on their audiences.

Maja Rudloff’s study on *(Post)feminist paradoxes: the sensibilities of gender representation in Disney’s Frozen* affirms and follows Koushik and Reed’s argument suggesting that Disney’s efforts, albeit its growing popularity in advocating feminist and postfeminist values, remain lukewarm attempts to authentically promote feminism’s agenda. More specifically, the critique is based on the premature or surface-level highlighting of truly feminine values

³⁴ “Her-story” refers to women’s attempt to reclaim their narratives from a uniquely female perspective and experiences.

evoked in *Frozen*. For Rudloff, this is mainly because of the conflicting representation of the signs and cultural codes in the movie. Disney's *Frozen* may have promoted equality, empowerment, and female agency in the narrative. Still, it paradoxically confounds it with antiquated stereotyped depictions of proper behavior, and unrealistic demands about woman's sensibilities, self-control, and looks.

Samantha Seybold concurred with the premise of the role of Walt Disney Pictures in its dependence on the patriarchal depiction of femininity in portraying its animated characters. The article entitled "*It's Called a Hustle, Sweetheart*": *Zootopia, Moana, and Disney's (Dis)empowered Postfeminist Heroines*" tackled the coming of the new breed of female protagonists, such as *Zootopia's* Judy Hopps and *Moana* countered the enduring of male-directed narratives. According to Seybold, both characters exercised self-agency and independence from their male counterparts in the film, promoting the feminist battle cry of empowerment. Despite this, these female protagonists are nonetheless coupled with or relegated to male characters who exhibit traditional masculine, a.k.a. toxic manners, which the female protagonist must save them from and emotionally nurture. This marked the plot twist from the damsel in distress trope to the princess as the savior or rescuer from the male's unfortunate situation. As a result, Seybold praised Disney's efforts to improve the roles of women in their storytelling. However, it also demonstrated the challenge of confronting, if not completely altering, the traditional social structures and surroundings that oppressed them in their fictional world.

The Development of Stereotypical Representations of Gender in Selected Disney Films: A Feminist Reading authored by Ali Asmaa also examined the Disney film *Moana*. It followed Seybold's recognition of *Moana* as a powerful female Disney character, as well as the reversal of Maui's or the male protagonist's role in playing the damsel in distress. For Ali, the male character's manifestation and overcoming of his weaknesses, or what Seybold identified above as toxic masculine characteristics, should be seen as progressive and a positive example to Disney's male audience. Similarly, Ali raised a similar issue, namely the persistence, albeit with discernible changes, of some stereotypical gender roles in *Moana* and Maui's ostensibly independent interpersonal dynamic, from which the plot fails to liberate them. The table below depicts the 1937-2016 evolution of Disney female protagonists' characteristics, narrative, conflict, and archetype. The

franchise of the third-wave princesses would be the starting point for this research's critical investigation.

Wave	Films	Characteristics	Plot & Conflict	Trope
1st	Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937); Cinderella (1950); Sleeping Beauty (1959); The Little Mermaid (1989)	a young woman, wearing corseted dress outlining her small but womanly curves, face, and hair made up to reflect what was considered attractive for a young woman at that time.	Regal/princess by blood, then lives in poverty for a while, waiting to be rescued by a prince, find true love, and live happily ever after.	Helpless, hyper-feminine trope.
2nd	Beauty and the Beast (1991); Mulan (1998); Tangled (2010)	a beautiful, spirited, and adventurous young woman, creative and determined even when faced with obstacles and societal expectations.	journey of self-discovery, facing obstacles, and finding love and acceptance on her terms.	Strong-willed and independent trope.
3rd	Brave (2012); Frozen (2013); Moana (2016); Zootopia (2016)	Independent young women with a strong sense of purpose who challenge societal expectations and traditional	A quest of self-discovery, courageously overcoming adversaries that ultimately help them grow and	Empowered female lead trope.

		gender roles.	develop as individuals.	
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Table 1. Development of Disney Female Protagonists’ characteristics, plot, conflict, and archetype from 1937-2016

