

The Application of Girl Power Through Third-Wave Feminism in *Birds of Prey*

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ABSTRACT

Girl Power is a part of third-wave feminism which has been addressed in several Hollywood movies in the past years. Girl Power is more of a slogan than a theory which emphasizes power and fun feminism. A recently released film, entitled ‘Birds of Prey (and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn)’, emphasizes the struggle of girls in their journey of independence. Using the word ‘Emancipation’ in its title, it seems to imply that the film is about women trying to overpower men, hence, the second-wave of feminism. Moreover, this research is qualitative research with a documentation method of data collection. This study aims to show how the film strongly uses girl power as a part of third-wave feminism to portray the girls’ empowerment in finding their own path of career, style, and equality from diverse backgrounds. The result shows that the movie wants to portray women’s struggles of self-discovery and self-acceptance that lead to independence and acceptance of others.

Keywords: Women, Feminism, Girl Power, Film

1. INTRODUCTION

Many people confuse the definition of feminism and what it stands for because of its long history of changes in the movement. The term ‘Feminism’ was born around the 19th century in the United States of America in the Seneca Falls Convention, which then followed by writers address injustices toward women [1]. Their movement has gone through many changes over the years. The changes in the world’s perception and attitude on women are what make feminists, those who initiate the movement of feminism, change their focus of the movement. To this day, the waves of feminism are still going and there are even some theories about post-feminists. However, the most relevant feminist theories in addressing women’s problems nowadays are the third-wave of feminism.

Third-wave generations were born in the mid-1990s from their disagreement with their predecessors; they saw a flaw in the second wave generation’s movement, what they felt like unfinished work in the second-wave movement. Their predecessors, the second-wave feminists, mainly had been fighting for equality of men and women; The flaws are, first, what the third-wave feminists were seeing as wrong of the second-wave feminist movement was that it was led by white women who did not include women of color, LGBTQ+, and working-class women as one of them [2]. In addition, second-wave feminists saw men as the oppressor and

women as the victim of men. Hence, the feminists in that era did not wear make-up and rejected the ‘girly’ culture as they think their desire to be ‘Girly’ is the result of patriarchy: to attract males, which was denied by the third-wave feminists [3].

The concept of girl power was introduced by Riot Grrrls [4], which is a subset of third-wave feminism, and quickly became popular in the mid-90s. By then, it had been deployed greatly in pop culture by mainstream media [5]. The traits of powerful young women who fought back and claimed their power was not accepted because of their gender, which then initiated the rise of Girl Power as a strategic way that was aimed to promote adolescent female empowerment and to establish the terms through which the ‘Girl Power’ itself had been analyzed [6]. There had also been a great debate over the terms ‘Girl Power’ and its relation to feminism. Girl power was the center in the third-wave feminist’s Girly culture. According to Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, ‘Girly’ are adult women, usually in their mid-twenties to late thirties, whose feminist principles are based on a reclaiming of girl culture (or feminine accouterments that were tossed out with sexism during the Second Wave), be it Barbie, housekeeping, or girl talk.’ Thus, in each different setting, girl power also represented female independence and empowerment in a more playful approach of the traditional femininity and ‘girlishness’ which channeled the voice of the third-wave feminists and separated itself from the overbearing personification of the second-wave feminists [7].

Third-wave feminists also longed to spread their focus into all women, representing them regardless of their backgrounds and sexuality, breaking the classism within women. Though, the third-wave was made possible because of the greater economic and professional status achieved by women in the second wave. Influenced also by the postmodernist movement in the academy, the third-wave movement focused on questioning, reclaiming, and redefining ideas, words, and media about womanhood, gender, beauty, sexuality, femininity, masculinity, and also other things [8].

The movie ‘Birds of Prey’ is not the first film that portrays and talks about the slogan Girl Power which belongs to the third-wave feminist movement. Other work such as The Gilmore Girls, which was released in 2000 by Warner Brothers also depicted and showed the characteristics of girl power through the episodes such as playful crossing between girlishness, female empowerment and the demand for independence [9]. Whilst Birds of Prey, released in early 2020, is a set of diverse girl characters; Harley Quinn, Dinah Lance, Renee Montoya, Cassandra Cain, Helena Bertinelli who are, with their own reasons, fighting Sionis, the antagonist of the movie and his men while also in search of themselves.

