The Rise of Independent Female Protagonists: A Research on The Animated Films *Putih* (2001) and *Kring!* (2019)

Sharifah Nur Sabrina Syed Abdul Hamid
College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam
Selangor, Malaysia
Email: sharifahnursabrina96@gmail.com

Mohamed Razeef Abdul Razak
College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam
Selangor, Malaysia
Corresponding author
Email: razeef080@uitm.edu.my

* These authors contributed equally to this study

ABSTRACT

Representation is significant especially in media driven society nowadays. We incidentally and unknowingly construct our opinions and thoughts through the consumption of varieties of different types of media, but one of the most powerful tools to communicate and share ideas with audiences is through moving pictures, especially since the boom of the creative and digital industries. That media would be animation. Independent animated films in Malaysia are expanding although slowly but at a steady pace. More and more audiences of different generations are able to tune in as digital media consumption is much easier to access. This helps audiences to appreciate the value of positive messages these films attempt to convey. Both *Kring!* (2019) and *Putih* (2001) hold deep sentimental values as both short films, even though small, depict certain aspects of personality traits, in line with the concept of feminism itself. Although both are in stark contrast with each other, both of the females depicted clearly how women are mirrored and perceived in the current society and era when they are created. It is crucial to see the progress and the significant growth of how women are portrayed on screen, although looked very unimportant, but one of the stepping stones in holding women's virtue as an abled human being, functioning in society.

Keywords: *Female, Protagonist, Malaysian, Animated, Film*

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has been accustomed to animation since the early 1900s. One of the first animated short films ever produced locally in Malaysia was *Sang Kancil and Monyet* (1984), directed and produced by Hassan Muthalib, one of Malaysia's leading forefathers of animation. Hassan (2007) mentioned that Malaysia has the potential to go far in the animation industry, although Malaysia is not preoccupied with big animation studios if compared to other ASEAN countries such as the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia.

Animation studios in Malaysia make do with whatever available resources they have and move forward to create amazing art pieces that capture the attention of the audiences with their captivating rendered art style and entice them with unique characters and storylines. Subsequently, this concept was affirmed when the television animated series for *Ejen Ali*, recently was contracted to exclusively stream on Disney+ Hotstar, one of the major platform sites for streaming video content, according to the news article by Mya (2022). Not forgetting, the entire seasons and mainstream movies of one of the most popular animation series in ASEAN, *Upin & Ipin*. These franchises have been added to Netflix for quite some time, and are readily available to stream on Netflix. As mentioned by Ahmad Izhan Omar , this achievement has potentially opened new opportunities for local content creators to shine and distribute their work with a better chance to be recognizable globally, on a global platform (Mya, 2022). Animation production produced locally can be watched and streamed globally, thanks to the exploitation of the digital age, where everything is accessible at the tip of our fingers.

Because of these notions, we could see the major impact of these successes on our digital economy. More allocations are strategized to boost the technology industries, animation. This is one of the first steps in recognizing the achievement and encourages local animation studios to strive for much better quality, not only on the graphics of the animation itself but the richness of the storyline and plot. It will be enticing and engaging, maybe something completely new for the audience to consume. Hence, this solidifies the concept of challenging new ideas and motives to be viewed by the audiences. Merging two concepts of not only animation created to be visually stunning and have an interesting plot line but to convey deep messages and challenge taboo themes for the audience to reason and ponder, especially in this day and age. The topic of the segregation of genders has always been prevalent in Malaysia, especially the occupational and wage gap between male and female workers. In recent years, a study by Rahmah (2017) has shown that there is still a significant gap between the income of female workers in a single household compared to male workers. Even though, within those years, female Malaysian workers are significantly growing in their respective workforce. Thus, more or so highlighting the issue of the insignificance and undermining of the female gender. Not only restricted and discriminated against in their own workplace but blatantly generalized and stereotyped heavily in the media. According to a study conducted by Mahmor (2015), it is evident that females are heavily stereotyped. Females are depicted to be fools and are always deemed as damsels in distress. The image of these females on screen is burned in the mind of its consumers, be it in writing, images, or moving media. This, evidently slowly reshapes and reconstructs how we as a society consume this information and project how we see women, in general. This is evident as we can see how princess characters, during the Golden Age of animation in America, especially in the Disney franchise. According to McKenzie (2015), the typical damsel-in-distress who is intensely domestic is the earliest depiction of Disney princesses. This is shown in a number of classic Disney animated films, including *Snow White* (1937) and *Cinderella* (1950). In some circumstances, the princesses are shown stationed in different residences and are only permitted to perform their customary chores while waiting to be rescued. McKenzie (2015) adds that the idea of a young, attractive, and kind-hearted princess mirrors cultural ideals about women and gender roles.