Epistemic Injustice in 21st-Century Disney Films

Continuing the above delineation, the next part centers on the analysis of the narratives of the films *Encanto* (2021) and *Turning Red* (2022) which as this paper argues could be deemed as breakthroughs or proposes a new wave of Disney characters belonging to the 21st century. The two films may be identified as the contemporary animator’s response to the lukewarm attempts of Disney to truly abandon the systemic andro-centric mold, and thus, are landmark works that disrupt and combat epistemic injustice. The analysis of the said films focuses more specifically on the following points: 1) how the film protagonists confront and challenge the conventionally marginalizing, oppressive, and antiquated epistemic norms and biases; 2) the films’ rehabilitative ways and disruptive impact in combating epistemic injustices, and 3) identification of reconstructed postfeminist values in the films’ attempt to resist dominant conventional epistemic norms.

Building on the existing literature on the study of the development, identified by Whelan as “waves” of the Disney princesses’ franchise,³⁵ this paper argues that *Encanto’s* main characters Mirabel Madrigal and *Turning Red’s* Meilin “Mei” Lee, signaled the dawn of a new generation of Disney female archetypes breaking away from the first wave traditional male-directed storylines and second wave pseudo-empowered characters. Moreover, I argue that unlike the third-wave princesses in the likes of Rapunzel, Elsa, and Moana, who remain estranged and bound by the outdated mainstream plot criteria influenced by Seybold’s identified androcentric mold, Mirabel and Mei’s reimaged narratives have

³⁵ Bridget Whelan, “Third Wave Princess: Reconstructing and Redefining the Traditional Princess Narrative” (dissertation, 2012). <https://lrc.benilde.edu.ph/user/login?dest=?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/third-wave-princess-reconstructing-redefining/docview/1282367017/se-2>.

managed to liberate themselves to some degree from the stronghold male-directed template. The two have successfully excluded from its narrative the ideal of hero portrayal possessing the 1) embodiment of feminine beauty standards informed by male sexual desire, and 2) fulfillment of happiness through the heterosexual romance that perpetuated in the first up to the third wave Disney animated films.³⁶ Despite such progress, the two still grapple with the systemic patriarchal initiatives to be discussed later in this section. I argue that such a breakthrough advances how popular culture can correct and disrupt epistemic injustices.

Implementing Seybold's first and second criteria, Mirabel and Mei's quests did not involve any heterosexual romantic interest. Still, they were accompanied by their sort of wingman,³⁷ and their peers in their adventure. Mirabel has her uncle, Bruno, who helped look into her future/fate to protect the magical village's *encanto*. In contrast, Mei has her father, Mr. Jin Lee, who knows her very well and supports his daughter's (and wife's- Ming Lee) choice to keep her red panda power. This breakthrough promotes a new brand of storytelling, showing a progression in the character's story. Both Mirabel and Mei's adventures involve an association with male characters. However, these men were neither depicted as the female protagonist's counterparts nor did not feel the need³⁸ to be superior to the lead character. These male characters seem very much aware and, in some sense, satisfied³⁹ to take the role of side characters whose purpose is to empower the female lead in overcoming her struggles. More so, neither of the female protagonists concerned themselves with

³⁶ Reiterating the critique pertaining to the premature attempt of Disney to reimagine the postfeminist ideals represented by Zootopia's Judy Hopps and Moana, the two remain trapped in the conventional mold of association and accompaniment (albeit not romantic) by a male counterpart as the heroines pursue self-discovery. See Samantha L. Seybold, "It's Called a Hustle, Sweetheart': Zootopia, Moana, and Disney's (DIS) Empowered Postfeminist Heroines," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 34, no. 1 (March 2020): <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-019-09347-2>, pp. 69-84.

³⁷ A wingman is a slang term for "a best friend; sidekick; "partner in crime" or "a person who helps another through a difficult experience." "Definition of Wingman," What does wingman mean? wingman Definition. Meaning of wingman. OnlineSlangDictionary.com, accessed April 10, 2023, <http://onlineslangdictionary.com/meaning-definition-of/wingman>.

³⁸ Who did not display the typical alpha-male masculine character.

