



FEMINIST QUEST HEROINE: FEMALE SUPERHEROINES AND DECONSTRUCTION OF MALE HEROISM

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ABSTRACT

Hero's narratives have long been significantly shaped by male heroism to construct a certain perception towards gender by imposing hegemonic masculinity onto a male hero and hegemonic femininity on a female in order to establish a perpetual linkage between masculinity and superiority, simultaneously marginalizing female characters and their values by limiting their roles into being damsels in distress waiting to be rescued by a male hero and later becoming a reward of his success. Nevertheless, it has become prominent that various materials, especially movies, in the twenty-first century American popular culture have adopted a different model to portray a narrative of heroism by infusing it with the concept of Feminist Quest Heroine, a theory foregrounded by Svenja Hohenstein that highlights the re-modification of male-dominated narrative of heroism into a feminist one. The narrative no longer cherishes the superiority of masculinity but now addresses the feminine aspects instead. In order to rework the narrative, the concept points out to four different but inter-related approaches: the empowerment of femininity, reworking gendered bodies, power of connections, and a critique of patriarchal power. The adoption of the approaches result in a more empowering heroine who is able to subvert traditional aspects embedded with a conventional narrative of heroism.

Keywords: hegemonic femininity, hegemonic masculinity, gender stereotypes, superhero, superheroine.

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1. HEROISM AND WHY IT MATTERS

In the contemporary world, considering the current proliferation of superhero narratives, it is important to consider that heroes are not born, but rather forged and constructed through repeated representations across various types of media. What is noteworthy is that, although the origin of heroes has primarily been fictional, the impact of heroism has never been any less factual. Due to its socially constructed foundation, heroism imposes hegemonic normative values and perceptions upon each hero, transferring them to those who consume the concept in an attempt to formulate predominant identities. As Sára Bigazzi et al. (2021) conclude, the role of heroes is adopted to reaffirm potential manners and values for individuals to imitate (4). Nevertheless, despite its reaffirmation of social

conventions, such a role is subject to change due to the evolving concept of heroism itself, thereby shifting the qualities people employ to justify a heroic act.

According to several scholars, heroism serves as a means of shaping people's behavior by legitimizing actions deemed heroic and right, while labeling others as unheroic or wrong. Kathy Blau et al. (2011) define heroism as "acting in a prosocial manner despite personal risk" (99), highlighting its power to influence people's actions towards what is considered conventionally virtuous, commendable, and in line with a specific sociocultural set of values and beliefs. Consequently, heroism offers guidance that regulates human behavior based on established standard notions of "right" and "wrong," thus molding the group members' actions accordingly. Notably, heroism not only holds appeal for humans but also stirs their emotions, compelling them to act in line with the perceived heroic ideal. Whether through skill or luck, individuals are motivated to achieve deeds worthy of heroic recognition.

Liubov Ben-Nun (2021) asserts that heroism is a societal construct, delineated by attributing specific actions to individuals that, to some extent, transcend "reasonable boundaries." This might involve legitimizing perilous or excessive undertakings, or associating values such as unwavering courage, honesty, and empathy with heroism (4). Within the context of a hero's narrative, these qualities often constitute the primary attributes embodied by the hero. Several of the enumerated aspects of heroism or heroic figures align with the characteristics of heroism commonly compiled by Philip Zimbardo (2020) who argues that heroism encompasses a voluntary commitment to actions performed in service to the greater good of society, often at the cost of "physical comfort, social standing, or quality of life" (1). Moreover, this voluntary engagement requires the absence of any expectation of personal gain. The social contribution inherent in heroism yields neither profit nor advantage, often resulting in either loss or equilibrium. This is precisely why such acts are deemed heroic, inspiring individuals to uphold similar principles.