We can acknowledge that these studies acknowledge how wrong women are depicted and interpreted on screen, this pushes the certainty for representation of female protagonists in animated films, especially in Malaysia. Although said animated films flourish on global platforms, the absence of female protagonists is unnerving. Most female characters in these films are deemed as side characters for the protagonist. With the time limit for these films to explore the female character's complexity, the audiences could not see their full potential as a whole. Even so, *Kring!* (2019) and *Batik Girl* (2021) rises to the challenge of not only making a protagonist for these short-animated film females but to challenge the themes of exploring the full potential of being a woman in Malaysia. It acts as a representation for female audiences in Malaysia to relate and conceptualize the idea of relating their suffering with the same issues as they needed to be seen and heard. Now, female viewers of all ages could see a representation of themselves on screen, with the message that they can grow and be empowered for their personal and professional lives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Emergence of Animation

The upsurge of animation should be fully credited to the growth of the internet. Most mainstream media that we consume, be it in the form of entertainment or education, succeeded through the leap growth of the internet itself. Audiences can engross themselves and consume media anywhere and everywhere they want. Multiple platforms are available on the internet for audiences to access and watch as these platforms are made to be easily accessed and navigated. This introduces a huge leeway for creators to engage and conceptualize unique ideas in order to capture the attention of the audiences. As computers advance, the demand for consumers becomes more and more challenging as audiences prefer to be visually enticed by video format. Creators are called to create in conjunction, not only providing stunning visuals for production but increasing the growth of the flexibility of creators to push boundaries and present difficult topics to be discussed. It is important as most of the viewers for animation specifically ponder young audiences, which are mostly impressionable children. Iamurai (2009) conducted research on how aggressive commercial influences the effect on young viewers, in which they argue that animation is the embodiment of characters representing living in the same environment as the viewer. Young audiences would perceive it and expedite the notion that it will influence the beholder's emotions and how they are going to act in their environment. That is why it is important to explore and conceptualize unique ideas to generate moving conversations and contribute to the social movement.

The Animus

Sex and gender are two separate identities in which, sex is the biological identity of a basic human, whereas gender, are social identity or cultural identity that is bestowed upon humans, according to Brugeilles (2002). In context culture, it dictates the 'masculinity' and the 'femininity' part assigned to each corresponding sex. Basically, identifying and categorizing humans into two separate groups, male and female. This is as though a confirmation assigned certain stereotypes and expectations to dictate their way of living. Women who are generalized into a specific box were ordered to stay home, become caregivers, care for the children, and do household chores. Men, on the other hand, are encouraged to explore and work in order to provide for their families. One of the first stereotypes is that women are not allowed to pursue bigger dreams and find comfort and learn from their own success. In most stereotyping, women are also expected to be dainty, sweet, and weak. They needed a hero, a man to come and rescue them, from bad things like their environment or bad people, and in some twisted way, from themselves. This somehow summarizes the status quo of a woman's standing in a social society. The social imbalance and inequality for both syzygies are jarring.

Carl Jung's personality archetypes theory plays a huge role in identifying and expressing the collective unconsciousness of the human mind. Beoree (2006) explains in Carl Jung's archetype theory, dives deep into uncovering the concept and idea of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'. The main four archetypes are the mother, the shadow, the persona, and the anima or animus. The anima or the animus will be dictating and helping to identify this social construct. The anima, according to the theory, is the 'feminine' aspects or traits in a man, whereas the 'animus' is the 'masculine' traits in a woman. Deep in the human consciousness, each woman is indicative of their animus. These traits came to them, based on their life behavior, personality, and cultural upbringing. Most of these 'masculine' traits challenge the social norm that they were expected to have. The concept of women wanting to become leaders, independent, and capable was somehow a vast concept. It's basically telling themselves, and the world that they have their own wants and their own needs. Women are supposed to be given leeway, the same as men, to achieve anything they want but are restricted by norms. This solidifies the inequality women

suffered. These are what society expects women to act accordingly. Any 'masculine', albeit 'feminine' traits are classified as strange to the eyes of social hierarchy.This heavily correlates with the Big 5 personality traits theory as this is deemed as one of the most accurate readings for personality tests according to psychologists globally according to. By exploring the animus of the masculinity aspect of a female human being, it correlates with the human's personality itself. Using the theory, it summarizes the personality into 5 different traits including:

