

# The Revolution of Female Characters in Disney Films

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## Abstract

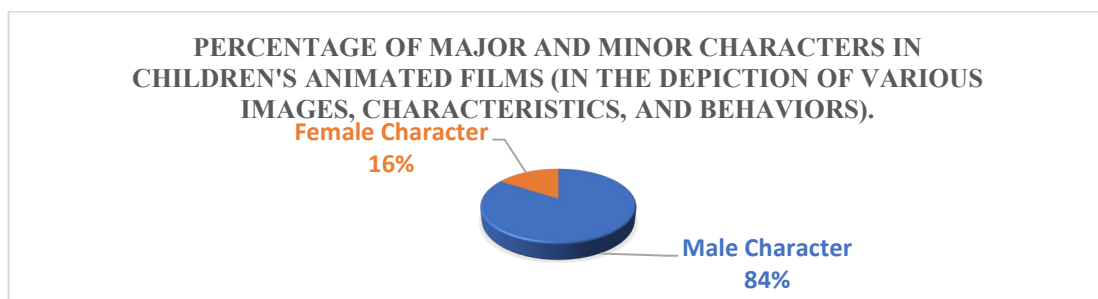
Disney characters always lead to gender development. Like a Disney princess who always depends on her prince to save her life. But now, the pattern is experiencing changes that occur in female characters. Women are no longer in a passive position, but they begin to develop to be strong, challenging, and independent. Through this paper, researchers will discuss several phases of the transition of female characters in Disney film production. By focusing on research questions, namely, how the nature of Disney women experiences a shift as a form of gender equality? To answer this question, researchers will use qualitative research methods that emphasize the depth of research and the results of the Disney film analysis.

## Keywords

Feminism, Disney Film, Gender Issues, Disney Princess, Revolution

## 1. Introduction

Disney comes with presenting many characters, ranging from the Princess character such as Aurora in Sleeping Beauty (1959), Giselle in Enchanted (2007), to Tiana in The Princess and the Frog (2009). Based on several examples from the Disney princess movies, Disney has remained consistent in presenting the prince figure needed to complete the presence of the Princess characters in the film. This must have happened for a reason. In a previous study by Sabrina Fischer (2010)<sup>1</sup> regarding the depiction of gender in children's animated films, it was found that male characters occupy more major and minor characters than children's animated films. Male characters also have a higher diversity of images, characteristics and behaviours than female characters with the percentage of male characters 84% and female characters 16%. As seen in the graph below:



According to the results of the survey, theories began to emerge regarding the gender inequality that occurred. Streicher (1974: 125-129) assesses the existence of different roles given to male and female characters as well as the negative representation of female characters. In general, female characters are less than males in cartoons, they are shown less on screen, do not have a leading role are not very active, have fewer responsibilities, they are less bouncing, and are much more childish than boys. Mothers work at home alone and men do not interfere with housework.

It is undeniable that male characters attach more importance to cartoons. Male characters are shown as more skilled, prominent, able to express ideas, threatening, and furious than women. In contrast, female characters are shown as more compassionate, in need of protection, and preoccupied with ordinary things than male characters (Green, 2001: 68). Therefore, it is not surprising that most of the Disney Princess films feature a Prince character to be a companion or even dominate the Princess character in films such as Snow White (1937), Cinderella (1950), The Little Mermaid (1989), to the film Beauty and the Beast (1991).

Based on this perspective, it certainly is increasingly leading the audience's assumptions and trust from the standpoint built due to gender portrayals displayed in a Disney film. So, the issue of gender is critical in shaping a thought that has an impact on society. At the beginning of the presence of the Disney Princess, they simultaneously experienced the same central problem related to the depiction of the very prominent gender differences. The role of women is considered weaker than male characters, especially in solving problems. As described (Purwoko, 2018) in the book *From Snow White to Brave: The Evolution of the Disney Princess* by Guizerix (2013), said that:

“These princesses’ life’s work is focused in the domestic sphere, and they are constantly being dominated by a more powerful figure—an evil stepmother, a prince, and even inanimate objects or traditional customs. Their dream is for a prince to rescue and marry them, and marriage is a fulfilling and satisfactory end to each of their stories.” (Guizerix, 2013: 3)<sup>2</sup>