In the words of Barbara Korte and Stefanie Lethbridge (2017), a hero is an individual, regardless of gender, whose remarkable acts of courage and nobility are held in high esteem. According to this definition, heroes are frequently portrayed as warriors, fighters, or soldiers (2). Furthermore, a hero, whether male or female, encompasses anyone whose exceptional achievements are widely recognized and celebrated. In this context, the role of heroes extends beyond the confines of soldiers and warriors, encompassing individuals possessing such commendable qualities. In any scenario, heroes embody significant social and cultural functions, capable of effecting profound and lasting impacts on a society. What emerges as thought-provoking in these studies is the malleable nature of hero conceptualizations. The notion of heroism is far from being fixed or rigid; instead, it remains dynamic and fluid. Various dimensions of heroism construct dominant

perceptions that influence people's actions accordingly, and gender stands as one such influential dimension.

2. HEROISM AND GENDER TROUBLES

Spanning across folklores, tales, religious texts, poems, popular culture, and mainstream media, the notion of heroism undeniably bears a profound gender bias. Within each narrative, heroism distinctively shapes our understanding of masculinity and femininity. As Rachel Poe (2015) suggests, an examination of epic hero tales reveals that the concept of heroism is a construct of patriarchal societies, inherently entwining masculinity with heroism and amplifying its significance within the narrative (1). In a contrasting vein, the concept simultaneously employs the narrative to insinuate a sense of inferiority onto femininity, by interjecting hegemonic feminine traits into the portrayal. This dual approach serves to perpetuate the value of masculinity while concurrently diminishing the worth of femininity. In this context, the concept effectively creates a win-win situation for masculinity, affirming its prominence and functionality.

In the realm of gender studies, the concept of hegemonic masculinity wields significant power and influence over prevailing perceptions of gender and social hierarchies (Becker and Eagly 2004, 163). This configuration of masculinity underscores specific traits that individuals who identify as males are expected to embody in order to conform to the archetype of a "proper" man. These traits encompass qualities like strength, independence, authority, and dominance. The notion of hegemonic masculinity is intrinsically linked to "male-agentic" characteristics, which encompass attributes such as strength, intelligence, resilience, and proactivity (Ritchie, Igou, and Kinsella 2017, 2). Its scope is not limited solely to gender; it extends to intersect matters related to race, ethnicity, and (neo)colonialism as well. Scholarly exploration of the societal construction of heroism highlights that Whiteness has historically occupied a central role in asserting dominant influence within societal groups (Taylor 2018, 91). Consequently, taking all these aspects into account, heroism crystallizes into an image of a White muscular man embodying hegemonic power, a construct stemming from the emphasis on strength, independence, authority, and dominance. This figure often serves as the prototypical character from which an extensive array of renowned heroes, prevalent across generations, emerges.

Traditional hero narratives not only embed a particular conception of hegemonic masculinity within their textual fabric but also reveal a distinct perspective on femininity, introducing the idea of hegemonic femininity. This concept delineates the expected behavioral norms for women, setting forth a framework by which their actions are judged as socially acceptable or not. Within the realm of hegemonic femininity, narratives tend to emphasize traits such as passivity, helplessness, and dependence among women. In contrast to the "male-agentic" attributes, Timothy Ritchie et al. (2017) propose that

women are associated with more communal qualities, such as empathy, selflessness, and compassion (2). On one hand, this mode of representation serves the purpose of reinforcing these traits in women—casting them as passive, obedient domestic figures. On the other hand, it also serves to bolster the notion of masculine superiority by projecting a narrative where a man rescues a helpless, “damsel in distress” archetypical woman. This dynamic aids in perpetuating and celebrating traditional gender roles.