1. Openness
2. Conscientiousness
3. Extraversion
4. Agreeableness
5. Neuroticism

Under these umbrella terms, each of these traits will be examined in depth to evaluate the existence or absence of these traits in a human person. .
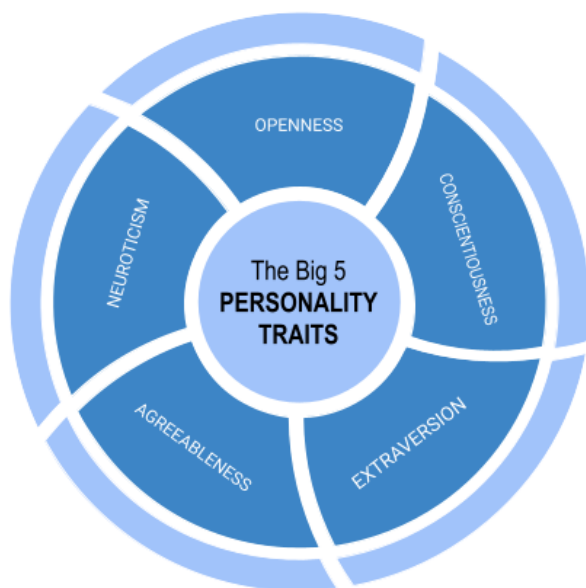

Figure 1: The Big 5 Personality Traits
(Source: J.M Digman, Personality Structure: Emergence of the Five Factor Model)

Feminist Ideology in Animation

Somehow this twisted way of dictating how females should be classified and expected seeps through and was adapted on screen. In general viewing to a wide range of audience, this helps nail down the coffin and solidifies these expectations into the social hierarchy. This was prominent, even from way back, we could see in old animations, especially princess-themed movies. Rowe (2019) confirmed in these movies, the dominant character, the star of the show, was the princesses. But they were presented as feeble as they can go dainty and needed to be saved. Not only their personality and traits were seeping through the screen, but how they were presented was also an issue. Most princesses are stereotyped as having light complexion, a slim figure, and a small waist. A cruel depiction of how women should be presented. The ideal figure. It contorted the mind of audiences spectating and projects what they see on the screen onto their real life. Certain expectations of how women should look and behave became the

social norm. It became, in some cruel way, a complete annotation in the norm cycle. Everything keeps on repeating and nothing changes.

That is why change is needed to challenge these social norms. Bringing in more independent dominant female roles is a game changer to break these stereotypes. We could see in Western animation culture, more independent female roles embrace their inner anima. Like in the animated film Mulan, women are capable of serving their country and fight in the war. Or in Brave, Merida chooses her destiny and dictates her life. In the article, it was highlighted that not only in major films, characters in serialized television also adapt to this feminist concept. The character Marge was once depicted in one of the episodes as joining a so-called #MeToo movement during her years in university. These characters act on their animus. This notion should have been celebrated by audiences, in which society exists in celebrating the female animus, a concept of simple decency in their own life. By projecting these ideas on general viewing, the audience can relate and gradually accept these ideas to be intertwined with their own beliefs. Therefore, putting out independent animation shorts would be the right move to completely introduce females celebrating their anima. It's approachable and feedable to the audience to play around with challenging the social construct of gender. Short animations are the perfect medium to meditate on the message of challenging gender. Even in Malaysia, the prospect of using a female dominant role in the selected animated film was the perfect choice to carry this message.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The chosen research methodology used was the qualitative research method. Data was collected through full viewing of both short-animated films chosen, which were *Putih* (2001) and *Kring!* (2019), focused on both of the short film's main protagonists, Teacher Suraya from *Kring!* (2019) and Putih from *Putih* (2001). A study was conducted, mainly focusing on the role of the protagonist in their respective animated films, and how the concept of femininity and the feminist ideology influenced the protagonist themselves. The method used to collect this data is by analyzing the personality traits of the characters and their on-screen roles. In further analysis, the data collected then will be applied to the Big 5 Personality theory, to observe the complexity of the character's personality and identity. The protagonist is identified by how much the characters appear on screen and their impact on the narrative of the animated film, explained by Putri (2017). In the animated film *Kring!* (2019), the protagonist is Teacher Suraya. Teacher Suraya is seen helping one of her students, Mael who is failing her class. Next in *Putih* (2001), the protagonist of this animated film would be Putih. Putih can be seen as the story revolves around her and how she navigates her life and escapes through torments from her antagonist. The research instruments used to analyze these characters are recorded in the form of a table. The characters chosen are as below:

