

PORTRAYAL OF SUPERHEROINES IN MARVEL GRAPHIC NOVELS AND FILM ADAPTATIONS

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Abstract

Gender stereotypes have been present in Marvel graphic novels and films to varying degrees over the years, but there have been some efforts to subvert these stereotypes in recent films. In the early days of Marvel films, female characters were often relegated to supporting roles, with limited screen time and character development. They were often portrayed as love interests or damsels in distress, rather than fully realized characters with their own motivations and agency. However, in more recent films like *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow*, there have been efforts to give female characters more prominent roles and to subvert gender stereotypes. Captain Marvel is a powerful superhero who is not defined by her gender, and Black Widow is a skilled and complex character with a rich backstory. That being said, there is still room for improvement in terms of representation and diversity in Marvel graphic novels and film adaptations. The studio has been criticized for its lack of LGBTQ+ representation and its limited representation of characters from underrepresented communities. The paper discusses the gender ideologies and stereotypes in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Keywords: Gender ideology, MCU, Hypermasculinity, Tokenism, Damsel in Distress

Hypermasculinity has been a common theme in Marvel films, particularly in the portrayal of male superheroes. Many of the male characters are depicted as physically strong, aggressive, and dominant,

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which reinforces traditional notions of masculinity. This can be seen in the way that characters like Thor, Hulk, and Captain America are portrayed as physically powerful and emotionally stoic, with little room for vulnerability or emotional expression. In some cases, this can perpetuate harmful stereotypes about men and can contribute to toxic masculinity. However, there have been some efforts to challenge hypermasculinity in Marvel films. *Spider-Man: Homecoming* and *Spider-Man: Far From Home*, for instance, show Peter Parker as a more sympathetic and expressive hero, challenging stereotypical ideas of manhood. Additionally, characters like Black Panther and Doctor Strange are depicted as complex and multifaceted, with emotional depth and vulnerability that challenge traditional ideas of what it means to be a 'strong' male character.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe has a history of sexist and misogynistic portrayals of female characters. Using post-feminist principles, they are told to suppress their femininity so that they can succeed among the Avengers. They need to give up being girlfriends, wives, and mothers and take on the role of superheroines(s). Glamour dolls stand in for absent mothers and evil sisters when women and parenthood are absent from the plot. Female filmmakers are now being actively encouraged to work on superhero films starring women. Six films have been produced over the past four iterations, with future iterations predicted to produce many more. Hollywood's current Golden Age is dominated by superhero movies. Many people have a lot of respect for the characters Marvel has created in the media. Brand loyalty increases as additional characters are shown, and this benefits the already massive fan base of the franchise. However, Marvel's stories include surprisingly few female protagonists. The recounting of classic superhero stories is especially interesting because there were fewer women in prominent positions in those eras. This results in women being relegated to the roles of girlfriends, wives, and mothers even when they play significant roles in the plot.

Following Tony Stark's (Iron Man) demise, Pepper Potts assumed leadership of Stark Industries. Pepper, who plays Tony's secretary-turned-CEO-turned-superheroine, will experience a profound and underappreciated female character arc in her MCU premiere as 'Rescue' in *Avengers: Endgame*, despite her diminutive role. Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow became a deadly clandestine operative after being raised in a Russian training program. Until her untimely demise in *Endgame*, Black Widow was a constant presence in all of the *Infinity Saga* films. Scarlet Witch, whose true identity is Wanda

Maximoff, is a criminal paramilitary who fought for justice by using her increased skills, the result of genetic experimentation. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and *Avengers: Infinity War*, Scarlet Witch's unique abilities are enhanced by her troubled history and mental struggles, which contribute significantly to her value to the MCU. Adoptive father Thanos prepared Gamora for a career as a lethal galactic assassin in *Avengers: Infinity War*, in which Thanos chose to end her life because she had betrayed him and been betrayed by the Guardians of the Galaxy. Thanos trained Gamora and Nebula, his adoptive daughters, to be deadly assassins. Following her heroic fight in the 1990s for the Kree in a cosmic battle, Captain Marvel/Carol Danvers rose to become one of the most powerful heroes in the universe. She betrays her people in *Avengers: Endgame* after learning how much her abilities had been hidden from her, but she ultimately joins the Avengers in their fight against Thanos.