³⁹ Confident with their masculine role and/or identity in the plot, so to speak.

beautifying nor reinventing themselves to find happiness and fulfillment. Instead, and most significantly (as opposed to the 1st wave princesses), they focused on their character development, empowerment, and self-agency, similar to the third wave female protagonists. Overall, it could be argued that Disney has omitted some of the toxic and insecurity-inducing habits of subjecting their characters to a helpless, hyper-feminine sexualized trope. It is a commendable leap for 21st-century Disney films after decades of being in the industry to be an inspiration for its young audience in embracing the rebellious princess coming-of-age female protagonist archetype who would fiercely rebel against the dominantly marginalizing tropes and norms.

Without discounting Disney's achievement acknowledged above, still, *Encanto* and *Turning Red's* characters' feet remain entangled, or to use Angela McRobbie's terminology, double entangled in the "traditional gender roles and patriarchal power structures are promoted alongside rhetoric about personal choice."⁴⁰ Mirabel and Mei's hands may have been liberated from the male gaze, but remain chained from the androcentric expectations of 3) conformity and subordination to patriarchal authority/society on one foot, and 4) dependence and submission to patriarchal initiatives on the other. These two deep-rooted marginalizing templates perpetuate the protagonists' conflicting struggles that limit their identities and agencies in their fictional lifeworld. The social imaginary that formed Mirabel's Madrigal family and Mei's clan as descendants of Sun Yee are manifestations of Disney's persistent reliance and subjection to patriarchal initiatives to craft their female character. However, before losing hope in this battle, this paper finds solace in the unfolding and reimagination of their characters in taking the upper hand against patriarchal initiatives. I argue that Disney's reliance on these oppressive antiquated values served as necessary evils to recognize and to call for the correction of the perpetuating epistemic injustices in the form of damaging patriarchal stereotypes that caged femininity for the longest time. The new generation of animated films has

⁴⁰ Angela McRobbie proposes the idea of "double entanglement." Angela McRobbie (2004, p. 2) CF. Samantha L. Seybold, "It's Called a Hustle, Sweetheart': Zootopia, Moana, and Disney's (DIS) Empowered Postfeminist Heroines," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 34, no. 1 (March 2020): <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-019-09347-2>, 70.

become the medium to correct and disrupt the epistemic injustice evident in animation by offering alternative narratives that challenge existing epistemic tropes and norms.

Disrupting Epistemic Injustice and the Promise of 21st-Century Disney Films

Demonstrating further the creative force of storytelling in challenging and recreating epistemic values, this section continues to critically explore the game-changing epistemic disruptions prompted by the films' new archetypes through the lenses of Miranda Fricker's *Epistemic Injustice*. The heroes' double entanglement to the glorified patriarchal values appeared to be intentional or a calculated move of Disney in crafting Mirabel and Mei's struggles for them to reveal, confront, and heal from. Following Fricker, I argue that the characters rebelled against both testimonial and hermeneutical injustices and prompted epistemic disruptions in their exemplification of epistemic virtue⁴¹ in their adventure toward self-discovery. Most importantly, the unfolding of Mirabel and Mei's narratives as epistemic disruptions paved the way for the validation of previously silenced perspectives, deconstruction of archetypes, and acknowledgment of systemic factors that impact individual experiences.

1. Listening to the Voiceless: Validation of Previously Silenced Perspectives

Directed by Jared Bush and Byron Howard, *Encanto* (2021) tells the tale of Mirabel Madrigal who is part of the third generation of *La Familia Madrigal* and is the only member who struggles with her lack of magical abilities. All her family members possess the gift of *encanto* (magic/blessing) that allows their magical (Columbian) village to thrive. Both her siblings (and the rest of her family for that matter), Luisa, and Isabella possess the magical powers of super strength, whose gift can always be relied upon to carry the burdens (literally and figuratively) of the Madrigal family, and an epitome of elegance and perfection who grow roses out of thin air, respectively. Because of Mirabel's anomaly and obscured role in the family, she

⁴¹ Testimonial sensitivity, and reflexive critical sensibility.

feels/treated like the pariah in her in their *casita* (home).⁴² This experience makes Mirabel the primary victim of testimonial injustice, particularly her relationship with her *abuela* (grandmother), Alma Madrigal. Testimonial injustice surfaces in the very identity of Mirabel as her person and word have no place, unacknowledged and even discredited by her hearer in their village. Mirabel suffers from deflated identity, or in terms of Fricker, an identity-prejudicial credibility deficit, in the family circle that is mainly fueled by her anomaly.