This strengthens the argument that Disney women are always described as helpless figures who are dominated by the role of the prince, who is considered more robust so that all women are just waiting to be saved. In a journal entitled *"Women in Film Medium: Reading Feminism Concepts in Moana"* by Purwoko (2018). He categorizes Disney princess figures into three generations, namely the first: Just a princess in elegant clothes, and her destiny is to wait for a handsome prince on horseback to woo her or save her from danger. It can be seen in the examples of films at that time, Cinderella (1950) and Sleeping Beauty (1959). The second: No longer taking the European stereotype of being submissive, white, and elegant, but trying to represent princesses from other regions with more varied characters. Thus, The Little Mermaid (1989), Aladdin (1992), Beauty and the Beast (1992), and Pocahontas (1995) emerged. And lastly: Disney negotiates the figure of their Princess with contemporary discourse and demands for diversity that are spreading in various countries. The Princess and the Frog (2009) featured the first African Princess in Disney princess history, then Tangled 3D (2010) saw Princess Rapunzel go hand in hand with a male figure to fight the bad guys, and Brave (2012) with princess Merida for the first time in history. Disney refuses marriage. Therefore, the issue of feminism is increasingly coming to the surface to prove that a female character in Disney's image can stand alone without a male figure beside her.

## **1.1 Objectives**

Therefore, this paper aims to prove the truth of the shift in the role of female characters, which is more prominent in the formation of characteristics and behaviours shown in Disney films in this era. Also, this

study is going to correlate the thoughts of the Disney Corporation and the women in the feminists 'movements since the first movie. Because the gender inequality that existed in the previous Disney Princess films seemed to perpetuate the differences in roles between women and men represented in the film.

This is important to talk about because, as we can see from the category of Disney Princess figures in the first generation, they are very dependent on the formation of the prince. Starting from the formation of Snow White, who fled in panic and finally fell to the ground and cried helplessly, waiting for the handsome Prince to come then, all their last wishes had come true and ended happily by starting a new life with the man who provided for her. It was later seen in the film *The Little Mermaid* (1989) by John Musker & Ron Clements. Miao (1998) draws attention to the fact that Ariel, the main female character, trades her voice for a pair of human legs to win the prince's heart.

„we are given a female protagonist who is silenced by her desperate need for male approval. "Shut up and be beautiful", the movie seems to tell young girls" Miao (1998)<sup>3</sup>

According to Miao, Ariel should not sacrifice her voice just to marry the prince. Ultimately, he was forced to leave his family and his old life. This reflects how important marriage is for the Disney Princesses. At the beginning of the formation of some Disney Princess characters, they were also often created as orphans or living only with a father figure (such as Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Cinderella). Disney has positioned women who are always in the narrative of men; the power over life is in the hands of men, while women mean nothing, other than just giving birth to a human child into the world, which in turn determines the history of life is a man.

In many contexts, in the end, the father figure is the only parent. In early Disney films, the Princess was portrayed through traditional fairy tales, with the theme of the girl in distress that the heroines needed to be rescued by the surrounding Prince, living up to the standards of early 20th century American ideals. Cinderella is an excellent example of this; she was left to live in the same forced slavery for the rest of her life until her escape ended in marriage. Cinderella is a story that refers to a traditional legend that features female characters (Princess) who cannot help themselves to get out of their problems, so they always depend on the figure of Prince or Father (male roles). (Hedenmalm, L., n.d.)<sup>4</sup>

This also ultimately impacts the community's point of view regarding the depiction of unequal gender or what we often refer to as gender inequality. In general, according to the theory put forward by Mansour Fakih (2001), gender inequality is reflected in economic marginalization, subordination in political decisions, stereotyping, violence, excessive workload, and socialization of gender role ideology. Thus, feminists argue that biological differences may lead to some differences in their roles. Still, physical differences should not be the basis of sexual hierarchies in which men are dominant.

## **2. Literature Review**

According to Xu Jiang's article entitled: "Study on Self-growth of Female Characters in Disney Animation from the Perspective of Feminism". It is said that Disney created a colourful image of women from the 1920s to the 1930s. Start by adapting classic fairy tales that are influenced by environment and social concepts when creating the image of women. The same or different women's symbols, women's narratives and women's consciousness are presented in different films.