As a consequence of the embedding of gender-specific attributes into hero narratives, a particular stereotype has emerged: the hero is prominently portrayed as a White, heterosexual, muscular man who either embodies or prioritizes physical strength. Frequently, he is destined to embark on a solitary quest, accentuating his sense of independence. Throughout this journey, the narrative archetype often presents him overcoming every challenge, owing to his hegemonic masculine qualities. His physical prowess, well-built physique, power, and authority enable him to triumph over any adversaries that attempt to impede his progress. His autonomy reinforces the notion that his heroic stature increases with each successful step of the quest accomplished without external aid. In essence, this trope perpetuates a portrayal of “the physical sense of maleness”, encompassing domains such as physical spaces, body image, size, power, and even sexuality (Aboim, Hearn, and Howson 2007, 4). Such heroes are frequently depicted as prince charming figures, warriors, demigod heroes, or similar archetypes. As these narratives culminate, consumers of these stories are presented with a heightened perception of masculinity that has been interwoven throughout. As Yuchen Yang (2020) proposes, this process of gendering engenders “internalized expectations, attitudes, and traits”, ultimately contributing to a distortion of power dynamics and reinforcing “structural inequality” in gender perceptions (319).

An additional element frequently entwined within the narrative of a hegemonic masculine hero is the presence of a damsel in distress—an archetypical character meant to underscore the hierarchical relationship between femininity and masculinity. As posited by Alice Eagly and Lindsay Rankin (2008), the perception of men as more inclined to perform acts of heroism has led to the cultural linkage of heroism with masculinity (421). These hegemonic masculine heroes are not solely portrayed to demonstrate their masculine attributes; more often than not, they rely on other female characters who are imbued with hegemonic feminine traits. In accordance with Karen Dill et al. (2005), the “damsel in distress” archetype serves to cater to male desires, thereby catalyzing the display of male heroism by her male counterpart (117). These characters typically exhibit traits such as passivity, obedience, kindness, helplessness, and dependence. Their role within the narrative is to underscore the societal expectations imposed upon women. They are predetermined to embody gentleness, domesticity, and submission, thereby further marginalizing and disempowering themselves. Moreover, these characters are strategically depicted to accentuate masculine values, bolstering the representation of hegemonic

masculinity within the male characters. The “damsel in distress” often endures misfortune and remains incapable of resolving her predicament due to systemic passivity and helplessness, consequently paving the way for a heroic intervention. This portrayal often results in female characters resembling a princess awaiting rescue by a prince charming, ultimately constraining their potential association with heroism. In essence, this recurring pattern perpetuates a representation of women that reinforces their reliance on male saviors and limits their potential for heroism.

3. FEMINIST QUEST HEROINE: SUBVERSION OF AMERICAN MALE HEROISM

Owing to the proliferation of feminist discourses in twenty-first-century materials, the narratives of heroism have undergone transformations over the years, leading to a reshaping of how the concept engages with the construction of gender through heroes and heroines. R. Connell and James Messerschmidt (2005) succinctly summarize that the concept of hegemonic masculinity is inherently flawed, projecting an artificial image onto a dynamic reality, thus leaving room for its own subversion (836). By reimagining this concept, it becomes evident that the feminist quest heroine has emerged to redefine both heroines and their male counterparts. Svenja Hohenstein (2019) contends that the feminist quest heroine frame offers an innovative narrative of heroism that not only challenges the glorification of traditional masculinity entrenched in narratives but also replaces it with feminist principles (14). This concept accentuates the reevaluation of femininity through female characters while subverting the perpetuation of masculine dominance through male characters. Hohenstein outlines three vital strategies that underpin the concept: empowerment of femininity, reconfiguration of gendered bodies, and emphasis on the potency of connections. Nevertheless, I observe the potential to incorporate an additional facet, a critique of patriarchy, which could further amplify the capability of the concept to challenge the established pattern of heroism. These attributes of the feminist quest heroine find tangible representation through a diverse array of superheroine characters depicted in twenty-first-century mainstream media. I argue that characters like Jean Grey from *X-Men: Dark Phoenix* (2019), Captain Marvel from *Captain Marvel* (2019), Natasha Romanoff from *Black Widow* (2021), She-Hulk from *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law* (2022), and Shuri from *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022) illustrate the tangible manifestation of this concept and serve as a lens through which they gauge the prevalence of the concept in the current era, signaling a transformative effort to challenge and reshape the conventional masculine paradigm of heroism.