Despite the affliction and silencing of Mirabel, her gift of intuition (which she only discovered later) is a beautiful representation of Fricker's responsible hearer employing the epistemic virtue of testimonial sensibility. Later in the film, it was revealed that her intuitive and empathic power became the source of hope in renewing La Familia Madrigal's gift/magic. Mirabel's gift is seeing through people's vulnerabilities and accepting them without judgment, and ridicule. Her characterization demonstrates the hearer's sensitivity to the other person's identity via the adjustment of credibility economics and critical reflection. This instance is evident in Mirabel's encounter with his exiled uncle, Bruno. Even the title of the song attributed to him, "We don't talk about Bruno" is already dismissive and charged with epistemic violence against the identity of Bruno even before introducing him in the narrative. Seeing, or better yet, hearing awful baseless anecdotes associated with Bruno, Mirabel did not allow those nasty rumors to deflate her uncle's identity. She developed a greater yearning to seek the truth to save the dwindling powers of the *encanto*. On the one hand, characters imbued with special gifts, such as Luisa's super strength and Isabela's perfection, were shown a surplus in credibility economics. Consequently, when their gifts slipped and waned, the expectations they carried took a toll on their imbalanced identity economics over their true identities and heart desires.

On the one hand, Disney's *Turning Red* (2022) animated film directed by Domee Shi, centers on Mei Lee's struggle as she navigates the expectations placed on her by her traditional Chinese immigrant family. As she explores her adolescence and family tradition, Mei is

⁴² Allison Hope, "Encanto' Shifts the Female Paradigm," *CNN* (Cable News Network, December 28, 2021), <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/12/27/opinions/disney-encanto-female-representation-hope/index.html>.

torn into a position that requires her to relinquish her red panda form. Unlike Encanto's Mirabel, Mei's mystical power to transform and conjure the red panda's powers is deemed an inconvenience in her life. Mei's transformation into a giant red panda is dismissed and seen as a curse by their clan, most dishearteningly by her mother. Mei (and her mom) suffers testimonial injustice as they try to hide their true self, the one that loves and accepts the red panda- from her family, as they will surely condemn her for letting it cut loose. Her credibility deflates as she is the youngest member of the family and a sheltered only daughter⁴³ to her parents, whose intention is mere to protect her from the destructive tendencies of the red panda form.

Mei's realization of unintelligibility or lack of interpretative tools to comprehend her experiences (hermeneutic injustice) prompted an internal conflict in her acceptance and her family's shunning of their real red panda form. Despite her confusion, Disney made a compassionate move and did not isolate Mei in navigating her gift and adolescence. Instead of performing the ritual to relinquish the beast in her, she was lucky to have found a community exhibiting reflexive critical sensitivity. Her best friends,⁴⁴ schoolmates,⁴⁵ father,⁴⁶ and eventually, her relatives (aunties) showered her with empathy and unconditional love. Seeing her red panda as an extension of

⁴³ People of a younger age are often discredited and infantilized due to their limited knowledge/experience.

⁴⁴ Demonstration of Epistemic Sensibility- The first time Mei's besties saw her transformation, they did not freak out, did not judge, or felt frightened by Mei's form. They hugged each other and allowed Mei to cry/express her fears/emotions. Mei being lost and alone exposed by her inability to make sense of her condition/situation. They sang their favorite best friend's theme song to lift her spirits and did not care for the explanation behind Mei's appearance.

⁴⁵ Mei's identity, most intriguing, her red panda form is loved and not feared by her peers. Surprisingly, unlike the usual plot that the deviant gets ostracized, Mei was never dismissed and treated like an outcast by her peers, in fact, her peers enjoyed her company in panda form.