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<sup>4</sup> Hedenmalm, L., n.d. Language and Gender in Disney A Study of Male and Female Language in Walt Disney Movies, [online] p.3. Available at: <<https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1029953/FULLTEXT02>> [Accessed 16 March 2022].

Feminism began in the 1930s, when feminists in the Western world fought for various political, economic and social rights for women, so that women were able to enter the public sphere. However, the aftermath of the second industrial revolution, caused some women to leave their families and find work. Even so, the foundation of patriarchy has not been shaken, society is still cantered on male voices. However, after the second industrial revolution, when Western countries fell into an economic crisis, men began to judge women to return to the family to ensure that men could find work and consolidate their dominance in society and the family.

In early patriarchal societies, women were not seen as independent individuals, or even as stupid as children. Actions and ideas are severely restricted by male society. During this period, Disney finally chose the classic fairy tale Snow White to make animated films. By depicting a gentle and submissive personality, it is very consistent with the image of women from a male perspective. Disney also deliberately developed housework skills in the film Snow White. This can be seen from the place where the snow white is always shown cleaning the house at every opportunity, and the dwarves work outside the domestic sphere (mining). For it is very clear that this film focuses on the idea that men work outside the home, while women stay at home, this too Disney presents with large-scale contrast. In the next Disney animated films, Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella, the heroine still has a beautiful appearance by relying on her excellent housework skills. Therefore, male domination, women's spirit of autonomy and independence have weakened.

To gradually break the shackles of women in a patriarchal society, the development of feminism is necessary. The ideological trend of feminism breaks the stereotypes of women established by patriarchy, leading more to think about the ignorance of patriarchal culture, and the awareness of women from the shackles of patriarchy. Media and audiences are two-way, and media development is like popular culture. The rise of feminist ideas influenced the subsequent development of Disney animation. Because when the feminist movement emerged in the 1960s, Disney chose to create a more diverse and new feminine consciousness from the image of the female medium. (Jiang, 2022)<sup>5</sup>

In the mid-nineteenth century, the early feminist movement was deeply rooted in the socio-political life of the country. At this time, feminists believed that women can gain a place in the public sphere and strove for women's political, economic, professional and other equal rights. Represented by the United States, only men have human rights in the Human Rights Declaration, and many relevant bills have long excluded women. It took decades for feminists to make the U.S. Constitution recognize women's right to vote. But after American women won equal political rights with men, the women's movement quickly disappeared from the United State. The neo-feminist movement was born in the 1960s and 1970s. It was influenced by Marxism and neo-left ideas and began to pose a challenge that social ideologies that put women at disadvantage, as well as gender biases in language, law and philosophy.

New feminists try to understand the situation of women for socio-political and economic reasons, and psychologically seek what women bear as an oppressed group. Feminism draws inspiration from historical materialism, and many theories begin to criticize "class". Socialist feminists believe that in a capitalist society, women suffer from two kinds of oppression the Capitalist economic system and the patriarchal ideology. From the perspective of Marxism, they think that the inequality women get in productive relations determines their vulnerable position. Feminism believes that changing the social system and structure can lead women on the road to freedom and equal rights.

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<sup>5</sup> Jiang, X. (2022). Study on Self-growth of Female Characters in Disney Animation from the Perspective of Feminism. *Culture*, 7(1), 12-18.

While the Disney studio is clearly trying to update its princess image for a post-feminist audience by consciously addressing gender issues in *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, or *Mulan*, the spatial and/or temporal transference of these issues transforms them into cultural criticism, reducing their potential as a representation of agency for an American female audience. The Disney “New Wave” marks a progressive shift towards the exclusion of “princess” characters, and inclusion of non-white, non-American female heroines: *Pocahontas* (1995), *Mulan*, *Aladdin*, *The Princess and the Frog*, and *Hercules*, while problematic in various ways, are unprecedented attempts by Disney to broaden their market appeal towards postmodern diversity while catering to the new expectations of its female audience. However, Disney consistently relocates these films to another country or time period, replacing the now-tired images of fairytale kingdoms with exotic foreign lands and nostalgia. For example, *Mulan* consciously questions her cross- dressing motives, wondering if she did it not to save her family but because it was the only way to make something of her life. This is a brilliant critique and states the problem of any woman searching for importance in a society that pushes motherhood and housewifery. (Stover, 2013)<sup>6</sup>