Table 1: Character is chosen to analyze (Animated film: *Putih*)

Character in Animated Film: Putih	Gender	Role in Animated Film
Putih	Female	The main protagonist of the film. The biological daughter of Mak Labu, the step sister of Merah and the step daughter of Mak Kundur.

Table 2: Character is chosen to analyze (Animated film: *Kring!*)

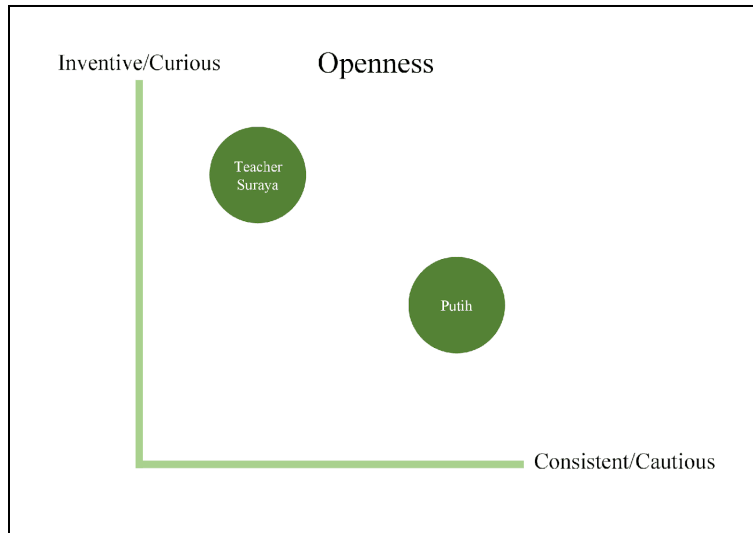| Character in Animated Film: Kring!	Gender	Role in Animated Film
Teacher Suraya	Female	The main protagonist of the film. A teacher at a local school.

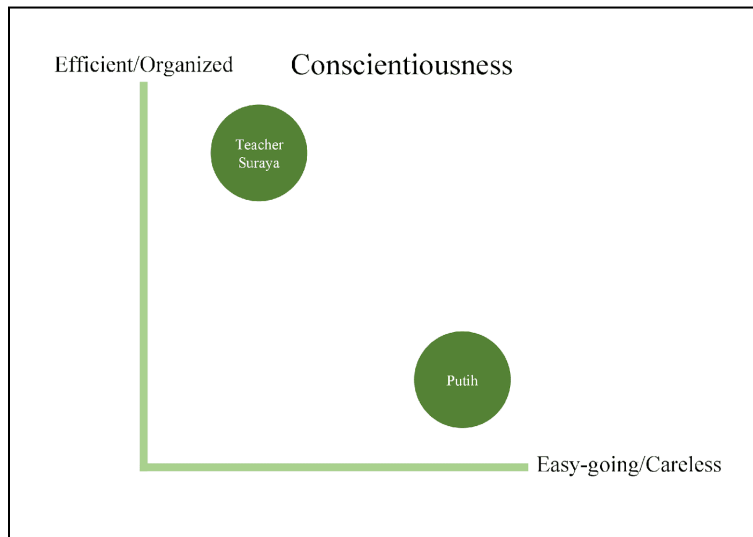**Figure 2: Characters chosen on the Big 5 Personality Theory (Openness)**