The idea of the word ‘emancipation’ in the modern era is taken and developed from the post-World War II feminist movement [10]. The feminist movement from the post-World War II was the Second-wave feminists' era as it was born in late 1960 with two different and distinct streams during the New Deal and World War II in which women were criticizing about male chauvinism and fights for sex equality [11]. Having women as the main characters and men as the enemy, it seems like the movie is telling about second-wave feminism. In addition, the extension of the title is; Birds of Prey: and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn, which seems to confirm that the movie tells a story from a second-wave feminists' point of view. From the result of the analysis, the main point of the plot and characters of the movie does not quite picture about emancipation at all but rather talks about Girl Power in every action the main characters take. There is also no scene which implies about ‘women vs men’ theory from the second-wave feminism although the beginning of the movie kind of looks like it implied about ‘women vs men’. For example, Joker took all credits for Harley’s works and abandon her, but then she did not want to take revenge on Joker and let him get away with it. It was not the reason why Harley broke up with Joker. Whereas, the ‘women vs men’ theory from the second-wave meant that in order to build a relationship that was political between males and females, feminists were focusing

more on the power relationship. Hence, many second-wave feminists were bold in expressing their criticism toward men and did not care about the unpopularity it brought to them [12]. The same also happens with the character Renee Montoya; she worked with her male partner but her partner, again, took all the credits and she didn’t do anything about it. Both are mentioned briefly because the plot does not dwell much on the problem between men’s superiority and women as the victim. Thus, all the more reasons why Birds of Prey is not representing the second-wave feminists but about Girl Power.

Moving on, the fact that the movie chooses mostly men as the enemies does not support the thought that this movie is more to the second-wave feminists’ side. The reason is that the women as the main characters are not better than the enemies since one of the women is an assassin and two of them are thieves. Therefore, this movie is telling the audience more about Girl Power instead of representing ‘emancipation’. This article will further show how the characters of Birds of Prey represent ‘Girl Power’ as a part of third-wave feminism. Based on our findings, the actions of each character in the film tell about self-discovery, self-expression, and unity of girls from different backgrounds.

2. METHOD

This research is a qualitative research with documentation method of data collection. The primary data source is from a recently released film entitled ‘Birds of Prey (and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn)’. The data is in the form of scene of the film. After the data is collected, the researcher will analyze how the film strongly uses girl power as a part of third-wave feminism to portray the girls’ empowerment in finding their own path of career, style, and equality from diverse backgrounds to then conclude the results of their findings.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Discovering One’s Role

Third-wave feminists have the desire to search, explore, and try out different jobs for their own personal careers [13]. As the representation of Girl Power, the main characters in Birds of Prey movie have the desire to find their way and role in the world without anyone forcing them to do a certain job. Third-wave feminists are against patriarchy, but that does not mean that third-wave feminism is against men, as it has already passed the predecessor’s problem of women being below men. Also, being against patriarchy does not mean

emancipation as the title of the movie says; “Birds of Prey and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn” because all Harley does is trying to be independent; she never tries to overthrow Joker. In the Cambridge dictionary, the word ‘emancipation’ means the act of freeing a person from another person’s control.

At the beginning of the movie, after Harley Quinn breaks up with Joker, she still uses Joker’s name for the sake of the immunity she gets. However, only after people underestimate her by thinking she is Joker’s pet does she quickly realize that she no longer wants to rely on Joker and that she needs to find her own identity to prove them wrong. So, Harley embarks on a journey of self-discovery, starting by blowing up a chemical factory where Joker and her start their love story and throwing away her J necklace. In addition, she cuts her hair shorter as if to get rid of her past and start anew. Freeing herself from Joker’s shadow, she can finally be free in finding what her value is and supports female empowerment. “I have to correct the mistake I have made in the past, I need to find a new identity.” is what she says after she tells her story about how she frees herself from Joker. However, Harley Quinn’s journey of finding her role in the world does not end there; it is just the beginning. Being freed from Joker does not mean she can immediately find her purpose in the world. She has an identity crisis which is shown in one of the scenes where she makes a handmade business card. Instead of writing one occupation below her name, she writes many occupations, which means she decides to try different kinds of jobs and is still not sure of what to identify herself with. At last, after defeating Sionis and getting the diamond which she exchanges with money, she finally finds what she wants to do; she starts her own company. It is not mentioned what Harley Quinn’s business is, but she finds her own company named ‘Harley Quinn & Associate’ as shown in the business card at the end of the story.