Entering the twenty-first century, Disney almost exclusively chose female characters as protagonists when making animated films. The development and accumulation of feminism has greatly encouraged changes in women's ideas. The female awareness of the protagonists in the film becomes stronger, and the male characters are gradually affected by their influence in the film. In modern society, the heroines of Disney animated films are no longer interested in falling in love. In the film *The Princess and the Frog*, for example, the heroine Tiana has a strong culinary talent, and her goal is to open her own restaurant. But one word claiming to be a prince ruined his life. From this case it can be seen that the female characters have been portrayed as having other life goals and not just pursuing the love of the Disney princess, (Jiang, 2022).

The following Table 1 contains Disney's strong female characters in the last 10 years:

Table 1. Disney's strong female characters

Nama Princess	Judul Film	Gambar
Merida	<i>Brave</i> (2012)	

<sup>6</sup> Stover, C. (2013). Damsels and heroines: The conundrum of the post-feminist Disney princess. LUX: A Journal of Transdisciplinary Writing and Research from Claremont Graduate University, 2(1), 29.

Elsa	<i>Frozen Sing-Along</i> (2013)	
Moana	<i>Moana</i> (2016)	
Maleficent	<i>Maleficent</i> (2014)	
Mulan	<i>Mulan</i> (2020)	

### 3. Methods

To achieve the objectives of this paper, the method used by the author is a qualitative method. According to its understanding, qualitative research can be described as a method that describes a phenomenon through descriptions in the form of sentences and language using natural methods. With data collection techniques, triangulation (combined), data analysis is inductive/qualitative, and qualitative research results emphasize the meaning of generalizations (Sugiyono, 2019:18)<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Sugianto, Oky. "Penelitian Kualitatif, Manfaat Dan Alasan Penggunaan". *Binus.Ac.Id*, 2020, <https://binus.ac.id/bandung/2020/04/penelitian-kualitatif-manfaat-dan-alasan-penggunaan/>. Accessed 11 Feb 2021.

#### **4. Data Collection**

This study was carried out with the aim of proving the truth of the shift in the role of female characters which is more prominent in the formation of characters and behaviors shown in Disney films in this era. In addition, this study also aims to correlate the thoughts of Disney Corporation and women in the feminist movement since the first film. So, in conducting the research process, the author will answer all research questions or prove the author's argument by relying on narrative films that focus on conversations between characters and film styles that focus on cinematography, namely type of shot.

#### **5. Result and Discussion**

Because gender issues are very influential regarding the assessment of the behaviour of the opposite sex, several theories or opinions of experts emphasize the effects of gender appearance contained in the media, one of the most effective in this case is film. Therefore, film industry players are more open about their support for the issue of gender equality which is currently still one of the main problems in society. Their attention began to focus on the role of women who were less noticed.

In this chapter, the author will explain the shift experienced by the main character of Disney by starting to entrust the figure of a woman to lead. In this era, Disney appeared to focus on a more tangible form of negotiations in the patriarchal world it directly showed that female figures could be substantial equivalent to men, more than men, even if they could live alone (Purwoko, 2018). Gradually Disney began to display a different perspective on the royal leadership system. The one who used to be dominant raised the story of the royal princess with all her helplessness. Now Disney seems to have started to dare to highlight the character of a Queen. The film *Frozen 2* (2019), directed by Jennifer Lee & Chris Buck, shows that Elsa's father and King Agnarr were rescued by his mother (Queen Iduna) from the Northuldra tribe in northern Europe. This proves that it doesn't matter if a woman saves a man. The strength and softness of Iduna's pose, while Agnarr drooped helplessly.

