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## Analysis Of Functionalism In The Movie Mulan

Art is known to both reflect and influence society. The four sociological perspectives tend to manifest themselves in different art forms such as books and films. Some films easily represent a perspective at its ideal, or extreme, state while others challenge the concept that society can only fit into one perspective. In Disney's adaptation of Mulan, it is easy to assume at first glance that the film is reflecting feminist theory, as it is about a woman joining the army. It does shed light on countless gender inequalities in society but the language and core values of functionalism are a much better fit for analyzing this movie. A thorough analysis of the many institutions at play reveal that it is closely related to the functionalist perspective. However, as many sociological theorists agree, the functionalist perspective does not account for social change. Mulan, is about the journey of transforming society but it does so by first navigating all the parts that make up society and showing how it is all interconnected. While it does reflect a challenge to the status quo, it can only do so by acknowledging the performative harmony of all the different institutions and their functions in society, a concept that is at the core of the functionalist perspective. Mulan reflects several different social institutions: family, military, government, and education. The movie also explores social facts through ancestors and gender roles. Throughout Mulan's journey, the viewers are exposed to the functions of these different institutions.

The functionalist perspective, as all things are, is interpreted differently depending on the source. This paper will be using the standards outlined by Pope: views society as a whole composed of different parts, seeks equilibrium, views structures and institutions by what they are contributing to society. This view understands functionalism as analyzing what makes a society exist and function as it does. It looks at the parts of a society as dependent on one another and all having a specific function. The separation of this perspective from many others, specifically conflict theory, is that Durkheim emphasizes the positive contribution of the various institutions. Essentially, all the parts of society are adding some form of positive contribution that is maintaining or striving towards equilibrium.

### Women and Honor

At the start of the movie, Mulan is preparing for her meeting with the matchmaker. Her mother and grandmother are obsessively fixing her hair, makeup and clothing and trying to teach her proper manners. Gender, as well as gender roles, are socially constructed but with the functionalist perspective we are able to understand them as socially constructed for a specific purpose, good or bad. Throughout this movie, the role of women and the role of men are clearly

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defined. As Mulan is preparing to meet the matchmaker, the women of the town sing a song for her which includes, “a girl can bring her family great honor in one way, by striking a good match and this could be the day.” She goes from one store to the next as each woman is adding something different to contribute to her success. The women are explicitly saying that as women, the one thing they can do for themselves and their family is to marry a good man. In this society, the role of the woman is to be a good daughter, a good wife and a good mother. She is to take care of her father, her husband and her children and produce functioning members of society. It is her responsibility to look presentable and be obedient, as the song says.

The song goes on to mention the citizens duty to their emperor, “we all must serve our Emperor who guards us from the Huns, the men by bearing arms, a girl by bearing sons.” Here we have three different areas of society with their functions clearly laid out. It is the government/Emperor’s duty to protect his citizens from any outside threats. In return, the men of society are drafted to fight in the army to protect their families. Alongside them, are the women who remain at home and take care of things while they are away. This reveals how these three different parts of society are dependent on one another.

The entire song repeats the phrase, “you’ll bring honor to us all.” The concept of bringing honor to one’s family, while highly cultural, can also be categorized as a social fact. Schmaus interprets Durkheim’s social facts to mean that in order for society to feel some kind of moral obligation to comply with the a specific norm, they have to believe there is a causal relationship between what they do and what the supposed outcome is. This means that the people in the movie must believe that in order to bring honor to their family both in the ancestral world and the one they live in, then they must abide by the set gender roles. Schmaus also pushes back on the notion that social facts are a collective representation. He doesn’t believe that you can assume an individual’s take on a specific norm even if they follow it. This explains why Mulan, although very hesitant and frustrated with the roles, still follows them in the beginning. She wants to please her parents and bring honor to her family in the only way society is telling her she can.

## **Matchmaker and Education**

The first song, which introduced us to many different parts of society, is leading up to Mulan’s visit with the matchmaker. Here, the matchmaker will either accept or reject Mulan as an acceptable woman to have as a wife. The role of the matchmaker is very powerful. Upon her rejection, a woman may lose her only opportunity to make her family proud. The matchmaker’s role seems to be widely accepted amongst everyone in society. It is unclear as to when the role came to be but it is obvious that she is unquestioned in her ability. It’s safe to say that the matchmaker plays a vital institutional role in society, similarly to how we may look at education.

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According to Durkheim, “education...is above all the means by which society perpetually recreates the conditions of its very existence.” The function of the education system, in its many forms, is to reproduce the ideals that maintain society. In this case, Mulan was taught to act a certain way so that she may obtain a good husband. In the song, all the women are giving her advice and teaching her how to be the best woman she can be. That education is tested by the matchmaker. She determines whether or not Mulan can uphold the values of their ideal woman. When first meeting Mulan, the matchmaker reprimands her for “speaking without permission” and having a body “too skinny” which she says is not good for bearing sons. She then tests her knowledge on household manners and tells her she must have certain qualities in order to please her future in laws.