There has been a series of waves in the modern feminist movement, much like the MCU films. The plight of historically oppressed women gave rise to fresh demands and chants with each new wave. From its inception in the 1830s until its decline in the early 1900s, feminism was characterized by political action in favour of women's right to vote and property ownership. Following WWII, women's rights activists sought equal pay for equal work and the choice to have children, giving rise to the second wave of feminism. During the 1990s and into the 2000s, a group of feminists known as the 'third wave' worked to ensure that women had equal pay and better access to contraception. A new generation of feminists has arisen since the beginning of the fourth wave of feminism in 2012, and they are combating issues such as job discrimination and sexual harassment using internet networks.

Since the MCU's inception, there has been a significant rise in the number of female actors cast in lead roles. Only 6.67 percent of female characters were coded on average in early MCU films, with Black Widow being the only character coded at all (Olufidipe et al 6). Marvel has progressed past having a token female due to its increasing representation of female superheroes. Marvel has increased the number of female lead characters through several different channels, helping male audiences appreciate the value and potential of women. The MCU has come up with a couple of answers to the allegation that the movies are mostly based on male-centric comics. Incorporating gender-neutral characters into brand-new comics is one possible answer. Using characters whose gender is not vital to who they are is another. Marvel has had to increase the number of female characters in their films, although it has proved

controversial. For instance, there is the Ancient One and Marvell. Though conceived of as more of a mantle than an identity, Tilda Swinton was cast in the role of The Ancient One, despite the fact that the character was originally written as a male. Marvell was placed in the part of a woman in order to position Carol Danvers as an uplifting role model.

Characters of different races and genders can be written into new comics. In the comics, Jane Foster assumed the role of Thor in 2014. Seven years from then, she will play the male-dominated role of Thor. In addition, Kamala Khan, who debuted in 2013, will serve as the series' main protagonist in her own Ms. Marvel series. The current stream of female Marvel characters has undoubtedly helped fans connect with female heroes, but there is space for improvement in this regard. This matters because, historically, there have been few female superheroes, which may explain why some women have found it hard to identify with the genre. If there are more female superheroes, maybe women may find it easier to relate to the characters and learn important lessons from them. The theory of social cognition examines the impact that various forms of media have on viewers. Female superheroes, like their male counterparts, can serve as great role models for girls and young women if they are portrayed as strong, selfless heroes. It would be helpful if there were more female superheroes to serve as role models, given the many moral concepts that superheroes represent. The cultivation hypothesis examines how the media might shape ideas and worldviews. The repetition of Marvel's portrayal of women as powerful protagonists endowed with special abilities may alter how both sexes perceive women in the real world. It might help people regard women as valuable and powerful individuals on par with males. And the Marvel brand is expected to maintain its message of women's worth. Marvel president Kevin Feige made the following statement:

As contrasted to when they are all male, I believe we will soon have so many fantastic female characters that they are our heroes in and of themselves. More than half of the Marvel heroes will be female. That's all. (Bacon 4)

Marvel's fourth phase might be the moment when female characters thrive, making up for the company's predominantly male production in the past. However, merely adding more women would not change the way women are portrayed in the media. The way in which female characters are depicted is also crucial.

