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The Role of the Woman in Contemporary Society
As seen in Disney's Pocahontas and Larsen's The White

The place of women is an important issue in today's society, and our views are expressed through media of all types – art, television, music, writing, and others. Sifting through the subtleties of these works can provide us insight into what the creator is trying to portray. We also get a glimpse of the unconscious influence of society. We may then examine what the implications of these attitudes are, and why they are important. The 1995 Disney film Pocahontas and Deborah Larsen's 2002 novel The White are two examples of recent media that deal differently with similar topics and time periods.

In the Disney movie Pocahontas, women in general play a side role. Whether by conscious choice or by natural tendency, the women are placed in what may be called the traditional role of the woman in American society. Even the Native American women are portrayed in what we might consider the “ideal” Indian form.

The beginning of Pocahontas is very telling, for the fact that there are no women that sail to Virginia. This does not seem very realistic if this is a colonial mission or even one of so long an expected stay. In fact, there are nearly no white women at all who appear in the film. This suggests that women are only supportive figures who play no real role in society. Some white women say goodbye to the men before they set sail in the beginning, but the men seem not to miss or even remember them after they set sail. Are women, then, only there for the pleasure of men, or objects to be left behind when business of import is being handled? The second and final time any white women are

displayed is when Governor Ratcliffe sings of finding riches. He states, “When they see how I glitter, the ladies at court will be all a-twitter,” (script) while fancily-clothed women fawn over his rings and kiss his hands. This suggests that women are easily awed and impressed by jewelry and wealth. The women seem to exist merely to make the man feel good about himself – by fawning over him like so for such a shallow reason, they become merely background objects of no real value.

Grandmother Willow plays the role of the wise old grandmother (with the exception of being a tree). It is hard to say for certain what we can draw from her presence since she is not a typical character. She is also an anomaly because she seems to at once know nearly everything but be surprised by others. For example, she knows John Smith’s name, but is surprised to see Pocahontas wearing her mother’s necklace. Perhaps we could interpret Grandmother Willow to be another example of trying to fit modern ideals into the Native American lifestyle. Grandmother Willow has the wisdom and kindness of a grandmother without being too powerful. She also has the spiritual qualities often associated with Native Americans. Thus, she is what we would want to see in a grandmother figure.

Pocahontas is the ideal picture of an Indian woman for our society. She is slim and beautiful, and very in tune with nature. She also learns English miraculously fast. This is an example of how we want her to conform to our modern standards. She is the type of Indian girl that an American might like to meet. She is fearful but curious in her first encounter with John Smith, while he is courageous and bold. This is a model of how we think a woman, particularly an Indian woman, should act. Her curiosity is a sign of her good spirit, while her fear subordinates her to the white man. When John Smith

discovers Pocahontas, we have a classic hunter-prey scene. The gun-toting John Smith is hunting the wild Pocahontas. This scene is a metaphor for man's desire for women and perhaps also the Indian. In fact, Governor Ratcliffe says to Thomas, "A man is not a man unless he knows how to shoot," (script). This definition of what a man is contrasts with that of a woman and is yet another example of the dominance of the man and his ability to wield power where women do not.

The role of the woman is much different in Larsen's The White. Mary Jemison is a strong and well-developed character whom the story centers around. In fact, the roles of men are downplayed somewhat, perhaps because of the female perspective – as we can see in Jemison's father.

Larsen constantly reminds us of Mary's many choices, as in the following quote: "She closed her own eyes then and stumbled along, *deciding* to give her captor that trouble" (Larson 6). She does it again and again, as when she states, "she had climbed up a hill and then had *decided* to try walking backward on the top of it" (Larson 16). These emphases on choices are important, because it gives Mary some control over the situation. Mary is influencing the story, and helping to shape her future. Mary is not the only woman to exercise this control. When "Her sisters *decided* she should accompany a hunting party" (Larson 35) they too participate. They play an active role in this story by raising Mary and by finding ways to brighten her spirit. They are not hiding in the background somewhere, but out on the pages for us to see. The repetition of the word *decided* is not an accident, as it rarely is with an author, and Larsen knows exactly what she is doing when she emphasizes the women's choice.

Jemison is also an active character when it comes to interaction among her peers. We can see this from the following quote: “But Mary answered and said that she had indeed declared herself curious, that she told Slight-Wind that she half wanted to go” (Larson 101). We can especially see from the way Larsen writes “she had indeed” that Mary is *actively* choosing what she wants and speaking out about her choices, whether speaking to a man or woman. This shows how women do have a voice and a right to use it as Jemison does.

The men in The White do play a significant role, but weak men are also featured. Mary’s father, for example, is not given much credit at all by Mary, and she often laments his “giving-up” and his carelessness for placing them in a situation of danger. Although Mary seems to reconcile this, Larsen is not afraid to introduce the possibility that a white male father could be weak. This is not something we would see in the movie Pocahontas. Dr. James Seaver, as well, plays a minor role in this story. By the time he enters the scene, his ignorance is almost laughable. The whole time he is involved, the focus remains on Mary. He may regard her or ask her questions, but the interesting things we are drawn to focus on Mary. Seaver is taken aback because “*Her* face. It was shining” (Larson 205). The parts of Seaver that we do focus on are his reactions to *her* and his inappropriate, or perhaps mistakenly preconceived questions. When he asked her if “All these years... you have been drinking the nauseous dregs of the bitter cup of slavery,” “it occurred to him that what he had just said sounded a trifle ridiculous.” Dr. Seaver is here admitting his own faulty predispositions, and we are allowed to laugh at his expense. This is not something we would do of a strong character.

Why is this difference of women's portrayal so important? They expose the different motives and social underpinnings of the authors. Pocahontas may well have been produced in 1995, but it follows traditional roles and values of other Disney movies such as The Little Mermaid. Women play a less-than-men role and are shown with less abilities than men. They are also depicted as the object of men's desires and are cast with "beautiful" but sexualized bodies. Whether this is to satisfy potential customers, the conscious decision of the writers, or just belies today's social values it is hard to tell. The story is completely different in The White however. Deborah Larsen casts Mary Jemison as a strong character with the ability to choose her paths in life. Other women in the story are also given choices and thus control. Control and the choice to decide is emphasized again and again. Larsen is not afraid to display weaker male roles, either. This adds to the complexity of the story, and perhaps a further element of reality. Perhaps Larson does not have to appeal to the same audience as Disney movies, and thus is not afraid to push the envelope of the role of men and women in contemporary society. Perhaps her writing is more telling of the feelings of women as a whole, being a woman herself. The conflict between the two views does, however, represent the same conflict in our society, and we must choose on our own which model to live by.