

Her Movie’s Enlightenment and Gender Ideologies from the Female Characters in Marvel Films

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ABSTRACT

Recently, with the rise of her economy, the status of women has changed partly. Industries begin to value the influence of females and consider the benefits of female consumption, film as well. By inculcating feminism by some women movements, films also have to be constantly reconsidered and renewed the significance of female roles. By this chance, female characters got the release, they are no longer under the gaze and judge of males or being marginalized in the whole film, they do have their own meanings and ideologies. Marvel, as the pioneer of superhero movies, also constantly explores and upgrades the value of female superheroes during its first decade and released Captain Marvel to join in feminism. But these changes seem superficial, females are still not out of the patriarchal system. This paper will compare the characteristics of four female superheroes in Marvel movies, so as to analyze female ideologies of Marvel films and discuss gender stereotypes through those female characters.

Keywords: *Marvel Films, Feminism, Gender stereotypes, Gender Ideology.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since 2008, the *Iron Man* appeared on the screen, the new era of Marvel Universe initiated and plenty of superheroes were born. Until 2019, the ending of the first era of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), *Avengers4: Endgame* came to the stage, Marvel industries have already produced 22 films and almost 54 superhero characters. Although all of them have their own logical, romantic, and distinct storylines, most of them replicated the same directions, such as saving their female lover (this part always be the flashpoint of the whole film) till the world through the superpower, which is granted by accident because of their integrity. Those superheroes have general similarities: righteousness, brave, determination, and male.

Table 1. The first generation of MCU main male superheroes

| Movies | Name | Characteristic |
|-----------------|------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>Iron Man</i> | Tony Stark | Righteous, Selfless, Intelligent |
| <i>Thor</i> | Thor | Righteous, |

| | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------|--|
| | | Conscientious, Loyal |
| <i>Captain America</i> | Steve Rogers | Righteous, Selfless, Patriotic, Leadership |
| <i>Guardians of the Galaxy</i> | Star Lord | Righteous, Fearless, Decisive |

Marvel Industry, as the leader of superhero films, created millions of male superheroes successfully but seems to be lagging in moulding an independent and entire female character. When it officially released its first female superhero film *Captain Marvel* in 2019, which is widely regarded as a typical, pioneered feminist film. Indeed, compared with previous Marvel films, *Captain Marvel* does break out of the framework of female characters in traditional superhero films, which shows progress and breakthrough of feminism to a large extent. Throughout the period (2008-2019), the ideologies of female characters in Marvel movies have big a change, female characters are no more marginalized and given the relative rights or choices as males did periodically. Although *Captain Marvel* brought a huge breakthrough, MCU’s females seem still

be trapped in a new gender stereotype with limited ideologies.

This paper will roughly divide the growth of female characters into four different periods by selecting four well-known female characters as the sample, discussing their similarities and differences in costume, effect, and storylines, also analyzing the ideologies they are illustrated.

Secondly, this paper will compare those female characters' ideologies, trying to analyze the progressiveness and deficiency through the comparisons by using the theories of Gaze (from Laura Mulvey[1]), Feminism, and gender stereotype mainly. Also, this paper will pay more attention to the relationship between marvel cultures and feminism. Therefore, numerous research about MCU and its cultures will be quoted.

2. THE EVOLUTION OF FEMALE IDEOLOGY IN MARVEL FILMS

2.1. The type of female superheroes

When "Black Widow" appeared frequently in some major Marvel movies, such as *Iron Man*, *Captain America* and *The Avengers*, symbolized those females who have officially stepped onto the stage of superheroes. Comparing the changes and development of female characters in the first decade, female figures can be roughly divided into four types: be rescued woman, the assistant, the struggler and the breaker, their birth also marked the responses of MCU to feminism.

Table 2. The type of MCU female superheroes

| Type | Name | Movies | Position | Characteristics | Scenes |
|------------------|--------------|--|---------------|----------------------|---|
| Be rescued woman | Pepper Potts | <i>Iron Man</i> | CEO Assistant | Considerate and meek | Always take care to Tony |
| The assistant | Black Widow | <i>Iron Man</i> , <i>Captain America</i> , <i>The Avengers</i> | SPY | Sexy, Obedient | Dress up, Obey the orders of The Avengers |
| The struggler | Gamora | <i>Guardians of the Galaxy</i> | Assassin | Bright, Competitive | Defeat enemies alone |

| | | | | | |
|-------------|----------------|-----------------------|-------|-----------------------|--|
| The breaker | Captain Marvel | <i>Captain Marvel</i> | Pilot | Courageous, Confident | Female pilot, which breaking society's stereotypes about women |
|-------------|----------------|-----------------------|-------|-----------------------|--|

In the first several years of MCU, it's easy to be found that most of the well-known heroes' protagonists are male, while female characters tend to be supported, who exist simply to serve as a foil to the male, even has nothing to do with the word "heroes". Except *Black Widow* has simple combat capability, the rest of the female characters, both are weak beauties who disguised as outstanding female elites basically, but always wait for the rescue from males. The most important function of them is the extra award-the lover to the male characters after they defeat enemies and save the world.