The information that can be taken, the king does not always have to be full of strength and strength. Not only that, through the film *Frozen 2*, boys can learn that it's okay if their partners will be higher, become a breadwinner, or hold a more brilliant career. Because in good relations to complement each other, not competing. What can men do as long as women develop their wings. That needs to be the main focus when the relationship involves two parties with a status, financial, or career background (Kirnandita, 2019).

In addition to *Frozen 2*, another example of this is the reproduction of the film *Sleeping Beauty* namely *Maleficent* (2014) by Robert Stromberg, who is a female antagonist who then transforms into the leading actor who holds the power of everything. Maleficent's character departs from an evil witch who has a grudge in the kingdom of King Stefan by cursing the daughter of King Stefan, Aurora. According to Priyanka (M.C., 2016) talking about maleficent,

"... Offering Female Role Models who work hard, improve their minds and do not define themselves in terms of men are encouraging sign that American patriarchy may be finally being cracking ".  
(M.C., 2016)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> M.C., P., 2016. Malevolence Subverted: (Re) Defining Gender Roles in the film, *Maleficent*. [online] Singularitiesjournal.com. Available at: <<https://www.singularitiesjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Singularities-Vol-3-Issue-2.pdf#page=38>> [Accessed 28 March 2022].

Compared to fairytale films with other traditional stories, this female protagonist appeared far more active and more potent, as if violating the previous ideology that was more closely related to women's compliance. Most critical responses also show that this film is part of promoting gender equality. That also further increases opportunities/opportunities for other female characters to be able to occupy the position of leader, with the hope of being able to stand alone without having to depend on the figure of a man who, in this context, is a King.

Not only that, but the leading role of women is also present in the figure of Mulan (1998). Mulan struggled with her courage and independence. She came out of the gender role determined to follow her way. Women in Mulan's culture, including her family, told her that she had to be a quiet and respectful wife, not attract attention to herself. This does not apply to Mulan, who feels she is more than what the people say to her. She cut her hair, dressed as a man, and fought at her father's place. She was at risk of being arrested and even killed for doing something like that, but Mulan knew that that was what he had to do to restore her family's honour. Mulan has its determination to be the best and more potent fighter. She took off her woman's identity to fight with a man and defeat the Hun people. She found a sense of self-esteem and her identity by removing what her culture said. What distinguishes Mulan from the girl in distress is that she does not need to be saved by a prince (Barber, 2022)<sup>9</sup>

The conclusion is the sound development of female characters in gender ideology displayed in the Disney film. Over time, Disney Princess no longer depends on a man or king. But it is described far more independent and can have their own decisions related to the way of life they choose. They also did not accept the rules given, but they began to dare to show resistance that tended to refute the order.

With the development of the generation, it is not enough to present the figure of the queen who can stand alone without the help of men. At this time, the Disney movie began to create a companion character who began to rebel against the power system that was always controlled by a man in the film. As in the example of the film *The Lion King*, where the female lions in the movie are also not as well as receiving the treatment given by the male to the discrimination that occurs, the female lions also begin to express their aspirations and do various kinds of rejection at every opportunity even though they are not characters Main in the film, they are described as strong and brave female characters. Next, the author will explain further the form of resistance carried out by the nature of Nala, a female lion in the film which is a supporting character (friend of the main character Simba in the movie).

Starting on the first resistance by Nala against the marriage tradition that binds the Disney female characters. At the beginning of the film, Nala gave hope to the audience with strong, brave, and rebelled marriages with Simba (rejecting the view that his nature was only to be a prospective pair of Simba, the main character). Nala even said to Simba that she agreed to replace Simba's position. Nala, at that time, looked very confident and believed in her abilities and that she could also have a dignity that matched the power of Simba as king. Even when Nala was about to leave Pride Lands and then was blocked by Zazu, Nala admitted that she did not need protection anymore.

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<sup>9</sup> Barber, M., 2022. Disney's Female Gender Roles: The Change of Modern Culture. [online] Scholars.indstate.edu. Available at: <<https://scholars.indstate.edu/handle/10484/12132>> [Accessed 2 April 2022].