⁴⁶ Demonstration of Epistemic Sensibility- When his father understood Mei's hidden desire and wish to keep the red panda, he supported and stayed with her (and her mother's) side regardless of the fierce form inhabiting/transforming their bodies. She saw her daughter's happiness when she embraced her true form. Understood the silence of Mei without her telling him that she doesn't want to lose her red panda form. Very rare to find a supportive and visible father figure in most Disney films. Mei's dad understood her daughter's pain because it was the same pain that Mei's mother/wife had to go through for them to be a couple/together when they were younger.

herself rather than a definitive identity greatly helped her to embrace her true self.

One of the ways that Mirabel and Mei's experiences rectify epistemic injustice is by giving voice to previously silenced perspectives. The protagonists experience a sense of invisibility and marginalization within their family due to Mirabel's lack of magical powers and Mei's choice to embrace the red panda's power. Adopting Fricker's virtue epistemology as a framework delineating the epistemic corrective process in the films' narratives, the above discussion showed how epistemic virtue is established, specifically the demonstration of testimonial sensibility and reflexive critical sensitivity by the characters. It became evident that despite their silencing, their struggles eventually came to fruition, were validated, and given significance through their stories unfolding. Mirabel and Mei learned to accept and embrace their true self with the support of their families, ultimately finding a sense of empowerment and agency. Centering the narrative on the female protagonists' experiences and capturing different perspectives, the protagonists confronted epistemic injustice and gave voice to the silenced perspectives within a community.

2. Progressive Representations: Deconstruction of Monolithic Archetypes

Epistemic marginalization ensues when the interlocutor's identity is eclipsed by their capacity to convey information or when the stereotypes unduly attached to them overshadow their person. The testimonial silencing both female protagonists were subjected to, according to Fricker, is an offshoot of the hermeneutical injustice that is playing in the background of their unkind narratives. For Fricker, stereotypes are the entry point of prejudice.⁴⁷ True enough, progressive ideals have been portrayed in the film's environmental (social context/setting) status quo. Despite offering a taste of diversity and inclusion, Disney had to put up with the conventionally marginalizing tropes to revisit and deconstruct these toxic gender roles and stereotypes while unfolding the plots.

⁴⁷ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 30.

In terms of progressive representations, both *Encanto* and *Turning Red* championed ideals of role reversal upholding matriarchal families challenging the typical male-led (kings/ male chieftains) social conditions of the Disney fictional world. The matriarchs: *Encanto's* matriarch, Alma Madrigal, the grandmother, and custodian of the *encanto's* gifts (symbolized by the candle) of the *La Familia Madrigal* and *Turning Red's* Sun Yee, the great ancestor and founder of the red panda are the sources of authority and image of power. Another crucial breakthrough in the aspect of representations is the complexities of the film characters. The characters were removed from the archetypal boxes and categories, which, in effect, felt more human than 2D fictional characters.⁴⁸

In line with this, one could view the Madrigal female family members as representations of a multifaceted complexity of femininity. Belonging to the third-generation Madrigals, Luisa, the eldest sibling, takes the role of the breadwinner of the family who carries all the burden of the village (literally and figuratively). Portrayed with a strong, broad, and almost masculine physique, Luisa can lift anything with her gift of super strength. While Mirabel's sister, Isabela, is the personification of elegance. Although seemingly ordinary, Mirabel possesses the power of sensibility, intuition, and empathy. Mirabel's mother, Julieta, prepares meals that could heal any illness; her Aunt Pepa's mood affects the weather, and her cousin, Dolores, has an extraordinary hearing sense and can hear a pin drop.