Figure 3: Characters chosen on the Big 5 Personality Theory (Conscientiousness)
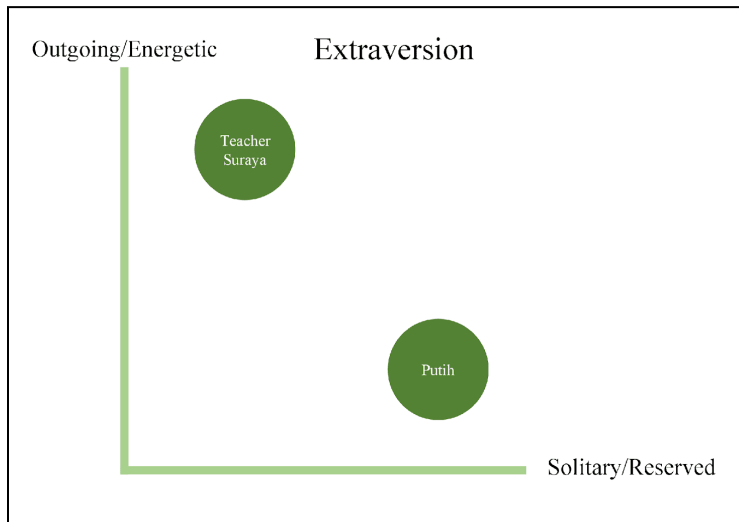
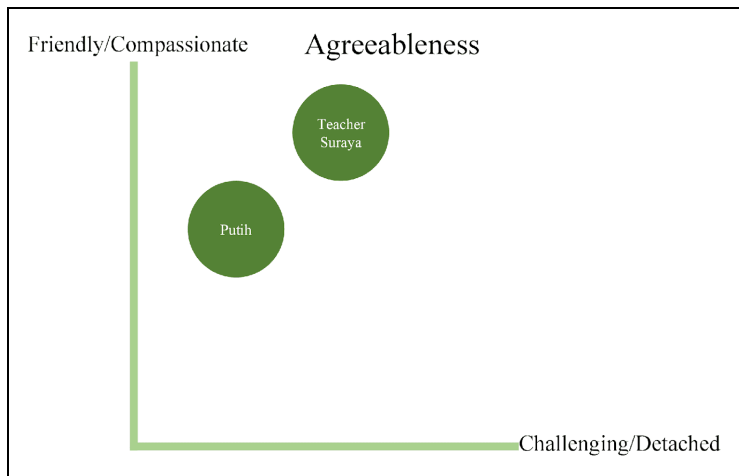**Figure 4: Characters chosen on the Big 5 Personality Theory (Extraversion)**

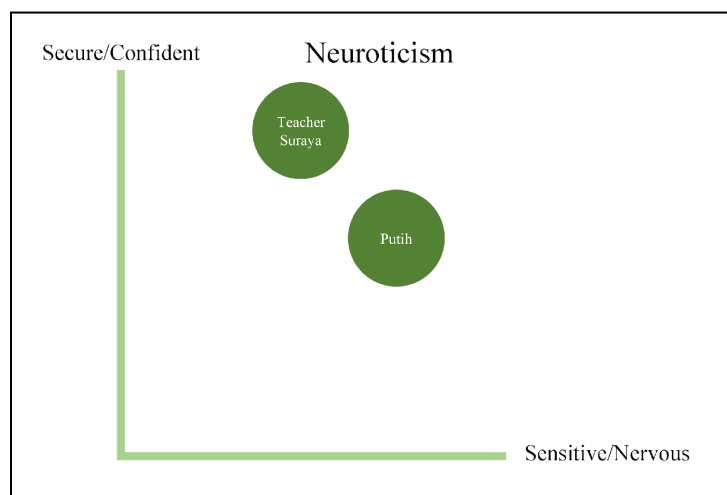**Figure 5: Characters chosen on the Big 5 Personality Theory (Agreeableness)**

Figure 6: Characters chosen on the Big 5 Personality Theory (Neuroticism)

FINDINGS

The Big 5 Personality Theory is used to analyze both of the protagonists of each corresponding animated film. Both of the female protagonists have an active role throughout the animation. The narrative of the protagonist's storyline is driven and affected by the protagonist's decisions throughout the film. Both main characters, Putih and Teacher Suraya are placed in the Big 5 Personality Theory elements, which are the following elements:

1. Openness
2. Conscientiousness
3. Extraversion
4. Agreeableness
5. Neuroticism

In Figure 2, both characters are placed in the Openness personality element, which contains the trait of inventive and curious vs consistent and cautious. We could see a major difference in both characters. Teacher Suraya appeared to be more inventive and curious as to Putih who is much more cautious of a character. In *Kring!* (2019), Teacher Suraya's main goal was to help one of her students who is failing her class. She seeks how to help this one student of hers as she notices that her usual method of teaching is not working for him. In the film, she decided to try a different approach to learning and ultimately helped her students in need. However, in contrast to the character Putih, she is very cautious of herself and her environment as she is always tormented by her stepfamily. Even though, further into the film, she was rescued and married the prince, she always had these feelings that she does not belong and one day will be overthrown. Although she overcomes the fear and gets her happy ending, it is obvious that Putih still maintains the cautious trait until the end. The blunt evidence of a damsel in distress is evident as stated by Craven (2002), female characters that were adapted from folklore especially, carry the traits of damsels in distress. This translates globally as it is applicable to the film Putih. Putih was adapted from local folklore from the story Bawang Putih and Bawang Merah. It is rich with cultural and positive messages contained in the story. This somehow wrongly translates that women have to be docile and meek in order to survive, which is a huge misconception of being stern and assertive as a female.