Pepper displays typical maternal traits early on in *Iron Man*, as she cares for her spoiled boss Tony Stark. From the perspective of the viewing public, the secretarial job is synonymous with nurturing. She puts up with Tony's mistreatment and even becomes close to him at the end of *Iron Man 2*, which is the only reason she becomes CEO of Stark Industries. She may be weak in genuine managerial and leadership talents, as her professional and social success appears to be largely attributable to Tony's romantic affection for her. In actual business, the chief executive officer (CEO) is the person with ultimate decision-making authority. Pepper, though, is always seeking Tony's approval. Despite the fact that Tony's approval should not be necessary for her decisions, Natasha turns down Aldrich Killian's proposal for a Stark Industries project in *Iron Man 3*. Killian takes Pepper hostage and gives her temporary superpowers as payback for being rejected. Pepper can murder Killian thanks to her alter persona, which Tony cannot. After they stop fighting, Tony utilises his egotistical power move to restore his feeling of manhood, which was damaged when a woman achieved a feat that he was unable to. Pepper doesn't see a problem with that, although Tony never thanks her for helping them. Pepper's powers are taken away, Tony's self-esteem is restored, and she goes back to being an average girlfriend. This incident lends credence to the stereotype that women are better suited for housework than to wielding superpowers. Pepper makes a brief appearance in the film's last scene, when Tony recommends that they should get married. Pepper makes her return in a major way in *Avengers: Endgame*, while she only makes a brief appearance in *Infinity War* where the couple discusses having children. In the most recent Avengers film, Tony and Pepper have a little daughter, and Pepper wants him to retire from becoming Iron Man so that they may spend more time together. As before, Tony goes against Pepper's desires and helps the Avengers defeat Thanos.

In the thrilling battle scene, Pepper surprises everyone by reappearing on screen as the superheroine 'Rescue,' donning an outfit that calls to mind Iron Man's arsenal. Armed with her new-found independence, she bravely engages in combat for the first time alongside other women. Pepper's moment of glory is short-lived, however, because Tony's physique is no match for the destructive force of the Infinity Gauntlet. In a devastating scene, Pepper reverts to the caring persona shown in the original Iron Man film to console Tony shortly before his death. She gives him the same "it'll be okay" assurance that he gave her in *Iron Man 3*: "She and their family will be OK" (Black 02:33:35). The spectator is left with a mental image

of Pepper as a widow and a devastated, single parent. Pepper Potts' overall growth as a character is tied to Tony Stark's. By not allowing Pepper to take charge of her own life, Marvel endorses the idea that it's okay for a woman to submit her identity to the authority of a man, even though her job title, 'Chief Executive Officer,' suggests otherwise. In *Iron Man 2*, Natasha Romanoff disguises herself as a notary to attract Tony Stark's notice and enlist him for the Avengers Initiative. Black Widow, a Russian spy, is immediately revealed to be her true identity. "...has no superpowers [or] super-powerful suits: she is simply a trained fighter who takes advantage of her gender." (Fauvreau 01:21:23)

Iron Man 3's underlying message that women are not equipped to be superheroes is reinforced by the assumption that Natasha does not possess any true superpowers. Some could even say she does not deserve to be called a superheroine because she does not have any special abilities. Natasha's exposing and low-cut uniform is exploitative of her body in a way that shows women in any profession are vulnerable to being sexualized as objects. Natasha, with her fiery red hair and provocative attire, is portrayed as a sex object. In an early scene from *The Avengers*, Natasha exploits her good looks to beguile her Russian captors before fighting her way to freedom. Black Widow's captivating allure has made her the prospective object of romantic affection for certain male Avengers in the films.

Significantly, Bruce Banner makes reference to his green alternate ego, the Hulk, during a playful conversation with Black Widow in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. In response, she tells him that she was sterilised during her time as a Russian spy trainee in order to help her focus on her tasks. Insinuating that childless women are monstrosities, she asks Banner whether he still considers himself to be the team's only monster. Maternalists hold that virtuous behaviour may be summed up by displaying maternal traits. Another definition of maternalism is the belief that having children is a woman's exclusive path to morality and decency. The comment made by Natasha regarding her infertility exemplifies Marvel's perspective on parenthood as a fundamental aspect of a woman's identity. Viewers might conclude that this stance is valid, which would go counter to the principles of the first four waves of feminism.