3.1. EMPOWERMENT OF FEMININITY

Svenja Hohenstein (2019) asserts that within the prevailing narrative of heroism, which predominantly exalts masculinity, femininity has consistently been perceived as feeble and lacking in power, consequently deemed unsuitable for heroic depictions and

relegated to passive roles (21). Narratives centered around heroism often mold femininity according to hegemonic feminine ideals, resulting in its portrayal as passive, vulnerable, emotionally fragile, and reliant on male assistance. However, the emergence of superheroine narratives in the twenty-first century disrupts this prevailing ideology. These narratives showcase heroines who embrace stereotypical feminine attributes, transforming them into sources of power, thereby embodying heroism through the empowerment of femininity. While heroism traditionally favors aspects associated with hegemonic masculinity, casting them as strong and potent, the concept simultaneously venerates traits of hegemonic femininity as weak and ineffectual. Consequently, those who embody and exercise masculine attributes are afforded the opportunity to become heroes, while individuals possessing hegemonic feminine qualities are often excluded. In essence, aspiring heroines either need to suppress their feminine attributes and adopt masculine traits or re-model their inherent feminine qualities in order to claim the mantle of heroism.

Among several attributes, one dimension of femininity that frequently finds itself depicted as a weakness pertains to the realm of emotions. Emotionality has often been exclusively associated with women, interpreted as a signal of vulnerability and an inability to carry out tasks with satisfactory outcomes. However, the feminist quest heroine paradigm shifts the narrative to revere emotions as a wellspring of strength rather than a source of disempowerment. An exemplar of this shift is seen in Jean Grey from *X-MEN: Dark Phoenix* (2019), who embraces this perspective to define her heroism. Empowered by the fusion of the Phoenix Force and Solar Flares, Jean Grey struggles to harness her newfound abilities, inadvertently endangering her companions and innocent individuals. Vuk, an alien aiming to absorb Jean's powers, consistently attributes her inability to control her abilities to her emotional instability. A climactic moment occurs as Jean and Vuk confront each other, with Jean losing control and endangering her friends. In this intense exchange, Vuk taunts Jean, asserting, "Your emotions make you weak; if you kill me, you will kill them all" (Kinberg 2019, 1:39:00). Contrary to this claim, Jean firmly rebuffs, "No, you're wrong. My emotions make me strong" (Kinberg 2019, 1:40:07), enabling her to master her powers, defeat Vuk, and transcend into a cosmic entity.

This pivotal scene underscores the profound notion that, in a society where women's emotions are frequently criticized and deemed feeble, there is no compulsion to conform. Rather than suppressing emotions to align with societal expectations, emotions can be harnessed as sources of empowerment. They facilitate a journey of self-discovery and awareness, enabling individuals to fathom their true selves and unlock their inherent potential. Within a male-dominated societal framework, women are often admonished to govern their emotions, an expectation that inadvertently obstructs their avenue toward self-realization and empowerment. In this light, feminist quest heroines exemplified by characters like Jean Grey reframe emotions as a reservoir of strength,

dispelling the myth of emotional frailty and reshaping the discourse around women's capabilities.