Their individuality is worth celebrating; however, the same unique quirks trapped them into a moral-epistemological archetype. This entails that deviating from their gifts tied to their identities would mean trouble for the *encanto* as it would disturb the social equilibrium Alma (*abuela*) is trying to preserve. Putting together, *Encanto's* deconstruction of the feminine ideal showed that a woman can be a leader, strong, beautiful, compassionate, a carer/healer, emotional and sensitive. *Encanto's* disrupting impact tells its audience that a woman

⁴⁸ "The Madrigals' powers are "a natural extension of these archetypes that we know very well, told in this tradition that's tied to the country in which [the story is] set." It also allows us at Disney to use a type of magic that we've never done before — a magic born of emotion and personality and character. It was just really exciting to play in that realm." Tracy Brown, "'Encanto' Is Disney's First Latino Musical. How the Filmmakers Got Colombia Right," Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles Times, November 29, 2021), <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2021-11-29/encanto-explained-disney-colombia-consultants>.

is a complex being, of sublime contradiction, and should be unapologetic for her intricacies and sensibilities. These complexities were even beautifully contextualized and informed by cultural appropriation made possible through the film creator's immersion and research on the country's rich history and culture.⁴⁹ The film excellently portrayed the diverse Latinx family and culture. Contrary to the oppressive monolithic prejudiced portrayal of the Latin ethnicities, *Encanto* painted a family portrait of diversity where each character is uniquely caricatured in terms of skin tone, hair texture, and body type- well-representing the diversity of Latinx ethnicity and culture. Demolishing the towering walls of hermeneutical injustice in the form of prejudice and antagonistic reception or branding among Latinx film tropes, *Encanto* is a brave attempt to tell a story seen from different points of view, more specifically, the colorful Colombian culture.

Similarly, hermeneutical injustice is also disrupted in the crafting of the protagonists in *Turning Red*. Each is creatively portrayed, albeit with the irony of sketching them following the mainstream Westernized television tropes. Interestingly, both films commence by introducing the characters, but *Turning Red*'s characters are not morally and/or socially confined to their archetypes compared to *Encanto*. Centered on self-discovery and friendship, the narrative depicts Mei, a Chinese-descent, dorky, overachiever, reliable daughter to her parents; her besties: Miriam, a tomboyish native Canadian; Priya, edgy, goth-vibe woman of color, and Abby, an energetic sassy Korean pop diva. Despite this, Mei consciously acknowledges all the stereotypes associated with her saying: "*I accept and embrace all labels*" thus, unbothered by the old marginalizing tropes. Not to mention, Mei's household set-up is also different from the conventional gender roles portrayed by her parents. Her father is always seen taking care of the household and adores his

⁴⁹ "The directors facilitated conversations with architects, who could speak to traditional materials used in Colombian architecture; chefs, to celebrate the food; and artisan groups, who could speak to the cultural significance of specific traditional crafts. The filmmakers also met with botanists to talk about Colombian biodiversity and visited the Gabriel García Márquez foundation." CF. Tracy Brown, "'Encanto' Is Disney's First Latino Musical. How the Filmmakers Got Colombia Right," Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles Times, November 29, 2021), <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/movies/story/2021-11-29/encanto-explained-disney-colombia-consultants>.

wife and kid, while Mei's mother is the one who manages the family temple/business.

Speaking of family, Mei's household, and tradition as Chinese immigrants in Toronto recognize and disrupt another case of hermeneutical injustice, particularly the "model minority" myth. The "model minority" myth relates to the stereotype that people of Asian descent living in the Americas are successful and high achieving. This bias dismisses the systemic barriers and inequalities individuals from this group face. The assumption has been conveniently used to marginalize and demean Asian communities in Western media. Walton and Truong write that the "model minority" is flawed and fails to capture the breadth and depth of the experiences of Asian people.⁵⁰ The film corrects injustice as it portrays Mei's modernized and, at the same time, traditional Chinese Canadian family who experiences a unique set of challenges and struggles. Both Madrigal and Lee families present a nuanced and complex depiction of the highly prejudiced minorities in Western mainstream media, thus disrupting the enduring homogenous patriarchal initiatives and archetypes as unrecognized by-products of epistemic injustice.