In *Avengers: Endgame*, Black Widow and Hawkeye have been assigned the mission of obtaining the Soul Stone, which is one of the six Infinity Stones. These stones, when brought together, have the potential to cause great destruction to the universe. This mission ends Black Widow's arc in the film. Once there, they find out that

one of them must die in order to gain access to the stone. Natasha and Hawkeye fight passionately, neither one wanting the other to die. Black Widow finally manages to defeat him, and then she jumps off a cliff to her death. Killing Natasha was a risky move on the part of the filmmakers, given her status as the film's lone female Avenger, but it paid off in the end. In contrast to Tony's lengthy funeral scene, Natasha's death is mourned for all of one scene, after which her eight-movie arc is completely forgotten. Overall, Natasha Romanoff has not yet matured into a strong, fully realised female character, a victim of Marvel's hyper-masculinity and discrimination.

An assassin contending against the MCU since making her debut in *Iron Man 2*, where she serves as an undercover operative for Tony Stark and Pepper Potts as Black Widow, Natasha Romanoff has been an integral member of the Avengers squad. Despite the fact that she has never been given nearly enough screen time over the years to fully develop her depth, viewers can still gather from the few brief glimpses into her history as a Russian assassin that she is a formidable member of the Avengers despite her lack of superpowers. Natasha earned her spot on the team after showcasing skills beyond those learned in the Red Room. Despite her lethal assassin skills, Black Widow continues to be a victim of the toxic masculinity displayed by her adversaries, the film industry, and even her own teammates. As was previously established, her first appearance is in *Iron Man 2*, when she is the subject of sexual objectification from Tony Stark and Happy in the very first scene she is in. It is immediately apparent as soon as she walks in and the focus of the aforementioned men shifts to her (Rupert et al),

[Sexual objectification] occurs when a woman's body . . . [is] singled out and separated from her as a person and she is viewed primarily as a physical object of male sexual desire. (Szymanski et al. 9)

The men's objectification of Natasha is not limited to this scene. In another film, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, when Black Widow first meets Captain America's new friend, Sam Wilson, Wilson's eyes immediately fall on Natasha's body, a fact he emphasises with a seductive, "How you doing?" (Russo and Russo 03:14 – 03:20). Problem-solving in *Iron Man 2* is intertwined with male gaze and objectification from the very first scene. Pepper warns Tony that hiring Natasha could result in a "possibly very expensive sexual harassment lawsuit" (24:18), prompting Tony to immediately scan her CV for lingerie photographs while ignoring her qualifications (24:48-25:04). Tony, without even bothering to look elsewhere,

declares that he “feel[s] like it’s her” (24:32) who should become his assistant. In this case, Tony’s actions are so outrageous that they can be attributed to his nature. However, he is not the only one who seems to find the Russian assassin to be an object of sexual fascination. Marvel’s writers and actors are just as guilty of sexual objectification as their characters are.

When it comes to *Iron Man 2*, it is not hard to see that Black Widow was written specifically to appeal to men. She makes her Marvel Cinematic Universe debut with some risqué cleavage, a waist-cinching outfit, heels, and a loose ponytail. The more we get into the film, the more ridiculous this interpretation and representation of her character becomes. Prior to the events of *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, only Black Widow was a female member of the team. Natasha’s battle outfit consists of skin-tight overalls, platform shoes, and her long red hair down, which is a combat danger, in one of the most terrifying scenes, which depicts her and Happy breaching the structure. The situation that is unfolding in the world of superheroes, specifically with regard to women, is that “[T]oday’s superheroines ... are often unrealistic, sexualized representations of female figures, with large chests, curvaceous backsides and unattainable hourglass dimensions.” (Szymanski et al. 9)