Henceforth, in Figure 3, the personality element of conscientiousness is used. In this element, the traits of efficient and organized vs the traits of easy-going and careless. In this figure, there is also an evident gap between both characters. Once again, Teacher Suraya placed on the highest spectrum of much more efficient and organized. In the opening scene of the film, it is observed that Teacher Suraya is a very capable teacher in her school. She saves any accidents that happen in front of her when she first arrives at her school. She is depicted as a very capable teacher, who is on top of her career. One of the major steps of representation of the female role in a functional society can be seen here. A female role can do an excellent job, especially in teaching young children. For Putih, she came off as a much more careless character, especially in handling her interaction with her stepfamily. She became reclusive every time her stepfamily abused her or her mother, Mak Labu. She was seen to be confident when she is by herself and when she conversed with the talking animals inside her own home but indefinitely shuts down whenever she is presented with a problem.

Next, in Figure 4, the personality element of extraversion is used. This includes the traits of outgoing and energetic vs solitary and reserved. Teacher Suraya again rises to the occasion as being more outgoing and energetic when compared to both characters. Teacher Suraya can be observed to wear her

feelings on her sleeves, as she can be seen very energetic and enthusiastic in finding a solution to help her students in need. Even though, in the height of the moment, she must fight her inner demons, trying to convince herself that she is no better than her current self, she succeeded in ultimately finding an alternative way to help. She overcame her negative traits and was rewarded for her efforts, by overseeing her student's accomplishments. For Putih, she is very reserved and reclusive. Whenever she was pressed to a wall, she somehow cannot overcome those obstacles and revert to being reclusive. Somehow, she viewed that she cannot be evil and mean, and stooped down to her stepfamily's level. Her character does not realize that standing up to yourself, defending yourself will never be associated with something bad. This in a roundabout situation, falls back on the idea of females being loud and assertive as 'bitchy'.

Although, In Figure 5, the personality element of agreeableness, we could see a little bit of change in the comparison of both characters. These traits in these elements are friendly and compassionate vs challenging and detached. Teacher Suraya, although she does have an amount of compassion for her students, she pursues her means of becoming a much more capable teacher to herself, rather than her students. She puts her own goal forward first, and then at the end, she realizes that with her effort, she was rewarded with kindness, which in turn becomes much more compassionate by the end of the film. Stark contrasts with Putih, she is the epitome of friendliness and a compassionate character. From the start of the film, she was shown as the most down-to-earth character. In line with the traditional folklore, especially in Malay culture, humility is a celebrated aspect someone should have, which is true. Having humility is a great trait to have in someone, but not enough until you are unable to protect yourselves from harm. From the start of the film until the end, Putih practices compassion towards her stepfamily, in which she forgives her step-family and provides them comfort later in the film as she was married off to the Prince. This conveys the idea that women are easily manipulated. They somehow associate this as a weakness as women apparently cannot defend themselves. It is a huge misconception as one of the feminist ideas are for women to be dependent on themselves, physically and especially emotionally.

Lastly, in Figure 6, the personality element of neuroticism includes the traits of being secure and confident vs sensitive and nervous. In this element, we could again observe a margin between both characters. Teacher Suraya is portrayed as a very secure and confident teacher, even at the start of the film. Even though, in a moment when she doubted herself in one of the scenes in the film, she rises back and becomes confident in her teaching skills at the end. Putih was depicted as much more sensitive and nervous, although her environment contributes to her personality. She cannot help but become sensitive and nervous because of the abuse. But in the end, she was able to achieve her happiness by marrying the Prince, even helping the Kingdom when it was under attack. In this instance, both characters at least achieved becoming someone more confident by the end of their film. We can see the growth of both characters, and the development of their confidence level. And it shows that being able to achieve self-satisfaction and happiness, could contribute to gaining more confidence in yourself. It teaches mainly for female audiences here that they can emerge as champions in their own life, no matter the consequences.