As Ayushee Arora (2019) suggests, male heroism traditionally suppresses emotional expression among heroes, urging them to maintain emotional stability to uphold their strength and resilience (7). Consequently, heroes are depicted as emotionally distant to avoid showing signs of weakness linked to emotions, which could undermine their heroic image. According to what Sebastian Peris (2021) writes, Jonathan Decker, a licensed therapist, analyzes the character development of Tony Stark (Iron Man) in the Marvel Cinematic Universe films and reveals that he likely experiences Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder due to the traumatic events he endures (n.p.). Despite this, he conceals his emotional vulnerability, fearing it might render him weak and incapable, given his ongoing emotional struggles. It is noteworthy that, in various instances, a hero who grapples with emotional vulnerability might not be immediately deemed "heroic" due to the association of this trait with femininity. However, such a perspective stems from the confines of limiting gender stereotypes. Had Jean Grey adhered to the traditional notion of heroism, she might have suppressed her emotions to gain better control over her power. However, this path would have reduced her emotional depth and portrayed her as a mere vessel for masculine attributes, reinforcing the stereotype that a heroine's power relies on the dismissal of emotions. This approach would have perpetuated the common trope of sidelining emotions in favor of power, aligning with traditional gender norms and undermining the nuanced portrayal of a powerful female character, thus repeating the same stereotypes and akin to the depiction of Tony Stark, an embodiment of male heroism.

Therefore, this heroine introduces a fresh perspective on comprehending the essence of heroism. Feminine attributes, including emotional depth, emerge as reservoirs of power and resilience. As a result, she does not find it imperative to adopt masculine traits or conform to gender norms to attain heroism; she embodies her agency authentically over her emotions. The prevailing notion that femininity is synonymous with weakness, or that female characters must embrace masculine attributes to qualify as heroic, is entrenched in restrictive stereotypes. The very essence of the feminist quest heroine is to disrupt and dismantle these stereotypes. It seeks to amplify the feminine qualities that these superheroines inherently possess, demonstrating that these attributes are not impediments but assets. By defying traditional gender expectations, the character illuminates a progressive pathway, encouraging a more inclusive and empowering understanding of heroism and its connection to emotions.

3.2. REWORKING GENDERED BODIES

Heroism not only delineates essential characteristics for achieving heroic status, but also prescribes a specific body type associated with it. Masculine attributes represent pivotal qualities an aspiring hero must embrace, including a masculine physical appearance. A

body type deemed congruent with heroism aligns closely with hegemonic masculine ideals—robust and conspicuously strong. In contrast, a body inconsistent with this prototype is often deemed incompatible with heroism. Consequently, female bodies, characterized as petite, slight, and delicate, are systematically juxtaposed against the traditional heroic narrative, precluding their depiction as heroes (Hohenstein 2019, 33). Certain feminine body types, such as blondness, slimness, and delicateness, have perennially been ascribed hyper-feminine and fragile connotations. As a result, such bodies frequently assume the role of a damsel in distress, serving to validate their societal standing. Moreover, within heroism narratives, the hyper-feminine body type is often harnessed to objectify, eroticize, and sexualize women, further reinforcing entrenched norms and justifications.

Briana Barnett et al. (2022) deduce from their study that superheroes, regardless of gender, are frequently depicted as assertive and hyper-muscular. This tendency is particularly pronounced among male heroes who often embody stereotypically masculine and unrealistic body forms, characterized by an excessively massive and muscular physique (354). This portrayal aims to link such hyper-masculine bodies with heroism while simultaneously distancing alternative figures, including those with stereotypically feminine physical traits. An exemplary illustration of this male-heroism-associated body can be found in the character of Captain America from the MCU movies. He possesses an exaggeratedly muscular physique, crucially tied to his heroic journey. As Chad Barbour (2015) suggests, Captain America's body portrayal serves as a symbol of his heroic masculinity, strongly aligned with hyper-masculine ideals and establishing a standard for heroic physiques (277–79). Conversely, for female characters, Jay Zagorsky (2015) highlights common tropes and stereotypes linked to traits such as Whiteness and blondness, inherently classified as hyper-feminine. These traits are often portrayed as beautiful yet weak and incompetent, consequently distancing the character from heroism and positioning them more as proper damsels in distress (402).

Nonetheless, contemporary superheroines prominently embody the hyper-feminine physique while effectively performing heroic deeds. Captain Marvel stands as a prime illustration, possessing a hyper-feminine form often associated with traditional ideals, yet unyieldingly portraying a powerful heroine (Fig. 1).