3. Recreating the Hero's World: Acknowledgement of Systemic Factors that Impact Individual Experiences

Weaved in the intersections of cultural, structural, historical, and ideological milieu, social imaginaries passed down through storytelling play a significant role in influencing individual choices and actions as social agents.⁵¹ This paper has contended that fiction has greatly contributed to the knowledge-creation of human civilization yet has become subservient to conventionally marginalizing archetypes that have disempowered women for generations. Unfortunately, the dilemma always falls on the shoulders of those belonging to the minorities for not fitting in the dominant epistemic mold without realizing that these injustices ultimately emanate from

⁵⁰ Jessica Walton and Mandy Truong, "A Review of the Model Minority Myth: Understanding the Social, Educational and Health Impacts," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 46, no. 3 (2022): pp. 391-419, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2022.2121170>.

⁵¹ Nicole Y. Pitre et al., "Critical Feminist Narrative Inquiry," *Advances in Nursing Science* 36, no. 2 (2013): pp. 118-132, <https://doi.org/10.1097/ans.0b013e3182902064>.

dominant/patriarchal systemic conditions. This, in turn, skews individual and communities' identities, thus, contributing further to the epistemic violence inflicted on the hermeneutical capacity of the knower to make sense of their experiences.

In the case of *Encanto*, detecting these systemic factors could be quite straightforward. Mirabel's ordinariness did not prevent her from supporting and doing acts of service for everyone. Mirabel tries to do her part in the family narrative field through her energetic, optimistic attitude and willingness to help. Yet, she was often demanded to step aside and misunderstood as an inconvenience. Arising from her lack of known gifts, Mirabel is treated as an "other" in the family. Mirabel knows in her heart the persistent need to prove herself and be an overly enthusiastic person in the bunch to compensate for her "unspoken invisible pain" she achingly sang to express her lack of words to explain her solitary experience. More so, *Encanto's* lore revolves around the unique quirks of each Madrigal member bestowed to them through and symbolized by the appearance of a magical door/room when they come of age where they could actively conjure their gift. Thus, Mirabel's exclusion as the odd one out /the black sheep of the family is also physically felt in the casita as she remains in the nursery room because of her lack of "place" in the household. Mirabel is yet again subjected to another form of epistemic injustice, specifically, hermeneutical injustice resulting from the pressure to conform to roles and expectations placed on her (or to the Madrigal family as a whole) as a "supposed" protector of *encanto* and the magical village. Thus, Mirabel's character challenges epistemic injustice by addressing the impact of societal norms and expectations on individual experiences. Her lack of magical powers is not presented as a flaw or a failure on her part but rather because of societal expectations and pressures. The lack of epistemic resources and proper communicative tools for the protagonist to exercise power to contest the relationships and societies which oppressed them are symptoms of hermeneutical injustice.

If Mirabel longs for her gift, Mei, on the one hand, finds the red panda form as an inconvenience and, at the same time, a forsaken hereditary trait passed down to the Sun Yee's female descendants. On the surface, it is evident that the primary reason behind this is that the ability to transform into giant red pandas is an undesirable and potentially dangerous trait in modern society. However,

subconsciously, and perhaps because of the clan's repulsion towards the red panda quirk being triggered by their negatively assumed "feminine" emotional outbursts is perceived as unacceptable and unempowered behavior for contemporary women. In the attempt to break away from the dominant patriarchal culture, the idea of independent, empowered women seems to take the view or thought that feminine traits and brute strength are mutually exclusive ideals.

This seeming contradiction caused by conformity to tradition and social expectations conversely affected Mei's love-hate relationship with her human and red panda self. The film also highlights how systemic factors impact a person's access to knowledge and the truth about the red panda's abilities in their female bloodline. Thus, taking the form of Fricker's hermeneutical injustice, Mei is victimized by it for the following reasons: First and foremost, despite being seen as a celebratory gift and uniqueness, the Sun Yee clan concealed the truth of the lore of their ancestor, perhaps due to the thought that only beautiful must be shown and the ugly and brute should be kept hidden. Secondly, it perpetuates injustice because of its critical demonstration of the dominantly marginalizing ideals of the clan's performance of the ritual aimed at controlling women's bodies, thoughts, and emotions because of the undesirability of the red panda form.