Female characters within this period (except *Captain Marvel*) were created as an object for the gaze by the male audience, Film emphasizes female's bodies, their existences do not have a substantial effect in the film narrative[2], they just become attractive selling points to satisfy the male-dominated film market with deliberate skimpy dress-up and seductive actions. The ideologies conveyed by female characters are simple and still serve the male protagonists.

2.2 Variation of females in MCU first decade

2.2.1. Figures: The aphasia till the powerholder

In the early days of Marvel films, almost every male superhero has a female lover who needs to be rescued. Those women do have some characteristics, like brightness, independence and competence, directors mould them only because those characteristics are pursued by contemporary female audiences, also can attract male audience. Pepper (in *Iron Man*) is a typical example, as CEO assistant, she does have excellent ability and higher IQ, but in the film, Pepper seems like a nanny who takes care of the daily of Tony Stark (male protagonist), clears up the mess for him and has no change to show her talent. She also emerges the infatuation with Tony, always waiting for the return of this playboy. In *Iron Man 2*, Pepper takes over as CEO temporarily, but the movie seems to highlight her incompetent management ability in order to emphasize the significance of Tony. Facing the explosion at the end of the film, Pepper just stood and waited for the

rescue of Tony, those scenes creating an image that no matter how capable the female is, she still needs help from the male. This kind of woman appears frequently in MCU, such as Peggy Carter (in *Captain America*), whose setting is a genius agent, but in the film, her parts are just emerging that she was the jealous girlfriend of Steve (male protagonist) and the typical lady who expected lover come back after the war, without any substantial intention. Besides, the high IQ female scientist, Jane Foster (in *Thor*), or the outstanding female student, Mary Jane (in *Spider Man*). Those females have the characteristics, like intelligent and independent which seem be useless in the film. Females only act the force for male heroes' growth and achievement, their feminine characteristics and charms have been completely marginalized and neglected.

This situation changed with the appearance of the Black Widow, females no longer stood behind males but became a helper with super fighting ability. It is obvious that male still makes key decisions at critical moments, female ability is only enhanced in physiology but not the thought. Also her every beautiful side turns, all hit the heart of male audience, reflecting female's sexy and beauty[2]. It is funny when those male characters show their patriotism and lofty aspiration, Black Widow is emphasized for her "bye-bye bikinis" and the pain of dysgenesis, sometimes using seduction to finish the mission. From this, we can see that the role of female heroes has been inferior to that of male heroes[3]. Though Black Widow showed that female has grown from rescuer to helper, the image of female remains limited.

Through Gamora(in *Guardians of the Galaxy*), the female image got a huge promotion, except for the high fighting capacity, she also showed the characteristic of righteousness and fearless as "male character did", female are reused, trusted, and have the ability of independent thinking. When Gamora found that her adoptive father Thanos did the wrong thing, she immediately chooses the side of justice. Females struggled to be seen and show their talent. But she still cannot escape from the rescued by a male, there is a scene that when Gamora was defeated by an enemy and nearly dying, Star-Lord (male protagonist) appeared and saved her life. Also although Gamora is different from ordinary female weaker, she is forced to become a tool of murder by Thanos, which still shows the image of the weak [4]. Finally, she was sacrificed by Thanos to get the original Stone. The setting of these plots inevitably falls into the male-centered ideology[5]. Females are still under the frame of male supremacy.

By the time of Captain Marvel, females seem to make a qualitative leap in both thought and physical, females not only have the fighting power beyond males but also have the right to oppose males, suddenly becoming the most powerful character in MCU. But the

fact is, this film (*Captain Marvel*) seems to prove that females can do what males do excessively, releasing the illusion that masculinity is used to define the new woman, creating a new female stereotype for women: asceticism, indifference, and masculinity. It is refreshing to go against the femininity stipulated by the patriarchy, such as weakness, meekness, shyness and obedience, to have more so-called masculinity, such as courage, strength, independence and determination[6]. From those four highly representative female characters, Marvel indeed reconstructs the female characters with the development of feminism, but it also reflects a hint that no matter what characteristics females have, such as independence, intelligence, selflessness, righteousness, they cannot escape the control of male and still need the protection of male.

2.2.2. Costume: Gazed by male

Marvel has also taken a step forward in its female superhero costume, take the example of Pepper, who always dresses like the typical Hollywood-style female elite. With some traits of a traditional businesswoman, like blonde, tall and slim, Pepper illustrates the most satisfied dress-up defined by a male in that time.

On the other hand, in the early Marvel movies, Black Widow always wore sexy skin-tight leather clothes with attractive red hair and makeup. In *Iron Man 2*, the director constantly displayed her sexy body and exciting fighting moves in numerous scenes, which attracted the interest of male audiences. Acting by the sexiest actor Scarlett Johansson, Black Widow cannot get rid of words like sexy and addictive.