Figure 1 Captain Marvel's physical appearance © Marvel.

This depiction of a hyper-feminine physique intertwined with strength and potency challenges established gender stereotypes and the constructed nature of binary gender categories (Hohenstein 2019, 33). Notably, some narratives may seemingly demand a more masculine presentation for heroines to align with conventional gender roles. However, true heroism for women does not necessitate the abandonment of feminine attributes or the adoption of a more “masculine” physique. Captain Marvel exemplifies that women can fully embrace their feminine bodies, devoid of excessive muscle or size, and still exhibit remarkable strength. Much like male heroes with their conventionally masculine physiques, Captain Marvel effectively wields her power without compromising her feminine identity. Her heroism does not mandate a forced merger of masculine traits within a female form. She shatters the confines of her stereotypically feminine body, establishing an empowering connection between femininity and strength. As a White, blonde, and slender heroine, this perspective challenges the misconception of femininity as a victimizing instrument wielded by patriarchal constructs (Hohenstein 2019, 37). Through characters like Captain Marvel, conventional feminine attributes are brought back to align with the ideals of heroism.

She-Hulk, also known as Jennifer Walters, offers another compelling instance of a heroine who need not masculinize herself to embody heroism. Notably, there exists a distinction between the portrayal of She-Hulk’s physical appearance in the Disney+ series and its rendition in the comics (Fig. 2).



Figure 2 A Comparison of She-Hulk’s bodies between the comics and the series © Marvel Studios.

In *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law* (2022), her physique is presented as slender and athletic, even while physically larger due to her mutation and green complexion. In contrast, the comics often frame her body through the lens of hegemonic masculinity, molding her into a more traditionally muscular and robust form to accentuate her superhuman strength and agility. The 2022 portrayal of She-Hulk may be perceived as a less masculinized rendition, potentially driven by a desire to shift emphasis away from her physical prowess and instead highlight her intellect and personal life. It is discernible that the depiction of She-Hulk's body in the comics tends to align with stereotypically masculine, manly, and less feminine or less womanly attributes, partly to mirror Bruce Banner's Hulk persona. This portrayal contrasts with a more relatable representation seen in She-Hulk's appearance, reflecting a physique akin to that of a woman engaged in regular bodybuilding training sessions.

It is intriguing to observe that this alteration in her physique appears deliberate and holds significance in shaping male heroism. According to what Alex Lue (2022) writes, there are allegations that Marvel Studio's executives instructed a special effects artist to reduce She-Hulk's size in the series (n.p.). This rumor led to confusion and outrage among Marvel fans, who expressed their views through comments, requesting a "more fitting" rendition of her body and asserting that she was "not nearly as much as she should be" while posting her "actual" physical appearance from the comic version to support their claims. These fans are well-acquainted with the customary portrayal of She-Hulk from the comics, a rendition molded by male heroism that portrays her physique as hyper-muscular to align with this dimension of heroism. Hence, in light of She-Hulk's updated physical depiction that diverges from the established norm, fans are disheartened, perceiving a departure from the traditionally crafted heroism they have come to associate with the character.

All in all, an erroneous pitfall when crafting a superheroine is the inclination to mold her in a manner that is more "masculine" in appearance. In numerous instances, the attempt to align a heroine with the archetype of heroism results in depicting her with a body evoking masculine traits. Succinctly, this perspective suggests that for a woman to qualify as a heroine, she must masculinize her physique, effectively obfuscating her innate feminine attributes—such as being slim, blonde, or slender. This perspective reflects a male-centric framework in heroism that perpetuates the exclusion of diverse body types from the narrative of heroism. However, contemporary superheroines challenge this paradigm by embracing their distinctive feminine physical attributes while admirably fulfilling their roles as heroines. They demonstrate that possessing traits like blondness, slenderness, and delicacy does not hinder their capacity to excel in their heroic endeavors.