In conclusion, the preceding discussion suggests that Mirabel and Mei's experiences have been subjected to both testimonial (identity deficit) injustices and unconscious collective harm because of interpretative and epistemic resource impoverishment. The existence of these injustices is not solely a result of their actions or choices but is also influenced by the societal expectations and pressures the heroes confront. Overall, in presenting these perspectives, *Encanto* and *Turning Red* defied and criticized the idea that individuals are solely responsible for their own experiences, highlighting how systemic factors can also impact a person's access to knowledge and resources.

Conclusion

The unfolding of Mirabel and Mei's (as well as the other characters) narratives as epistemic disruptions paved the way to the validation of previously silenced perspectives, deconstruction of archetypes, and acknowledgment of systemic conditions. The silencing

felt by the characters based on their identities (testimonial injustice) was validated by putting their experiences and struggles in the spotlight as they confront and exercise their agency over the dominant values that limited their capacities as knowers and participants in the narratives. Further demanding the need to correct the enduring epistemic injustice in Disney’s androcentric narrative formula, the film’s portrayal of progressive representations of unique identities and diverse cultures pushed for the deconstruction of monolithic archetypes (hermeneutic injustice). Consequently, demolishing the homogenizing character templates revealed the ingrained systemic factors emanating from hermeneutical injustice. Because of the impoverished knowledge resource and lack of interpretative tools within the characters’ world, the perpetuation of these marginalizing systemic factors left a more damaging impact on the characters already deflated/violated identities and intelligibility to comprehend their experiences.

It appears that a new wave of female protagonists is now approaching. Exemplifying empathy and sensibility in their characterization, the relatable complexities of today’s characters served as the radical driving forces in breaking the glass ceiling of the androcentric mold. Transcending the picture-perfect, brave, and empowered princess to a compassionate multifaceted female protagonist, Mirabel, and Mei are pioneering a new generation of Disney female protagonists that fiercely embrace their identities and summon their fictional world to reinvent itself alongside their self-discovery. The films’ praiseworthy depiction of Fricker’s epistemic injustice and rehabilitation personified by the characters’ actions warrants Disney’s successful reimagination of the 21st-century heroes - not merely as the rebellious kind, but a radically sensible one. Synthesizing this comprehensive critique, this paper proposes a fourth wave or new era of Disney female protagonists as the animation company continues forging a path that positively impacts the audience’s understanding of the complexities and intersectionality of gender and race in contemporary society.

Wave	Films	Hero Characteristics	Plot & Conflict	Archetype
<i>4th</i>	<i>Encanto</i>	<i>Resourceful,</i>	<i>Navigating the</i>	<i>Coming-of-</i>

<i>wave of Disney Heroes</i>	<i>(2021); Turning Red (2022)</i>	<i>compassionate, and multidimensional young women with a sense of responsibility towards their families and communities.</i>	<i>challenges of adolescence, grappling with issues of identity, and struggling with the expectations placed on them by their families and communities.</i>	<i>age, Radical archetype</i>
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Finally, in the attempt to respond to the critique on the tepid feminist reconstruction efforts of Disney from the existing literature, this paper argues that the films *Encanto* and *Turning Red* created disruptive breakthroughs to the societal norms and biases that perpetuate epistemic injustices. Moreover, through this comprehensive critique, the following postfeminist values surfaced in the film: recognition and correction of dominant marginalizing values evoked in the outdated systemic factors that limited the identities and experiences of the knower/character; agency and representation by giving voice to the silenced, and the celebration of diversity and the multidimensional archetypes; healing through recognition of a shared vulnerability espoused by the radical force of compassion and sensibility towards oneself and others, and; in solidarity to support and empower other women become the person they hope to be (Mirabel's sisters and family, and Mei's best friends and relatives). This paper hopes that the rehabilitation of virtue at the epistemic level and postfeminist values evoked in the films be considered as examples of how popular culture can correct and disrupt epistemic injustices, most significantly, about how the films such as *Encanto* and *Turning Red* could influence its audience's thoughts, sensibilities, and expand their hermeneutic horizon.

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