The duties of the matchmaker are essentially what we consider the function of our modern education systems. Our schools are meant to produce law abiding, well-rounded citizens. The matchmaker is meant to produce a woman that upholds all the qualities of the ideal wife. The movie’s twist comes from Mulan not being able to fit into that box and how she struggles with it which leads her to take matters of honoring her family into her own hands.

## **Mulan as the Unsocialized Individual**

After Mulan is rejected from the matchmaker she has her moment of feeling like an outcast who will never fit in. Pope emphasizes how Durkheim argues that while the parts of the whole society strive for equilibrium there is a force, and that force is the “unsocialized component of the individual”. At all times, society is trying its best to control this aspect of the individual or socialize it to fit into society. This is done through family, education and even careers. Durkheim mentions the concept of solidarity or integration and how attached an individual is to the group they are apart of. A stronger attachment is believed to deliver a more socialized individual. However, when there are so many institutions at play, all contributing to the whole, it can be difficult for the individual to find an attachment to the whole, whole being society. If the unsocialized individual feels no attachment, or has even been rejected by society, then they would feel no obligation to contribute to society. What is not talked about is what happens when the unsocialized individual still feels moral obligations to the certain parts or institutions rather than the whole.

Mulan is a prime example of an unsocialized individual. She was deemed to be unworthy of bringing honor to her family in the way women are supposed to. Therefore, she feels like an outcast. However, this rejection does not relieve her of her moral obligations to her family, which was embedded in her growing up. The way she decides to bring honor to her family is by taking her father’s place in the war so that he won’t be killed. This action is not exactly a direct challenge to the status quo. Mulan is simply fulfilling her duty as a daughter in an alternative way since she was denied her right to do so as a woman by the matchmaker. She instead turns

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to the 'man's duty' to society to compensate.

Cole argues that a dialectical approach towards functionalism allows one to understand that "the seeds of change lie within the social structure itself" (Cole, 1996). With this approach, we're able to better understand Mulan's decision as still fitting in to societal institutions. Although the gender roles are explicit within the first ten minutes of the movie, familial obligations are also emphasized. She makes a courageous decision to disguise herself as a man to take her father's place in the army. Her intentions behind this are not an attempt to combat gender roles and allow all women to join the army, she makes a rash decision to put her family before herself. A value that is emphasized in the movie. The familial institution and the duties Mulan feels towards that is what paved the way for her to make such a decision. In other words, the seeds of change were produced by society itself. This outlines exactly what a latent function means in society. Although there are many institutions working to create equilibrium for the whole, the movie reflects that some institutions may play a more important role in an individual's life, thus affecting their decisions.

## Men and Honor

As Mulan is disguised as a man and amongst the other soldiers we get an insight into what function they play in society. In the beginning, there was the song outlining what makes an ideal woman. In the middle, we have a song explaining what makes an ideal man, the lyrics include "be a man, we must be swift as a coursing river, with all the force of a great typhoon, with all the strength of a raging fire." These lyrics reflect the qualities of a good man and a good soldier. For the men, their duty is to be powerful warriors that protect the nation from any threats, in this case, the Huns.

A few moments after training the men head to a battle site. On the way there they complain about the long walks, the hunger and the heat. They outline these struggles and then sing about "a girl worth fighting for" as a way to get them through the day. When we tie this back to the role of women in society as existing solely for male consumption we can see more explicitly the interconnectedness of the men at war and the women at home.

## The Emperor

The emperor is the focal point of the many institutions. He represents the unity of the nation and power. As mentioned before, the women sing how they rely on the emperor to protect them from the huns and therefore they must give the emperor sons to fight in the war. They are outlying the codependency of the institutions. At the end of the movie, once Mulan has helped defeat the Huns and saved the Emperor the movie comes to a standstill. What could potentially represent

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a major conflict to the equilibrium in society is superseded by the power of the Emperor. While his advisor tries to convince him to punish Mulan for her actions, he instead thanks her and gives her material to represent bringing honor to her family. In this society that has laid out rules and obligations for every member has also set itself up to handle conflict while still maintaining harmony. It does so by allowing the emperor the power to defy such rules in the name of safety and family.

## Conclusion

Over the course of the movie, the viewers are given a peek into what life is like for women of society as well as men. They are reflected as two different parts of society that are dependent upon one another fulfilling their societal obligations. The different institutions such as family, military, and education all play a role in producing socialized members of society that

have accepted the norms and values. This harmony allows for a smooth functioning of society, one in which each member plays their part. Conflict arises when one member has difficulty fulfilling her assigned role and instead paves her own path. The conflict is handled by the governing force of society. Throughout this movie, we see a society that is functioning well and then is approached with conflict in which it handles softly and without chaos. All of this to show the importance of each member in society and the function they play in creating the whole.

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