In a conversation between Nala, Simba, and Zazu, Nala once said: "We have never been married, Zazu". This further emphasized that he disapproved of the marriage tradition that always occurred among the characterizations of Disney. Nala tried to voice her opinion that she also had the right to choose her friends later. Rozario (2004) once said that most Disney women's films will always be in a subordination position, depending, and passive. But in this chapter, female characters are needed to break this view. Through Nala's surface, the role of the female lion seems permitted to speak, argue, to solve the stereotypes of broad audiences about women who are weak and domesticated.

Turning to the conversation between characters, in Style (cinematography) the film *The Lion King* begins to dare to show the form of resistance of female characters against men. As caught in the scene when Nala managed to beat Simba twice in a game they did. As illustrated Figure 1 below:



Figure 1. Nala's scene defeated Simba. (Source: *The Lion King*, 2019, Timecode: 23:49)

Based on the scene displayed, Nala's body position is right above the Simba, with the hand holding the head of the Simba. The composition seems to speak that someday, sooner or later, the role of the female lion in the film will be able to be above the male. The part of a female lion has become a pride that holds complete control over the life of groups of the lion family. Whereas in terms of the film narrative, another evidence of the figure of Nala fighting for the right of the female people to speak is also reflected in the scene when Nala told Sarabi to do something so that the leadership of King Scar could collapse, and Pride Lands returned to normal as before. Because of the thought that Nala believed at that time, Sarabi was their queen, and Nala was sure that Sarabi had the authority to stop Scar.

Nala hopes that Sarabi can use her queen's status to try to fight the evil leadership of King Scar, even though it is an unhealthy quarrel. Not only highlighting Nala, but even in this situation, Sarabi is described as a strong woman who is not afraid of Scar even though her existence tends not to be considered essential, and her rebellion against Scar tends to bear and does not satisfy the expectations of the audience. Not only that, when the female had received help from Simba, who was immediately present to fight the Scar, Nala again moved the female lion group to attack King Scar and the Hyena troops to force Scar to re-hand over the leadership throne to Simba as a form against the patriarchy applied by Scar so far.

When the females had received help from Simba who was immediately present to fight Scar, Nala again moved the lioness group to attack King Scar and the Hyena troops with the aim of forcing Scar to return the throne of leadership to Simba as a form of their protest. against the patriarchy that had been applied by Scar all along. This is reflected in the following scene: (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Nala leads a group of lionesses to attack King Scar and the Hyena army.  
(Source: The Lion King, 2019, Timecode: 23:49)

This scene finally opened the eyes of the audience that if the figure of the female lion in the film was allowed to have a more vital role or lead, they could also be in that position, and defeat All Hyena's troops attacked. However, it is unfortunate from the beginning to the middle of the movie, the role of a female lion such as does not exist and is very minimal. The focus of the audience is only directed to the part of kings who exchange leadership and put aside the part of female lions, who should also get an important role. Although Nala and Sarabi are not the main female characters, they have begun to dare to voice their opinions and rebel to try to fight regulations that if they are detrimental to their groups. This is an excellent initial step for female supporting characters in Disney film that dreams of absolute equality.

## 6. Conclusion

After successfully answering research questions related to several transitional phases of the female Disney characters, the author can conclude that along with the times, the films produced by Disney have adapted the social values that exist in society. Disney seems to have developed to harmonize the various opinions and thoughts that exist on several types of social issues. Disney began to balance presenting a more accurate and relatable portrayal of gender. In addition, through the shift in roles, female viewers can trust their abilities more and are more confident that they can also have the same strengths and opportunities as other male roles that have always been showed to be strong and independent. Not only focusing on the part of the Disney princess who transformed into a leader and leading role in the film. However, now women's supporting roles have also begun to be given the same opportunity to express their opinions and take a stand. Some are rebelling against the leadership system which is always dominated by men's roles. Although the rebellion carried out by female characters tends to be minimal and requires more support, in general, this has progressed significantly for the development of female roles in the next Disney film. Thus, film media, which is considered more effective in gender development, can participate in voicing gender equality to a broader audience.

With various findings that have been described in the literature review chapter and evidence in the analysis chapter, the author concludes that in producing its films, Disney always pours out a thought that adapts to the current era or generation. So, their loyal audience can grow together with Disney movies. The first generation seems to have room for nostalgia, while the next generation can perpetuate the values established by Disney.

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## Biography

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