From this observation, we could see the correlation and the growth of how female protagonists are depicted in their respective eras. We could see the common traits and personalities applied to both characters and how they managed themselves in their own narrative. From the change of women's prospects in society, to how women can change their given personality and traits to become a much better version of themselves. We can clearly see the growth of how complex a woman character can be and how integrated these female characters are with their personalities and at most, shine the brightest in their storyline. In the previous era, we could see how focused we are in maintaining the concept of a 'damsel in

distress' and we cannot have our own voice because it is deemed as being emotional or 'bitchy' in some sense. Whatever beating we received, we cannot retaliate and stand up for ourselves. And that influenced how women are supposed to act and be in those eras of time. With the current character that we have with Teacher Suraya, society can observe the full potential of being a woman in Malaysia specifically. The audience can see that women can thrive in their working environment and although still associated with being emotional, they can control and become a better version of themselves. This correlates with the feminist ideology of independent women in the workforce and a stable health mentality.

CONCLUSION

Based on the finding, there is a clear correlation between the progression of female protagonists throughout the years. Female audiences could relate to the positive imagery presented on screen to relate these issues with themselves. This helps boost the representation of a female's independence and stability as not more of an object anymore, but a human being with complexity and emotions. It speaks volumes for us as a society, healthily communicating and addressing our issues about what femininity is, and in fact, trying to embrace change in the 21st century. It is high time for our society to not only embrace the change but embedded in the mind of people that women are not just accessories to society, but their being as a human is valid. Women deserve to be seen and heard, on par with their male counterparts. They should embrace their inner animus and strive for a bigger brighter dream. And by seeing the progress through Putih and Teacher Suraya, it is clear that we are on the right path towards a much better future-for ourselves but for our future generations.

REFERENCES

Boeree, C. G. (2006). Personality Theories: Carl Jung 1875-1961. Psychology Department, Shippensburg University. Original E-Text-Site: [http://www.ship.edu/%7Ecgboeree/perscontents.html]

Brugeilles, C., Cromer, I., Cromer, S., & Obadia, Y. (2002). Male and Female Characters in Illustrated Children's Books or. *Population*, *57*(2), 237-267.

Craven, A. (2002). Beauty and the Belles. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, *9*(2), 123–142. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350682002009002806

Hassan Abdul Mutalib. (2007). From mousedeer to mouse: Malaysian animation at the crossroads. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies.* 8(2), 288-297.

Hassan Abd Muthalib (Director). (1984). *Sang Kancil and Monyet* [Film]. Finas

Hilmi Ismail (Director). (2019)*. Kring!*[Film]. Brainy Bones Studios

Iamurai, S. (2009). *Positive Cartoon Animation to Change Children Behaviors in Primary Schools Teaching and Education Innovation Positive Cartoon Animation to Change Children Behaviors in Primary Schools*. *International Conference on Primary Education 2009,* 1-3

Irwan Junaidy (Director). (2021). *Batik Girl* [Film].The R&D Studio

Mahmor, N. A., & Hashim, N. (2015). Citra Wanita Melayu Dalam Cerita Animasi Kanak- Kanak Upin dan Ipin. *Journal of Education and Social Sciences*, *2*, 137–149.

McKenzie, B. (2015). Disney's female gender roles: The change of modern culture. (Unpublished master's thesis). Indiana State University.

Mya Amri (2022, June 24). *Siri Animasi Hebat, Ejen Ali Musim Ketiga Kini Di Disney+ Hotstar*. Gempak.com. https://gempak.com/berita-terkini/siri-animasi-hebat-ejen-ali-musim-ketiga-kini-di-disney-hotstar-73115

Rahmah Ismail, Farhadi, M., & Wye, C.-K. (2017). Occupational Segregation and Gender Wage Differentials: Evidence from Malaysia. *Asian Economic Journal*, *31*(4), 381–401. https://doi.org/10.1111/asej.12136

Rowe, R. (2019). Shaping Girls: Analyzing Animated Female Body Shapes. *Animation*, *14*(1), 22–36. https://doi.org/10.1177/1746847719829871

Rashid Sibir (Director). (2001). *Putih* [Film]. Fine Animation

Putri, C. (2018). The Characterization Of The Main Character In Gone Girl Film. *linguistica*, *7*(3). https://doi.org/10.24114/ling.v7i3.11888