Their skintight dresses feature low-cut necklines and bare midriffs to emphasise their sexuality. Black Widow is also a target of sexism, another manifestation of toxic masculinity; Kinnunen defines sexism in the context of the film as follows. “[E]specially in the dominant Hollywood cinema women on screen were “merely signs for all that is non-male”, and that women were presented only as what they represent for men, instead of showing “women as women” (15). Many movies, including her first, *Iron Man 2*, perpetuate the stereotype that women are incapable of performing male-dominated tasks. As soon as she enters, she is ushered into the boxing ring for her first instruction. Happy asks her, rather mockingly, if she has ever boxed before. “[T]he Tae Bo? Booty Boot Camp? Crunch?” (Fauveau 24:37) which Happy thinks is too macho for a petite woman like Natasha Romanoff, so he’s had reduced versions made for her. These sexist tropes are most prevalent in movies like *Iron Man 2*, but the MCU as a whole isn’t without its problematic movies.

Wanda Maximoff, a character in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, is the most influential and powerful figure. She experiences a distinct type of sexual injustice. Beneath her numerous talents is a susceptible and parentless identity that may be readily taken advantage of. Marvel Studios has made no attempt to mitigate

Captain America's characterization of her as "young and enhanced" (Whedon 00:09:38) in her initial feature appearance, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. Robyn Joffe, a student at York University, is conducting a thesis on the representation of women and LGBTQ characters, highlighting that the Scarlet Witch is solely responsible for incapacitating the Avengers. Hawkeye, who possesses only the true skill of wielding a bow and arrow, delivers an encouraging speech to her in an abandoned structure, as she is the sole member of the Avengers who experienced a breakdown during the previous battle. Following the demise of her twin brother who served as her main source of support, she has become increasingly dependent on male parental figures.

Her recklessness results in the deaths of innocent bystanders, yet the male Avengers continue to pardon her. They protect her at all costs and never hold her responsible for her actions, turning her into a helpless weakling. She plays the role of the damsel in distress until her true might is revealed in *Avengers: Infinity War*. Even though she and the superhero she has a crush on, Vision, are assaulted early in the film, she manages to defeat her foes with just her powers. However, Captain America is the one who ultimately rescues her. Directors Anthony and Joe Russo openly admitted in the film's audio that they staged the scenario to make Captain America's "grand entrance," so, ignoring Scarlet Witch's abilities once again. *Avengers: Endgame* is her most recent film, and in it, she fights Thanos, the villain responsible for Vision's death. It is the first time she has acted independently of the other Avengers, and her brief but fiery arrival sees her unleashing years of neglect and agony upon Thanos.

The practice of infantilization, in which an adult is treated as if they are still a child, has drastically damaged Scarlet Witch's telekinetic and mind-control skills. As she grows up, she experiences more and more emotional difficulties since she is both more powerful and more dependent on others. Her portrayal shows she lacks the self-assurance to handle abilities of this magnitude. The Russo brothers promote sexism by fostering the myth that viewers prefer stories about helpless women who are ultimately rescued by a heroic male lead.

The Guardians of the Galaxy consists of a diverse bunch of individuals from various parts of the galaxy. Similar to Black Widow, Gamora is the only female member of the squad. The character is consistently subjected to verbal and visual objectification throughout the film, *Guardians of the Galaxy*. When Rocket, a male raccoon and member of the Guardians suggests that she utilize her attractive

appearance to negotiate for materials that could assist in their prison breakout, she responds by stating, “you must be jesting” (Gunn 00:34:32). When Peter Quill, the leader of the Guardians, attempts to engage in conversation with her, she forcefully rejects him, referring to his approaches as “pelvic sorcery”. Subsequently, another individual refers to her as a “green prostitute” (Gunn 00:52:28). *Guardians of the Galaxy* features the character in a cleavage-revealing mesh bodysuit, which is accompanied by misogynistic speech. After her initial appearance, she transforms into her most recognizable image. Gamora dons a form-fitting leather top and miniskirt which contrasts with the conventional attire typically worn by male protagonists, deviating from the typical expectations from a female superhero. Applying psychoanalytical theory to feminist film theory results in the concept of the male gaze which suggests that women in media are frequently dressed in a way that is intended to capture the attention of male viewers.