Figure 1 Harley Quinn blowing up the chemical factory to declare her breaking up with Joker



Figure 2 Harley Quinn cutting her hair declaring her path of new self-discovery

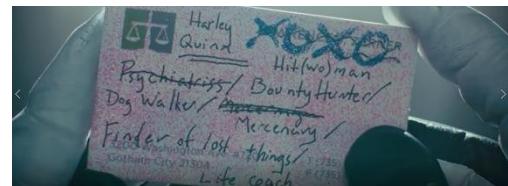


Figure 3 The business card handwritten by Harley Quinn herself showing her dilemma in finding her own purpose



Figure 4 Proof that Harley Quinn finally finds what she wants to do

Another character who eventually grows close to Harley Quinn throughout the story is Cassandra Cain. Different from the other main characters, despite being the youngest, she is an independent girl and already finds her role in society. Being the victim of a broken family, she finds herself stealing from others to live because her foster parents seem to not care for her. Her journey to find her independence is not shown in the story as she is already the icon of Girl Power herself by being an independent girl at such a young age. At the end of the movie, Quinn takes Cain under her wings and she joins her to be Quinn’s apprentice.



Figure 5 Cain in an action of stealing

Dinah Lance is another main character in the movie who represents women of color. Just like Harley, Dinah Lance also seeks to break free from the grip of a guy, in her case, it is Roman Sionis as she is used as his toy. Started by singing in Sionis’ night-club, Sionis promoted her as her driver because she sees Dinah beat up a bunch of guys while she is rescuing Harley Quinn

from an attempted abduction; which shows her as the girl who can fight for herself. She is called ‘Little bird’ by Sionis which can be a metaphor because Sionis sees her as a weak, controllable creature who is dependent. This also shows another patriarchal aspect that third-wave is against. Dinah struggles in freeing herself from Sionis’ grip as she is afraid of him. Detective Montoya tries to offer her to be an informant on Sionis for the police, but Dinah rejects as she doesn’t have the best experience with the police department in the past.



Figure 6 Dinah was pressured by Sionis

Later on, while Sionis’ right-hand-man and her are sent on an errand by Sionis to retrieve a diamond, it is stolen by Cain from Sionis’ right-hand-man. She then decides to work with Detective Montoya behind Sionis’ back as a way of helping Cain free from being tangled with Sionis’s mess. Her journey of self-discovery is a rough and slow one as she is trying to portray as an obedient driver while following her heart to work with Detective Montoya in order to save Cassandra Cain. Sionis’ right-hand man almost kills her as he suspects that she is betraying Sionis, but he fails as Helena kills him first, making Helena unintentionally saves her. Finally, she joins with the other girls to fight against Sionis and finally stands on her own feet for justice. After Sionis dies, which marks the beginning of her independence and self-discovery, she joins the Birds of Prey.

Another character named Renee Montoya also finds her purpose in life by joining forces with other girls to call off crimes and call themselves as Birds of Prey. Her search for independence starts because she is sick of working and having her useless male partner taking all the credits for her works. Quitting her job seems an act that radiates the women empowerment energy as she quit working in a patriarchal environment. Rather than keeping working for the police and being confined in their system, she makes her own way to serve justice with the Birds of Prey teammates.