Compared with the first two characters who become the object of the male's gaze, the costume of Gamora tends to be normal. Although she is still wearing classic sexy leather, the dress-up did not excessively emphasize feminine traits. But there are still many lenses that unconsciously conveyed her charming body and figures, also her first appearance is to lure Star-Lord by female attractiveness in order to capture the treasure, females are still gazed at by the male.

In *Captain Marvel*, MCU subverted the conventions of s in the past, covering the female sexy and beautiful body with Roman gladiator-like modeling[7], with some defeminized features such as short hair, fully wrapped suit and no makeup. In terms of personality, Captain Marvel was too righteous and relentless, seems to get rid of the suspicion that female superheroes are created to satisfy the male gaze.

It's true that Marvel has done its best to rid itself of female voyeurism during this decade, but there are still plenty of unconscious shots that stare at women bodies constantly, through costume, makeup, and personality depictions.

2.2.3. *The promotion of ideology*

While most line manufacturer think female superheroes can't carry a movie's box office, they also think people don't like seeing women save the world [8]. Also male do not like the female characters with too violent, too tough, or too masculine personalities. In sake of box office, female characters must notice to show off their superpowers without making male feel threatened or even uncomfortable [9]. Although in their view, female superheroes only serve as a foil to the male characters or to balance the over masculinity of the film, the image of females in the film has also undergone a wonderful transformation. Without the identity of "the other" and the aphasia, females gradually come from the behind-the-scenes to the stage, the significance of females has also been greatly enhanced in MCU.

The ideologies of female have also changed from a simple be-rescued to rescuer which seems to be too hasty. Trying to clean the suspicion of gazing at female, Marvel starts to stand by the female side. There are many scenes where men deny women, which indeed reveals the bullying of men towards women in daily life. In *Captain Marvel*, her father has always been an obstructionist rather than a defender of her life [10], the male pilot cadet also show strong sexual discrimination to female, attempting to use the "male original sin theory", written by Li Jie in the paper "Research on The Narrative of Marvel Superhero Movies from the Perspective of Ideology", excessively puts male and female in opposition for catching the traits of feminism.

3. CONCLUSION

Nowadays, with the continuous enhancement of "her economy", the voices of egalitarianism, women's liberalization and independence are also on the rise, many feminist movements, such as "#Me-too", "He For She" are arising. With this situation, some film industries must reconsider the status and the significance of women, the images of female characters in the film are no longer simplified as the tools of voyeurism. For example, the intelligent, brave mother of *Three Billboards*, four rebellious and assertive girls from *Little Woman*, tough Waris in *The Desert Flower*, female ideologies become diversified and veritable.

Although the development of female liberalization is getting stronger, the mass media always conspired with consumerism, still disciplined female's body, and consciousness, and even used the peculiarities of "her economic" as the selling points to ingratiate most of female audience or consumers, setting up their own good word-of-mouth with lucrative profits.

Of course, we can't go with the dichotomous thinking to convict the concessions that Marvel does in

feminism, such as increasing abundant female roles and enriching their ideologies. After being found in a decade, Marvel Industry even gave its own name to the first female superhero film: *Captain Marvel*, the female pilot with sealed clothes, Mohawk hairstyle and manliness. Those big changes do differ from those typical female characters mentioned before, but they seem to be in a hypercorrect way, establishing a new stereotype to females that do "male's things" and get rid of the weakness from females. Those changes showed that Marvel's understanding of feminism is limited without throwing the supremacy of patriarchy. Also, the original sin of males showed in *Captain Marvel* and assemble all female characters in *Avengers 4: Endgame* suddenly presented the intend of catering to the trend of feminist demands in a formulaic way hurriedly.

It seems that the superficial changes of Marvel cannot smash the cognition those female heroes equal to a supporting role in MCU. Also compared with Captain Marvel's opponent (in business rivalry) the Wonder Woman, despite the costume still having the suspicion of being gazed at by males, but Diana (the main female protagonist of *Wonder Woman*) did not completely give up the characteristics as female or depreciated male to shine female's value. It showed the independent, strong and intelligent traits of women also combined with femininity. By contrast, Marvel does have some congenital deficiency in expressing females truly.

Films take an important part of popular culture, carrying and disseminating the social comprehension of females. Female characters in films also affect them to understand social cognition and take a great guiding effect on their self-worth and autognosis. At present, the significance of female characters is only associated with commercial and social functions tightly, although there have been great changes in the representation of females in Marvel films, it is difficult for a female to completely get rid of these stereotypes and just labels through the quantity and time, the importance of female has not been really recognized from the ideology. Therefore, the director of Marvel has to comprehend the core idea of feminism and grasp the understanding of gender equality, which can integrate the merits of feminism and superhero films without pursuing her economy unilaterally.

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