Gamora perishes due to the cataclysmic occurrences in *Avengers: Infinity War*. Thanos locates the Soul Stone on the planet Vormir, in the same way as how Black Widow and Hawkeye would eventually do it. Collectively, he and Gamora discover that he must willingly give up something of great personal value in order to obtain the stone. Due to Thanos’s apparent lack of concern, Gamora immediately experiences a sense of relief, believing that he has no interest in the stone. However, in a shocking twist of events, her very own father betrays her and forcefully propels her off a precipice, leaving us only with the sound of her agonizing cries. An indifferent father brought her into existence and promptly ended it, leaving her lifeless body on the floor below. The narrative of Gamora, a unique female character, was diminished in order to further a larger male-centric storyline. Gamora, similar to Black Widow, served as a representation of female power within a primarily male ensemble. Their self-sacrificial deaths suggest that Marvel believed that women needed to perish for a purpose in order to possess significance. The death scene in *Avengers: Endgame* implies that the protagonist’s whole narrative was intended to contribute to a male character’s story, so, negating years of character growth as a formidable female superhero, undermining her power, and devaluing her significance, despite her brief return to her original persona in the movie.

Nebula, who was adopted like Gamora, is depicted as Gamora’s antithesis due to the severe upbringing they experienced together. When they were young, Thanos forced Nebula, who was the less strong of the two, to compete against his other daughter, Gamora.

As a consequence of her failures, Thanos imposed a penalty on her by surgically removing several body parts, including her “cerebral organ from her cranium and one limb from her trunk” (Bowen, 201). Nebula’s final metamorphosis into a biomechanically augmented assassin will render her an unparalleled menace in the galaxy. Despite reaching adulthood, Nebula and her sister were unable to overcome the intense rivalry that had originated throughout their childhood. Nebula is depicted as a feeble and reliant character who displays deference towards her father despite her evident physical prowess. She remains loyal to him because of fear of facing severe consequences if she disobeys, however, she also harbours a strong desire to eliminate him in retaliation for the immense pain he has inflicted upon her. Nebula’s character is shown as weakly developed and lacking depth in her first two cinematic appearances. Her only notable characteristics are her envy towards Gamora and her animosity towards her father.

While talking about Natasha, Gamora and Wanda to highlight the issue of mortality and the stereotypical treatment of female superheroes in Marvel films, one could also illustrate the point through the character of Jane portrayed by Natalie Portman in the Thor series. She chooses to die in order to save the world. For a short while, she was the Lady Thor, complete with all the powers, costume, helmet and even the hammer, only to have cancer and die!!! It is like a woman’s greatest superpower is death.

A dual narrative emerges from the analysis of gender representation in Marvel movies: female characters are typically cast in stereotypical and sexist roles, such as serving as romantic interests or mother figures, while male superheroes typically embody hypermasculine traits like physical strength and emotional stoicism. Captain Marvel, Black Widow, and Scarlet Witch are just a few examples of the MCU’s progressive shift toward more powerful and multifaceted female characters. These characters challenge gender stereotypes by displaying strength, agency, and depth. Critiques of enduring problems like sexual objectification and unequal screen time in comparison to male counterparts, however, temper these advancements and draw attention to the continued difficulties in establishing full gender equality in superhero stories. In addition, Marvel’s latest endeavours to present a wider range of diverse female heroes – Jane Foster as Thor and Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel, for example – are a reaction to calls for increased representation. These characters are meant to uplift and connect with viewers outside of conventional male-dominated demographics, mirroring larger

societal movements toward inclusivity and empowerment. However, the way gender is portrayed in the MCU is still under scrutiny for its potential to either reinforce or subvert cultural stereotypes, highlighting the intricate relationship that exists between popular culture, audience expectations, and changing feminist viewpoints in the field of superhero storytelling.

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