The third member of the Birds of Prey is Helena Bertinelli. No different from Cassandra Cain, she is not showing a massive character development because she is already a Girl Power icon. She finds her own way to serve justice on her own terms; by being an assassin. After witnessing her entire family being killed when

she was a little girl by Sionis and his men, she made up her mind to avenge his family and targeted all who used to take part in killing her family members. Despite having to work alone, she succeeds in taking her revenge on Sionis’ men, until the end when she has to join the other girls who also fight against Sionis. Driven by her bitter experience and not letting anyone suffers injustice as she does, she funds the fighting crimes organization, Birds of Prey in which she also has a role in, with the money she gets back from Sionis.

3.2 Being Feminine and Fun

The word feminine invokes anger in second-wave feminists, who are against femininity. Findlen [14] said about how feminists before the third-wave used to say “if something or someone is appealing, fun or popular, it or she can’t be feminist”. The second-wave feminists think of being feminine means agreeing to the patriarchal definition of girlhood and they want to break free of it. Riot Grrrl [15] provides a response to dominant representations of the patriarchal definition of girlhood by establishing a space in which young women and girls are empowered to resist and produce their own take of self-representation. In contrast to how second-wave feel about femininity, Birds of Prey, which is taking on the third-wavers, is treating interaction with men as equals, and being free to choose on their sexuality (whether it be heterosexual, homosexual, etc.) while also actively being feminine [3].

For girls being feminine does not mean they want to give men the pleasure to look at them, but rather being feminine is for the girls to feel independent, free from judgment and should be valued and acknowledged that feminine is within the scope of feminist history and future [16]. “Girlie says we’re not broken, that our desires aren’t simply booby traps set by the patriarchy. Girlie encompasses the tabooed symbols of women’s feminine enculturation. Using makeup isn’t a sign of our sway to the marketplace and the male gaze.” [16]. A lot of femininity is shown through the movie, and much like Riot Grrrl, the movie becomes a space where being feminine is fun and does not make girls look weak and a mere object to male gaze, but fulfill their desire and self-representation. Some of the girls’ characteristics and styles are free and feminine. “Young women revel in their femininity through a distinctive ‘girl power style’: sexually provocative clothing, wildly sculpted and dyed hair, body piercing, and publicly displayed tattoos” [17].

For example, Harley Quinn holds up her hair in ponytails and has dyed hair, paints her face with a red heart on her cheek, wears fish-nets socks, and wears high-heeled shoes on her one foot and her other foot is

bare. Quinn does not seem to mind others; she is just expressing her unique and feminine self. More importantly, she does not dress up to attract the male gaze.

As a group itself, Cain and Detective Montoya are the tomboy characters, and Lance, Quinn, and Bertinelli are the more girly characters style-wise. However, at the end of the movie where the five of them are collecting their fighting gear as they prepare to fight Sionis and his minions, Quinn gives Detective Montoya her red corsage top that she can wear which one again implies how girls can wear whatever they want to, in contradiction with the second-wave feminists who are against femininity / feminine clothes.

Other ways of portraying femininity as fun are by using fun words and not limiting the characters' style. Third-wave feminists are against no-fun or humorless, frumpy, and antisex second-wave feminists who gloss over the differences that exist in their movement [3]. Riot Grrrl, being one of the first to promote Girl Power, also uses fun words in their songs. Their lyrics didn't only use the word "girl" but also other words that are traditionally seen or used to bring women down such as "slut," "cunt," and "dyke" [17]. In contradiction to the boring, humorless second-wave feminists, the girls of Birds of Prey are showing their rich humor. It is first shown in the movie when Detective Montoya changed her clothes in the Police Department with a white-red graphic tee that uses the fun phrase: 'I shaved my balls for this'. By using a unisex graphic tee, it shows her fun personality and showing her indifference toward people's bad opinions on her different choice of clothing, even though she uses it in the wrong place; which is in the police station. The fun does not stop there, at the very end of the movie, fun words are used to describe Harley Quinn's newfound identity. Quinn's newest business card shows 'Harley & Associate' with the writing below it: 'Badass Motherfucker' which she decides to name her and her crew in the company with. For second-wave feminists, calling them 'Motherfucker' will look like an insult to them, however, because of this movie being supportive of girl power, Harley Quinn and the others call themselves as 'Badass Motherfucker' for fun purposes.



Figure 7 Montoya wearing 'I shaved my balls for this' t-shirt

3.3 Equality from Different Backgrounds

Different from their predecessors, second-wave feminists, whose theory seems to lean heavily on white women, third-wave feminists include more women from different backgrounds in their movement. More efforts are shown by third-wave feminists to embrace differences in age, sexual preferences, age, and class [18]. As Girl Power icons, the main characters from Birds of Prey also embrace each other's differences. Being centered in America, third-wave feminists mostly only address African-American people and the LGBTQ+ community. However, with the film Birds of Prey, they manage to cover women from a different race, sexual preferences, and age.

3.3.1. Race differences

First, in the term of intersectionality, Birds of Prey shows a variety of girls representing different races. In the second-wave feminist's era, women would not dream of having a black, Asian, or any girl with different races other than Caucasians to appear in a movie representing Girl Power. In this case, Harley Quinn might not represent intersectional feminism, with her being a white girl. However, in the movie, she befriended women from different backgrounds in her journey to defeat Sionis, such as Cassandra Cain who represents an Asian girl and Dinah Lance who represents women of color. In addition, the character other than Harley Quinn is not there in the movie only to be the 'friend' of Harley Quinn; they stand equally as one of the protagonists and have their own story.

3.3.2. Sexual preferences

Other than the variety of races, Birds of Prey also covers girls with different sexual preferences. Third-wave feminists expanded the definition of sexual liberation by second-wave feminists as a process of becoming conscious of one's gender identity and sexuality that has been shaped by society, then intentionally establishing and being free to express one's truest identity and sexuality [8]. Harley Quinn herself represents the LGBTQ+ community as it is shown at the beginning of the movie, where Harley Quinn is telling her life history, that she is bisexual. Although it is not said explicitly, it is shown from the visual animation, when she tells her story about being heartbroken several times, that she had dated two men and one woman before she dated Joker. Another character who represents the LGBTQ+ in this movie is Detective Renee Montoya as a lesbian character. Her lesbian character is shown when she was in the Police

Department, talking to her captain and the Assistant District Attorney (DA) about a case, in which the assistant DA is also her ex-girlfriend. Although their sexuality is not the main highlight in Birds of Prey, the movie still makes sure that there are characters who represent sexual liberation in which third-wavers stand for.



Figure 8 Harley Quinn telling her story of a failed relationship with a boy



Figure 9 Harley Quinn telling her story of a failed relationship with a girl

3.3.3. Age

Next, is the variety of ages within the group Birds of Prey itself. As mentioned previously, the third-wave feminists take into consideration the differences in many things including in age difference [19]. The girls in Birds of Prey are not all adults/young adults but there is a teenager and an older woman yet despite their age difference, they can come together as a group of friends. Cassandra Cain is the youngest amongst the girls because, in the beginning of the movie, she still lives with neglectful foster parents in which she ends up leaving behind. Even though it is not mentioned how old Cain is in the movie, from her appearance, it can be concluded that she is at the age of a teenager. As for Renee Montoya, we can conclude that she is older than the rest of the girls, since she has worked for the police long enough for his former partner, who stole Montoya's work, becomes the captain; it usually requires a long time to finally achieve something big enough to be promoted as the captain in the PD.



Figure 10 The girls finally found their purpose and worked together to fight Sionis

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the movie Birds of Prey represents Girl Power as a part of third-wave feminism. The highlighted qualities that represent Girl Power in each of the main characters are about how they embrace their identity, uniqueness, and differences. However, by having the word 'emancipation' in the movie title, it could also confuse people into thinking that the movie is hating and trying to rule over men, which represents the second-wave feminists. However, after analyzing the movie, it is actually foreshadowing the reality of feminism in today's era, which is more to the Girl Power in the third-wave era of the feminists' movement. The movie wants to portray women's struggles of self-discovery and self-acceptance that lead to independence and acceptance of others. After the analysis of this film, it can also be said that it is important to clearly convey messages specifically because if the movie gave misleading information, it would take away the true essence of the movie.

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