3.3. POWER OF CONNECTIONS

In traditional narratives of male heroism, autonomy is a recurring theme. Male heroes are frequently portrayed as independent and self-reliant, attributes that signify strength and resoluteness and are lauded as quintessentially masculine. This self-sufficiency has become a pivotal facet of heroism, symbolically encoding bravery and resilience within the construct of hegemonic masculinity as embodied by the hero. However, the concept of feminist quest heroine diverges from this convention by highlighting female heroines who prioritize connection, valuing it as “sisterhood”. Within the realm of feminist discourse, sisterhood holds a central role, denoting the sense of camaraderie, solidarity, and mutual support that women extend to each other as a result of shared experiences of oppression and discrimination. As articulated by Bell Hooks (1989), sisterhood serves as a means for women to uplift one another, collaboratively surmount shared adversities, and attain collective objectives, thereby nurturing empowerment, fostering a sense of belonging, and effecting liberation (43–44). In contrast to the solitary male hero archetype, contemporary heroines of the twenty-first century choose to embrace teamwork, extending helping hands to navigate challenges collectively and ultimately attaining heroism side by side.

Mr. Incredible from *The Incredibles* (2004) provides a notable illustration of a character who internalizes the concept of independence, a facet that within the frame of male heroism is a pivotal element in order to qualify as a hero. Alongside his embodiment of other pertinent aspects of male heroism, such as a muscular build and strength, his constant expression of self-reliance is a recurring theme within the storyline. When accompanied by a fervent admirer who seeks to collaborate with him, Mr. Incredible firmly asserts his preference for working alone, underscoring his identity as a hero who can stand on his own without needing assistance. This is particularly emphasized if the support originates from sources deemed less “masculine”, such as children or women. Likewise, when his wife becomes aware of his engagement in a perilous mission alone, she extends her offer to assist him. Not surprisingly, he declines, driven by his determination to shield his family from potential hazards. The deep-rooted adherence to male heroism drives him to place an emphasis on self-reliance, surpassing the immediate context that might actually necessitate external aid. This inclination serves to validate his identity as both a hero and a father capable of accomplishing his objectives unaided. The feminist quest heroine lens highlights the distinct approaches of male and female heroes. While male heroes often operate in isolation and independence to underscore their self-reliance, perpetuate this attribute as a hallmark of heroism, and sustain its ideals, female heroines, instead, champion the significance of connection. They regard it as a wellspring of collective strength that can be harnessed to attain their objectives, particularly when combating the shared oppressions they might confront.

A compelling illustration of the shift towards sisterhood within the narrative of heroism can be found in *Black Widow* (2021), where a potent sense of sisterhood is

interwoven among the female characters. Amid a historical backdrop where female spy narratives have long been overshadowed by male-centric heroism and the male gaze (Timmy Dean 2009, 874), *Black Widow* emerges as a remarkable departure, introducing a range of female characters united by shared experiences of disenfranchisement and oppression. Notably, Natasha Romanoff, Yelena Belova, Melina Vostokoff, Taskmaster, and their fellow Black Widows have all endured the same subjugation under the tyrannical grasp of Dreykov, the leader of Red Room—an insidious Soviet organization that ensnares marginalized women, coercing them into becoming ruthless assassins. Within the confines of the Red Room, these women are subjected to manipulative brainwashing, rendering them obedient pawns in Dreykov’s grand design. Red Room stands as a glaring testament to the manner in which patriarchal systems strip women of their agency and individuality, reducing them to commodities to further the longevity and dominion of men (Agustina et al. 2022, 14). Condemned to exist within a brutal and unforgiving environment, they are ruthlessly exploited to sustain a system that devalues them as mere “trash” awaiting disposal. Each Black Widow is ensnared in the same cycle of oppression, enduring subjugation and abuse.

Throughout the course of the film, the narrative delves into the concept of sisterhood through the portrayal of connections and relationships among the female characters. The journey of liberation is epitomized by Natasha, Yelena, and Melina, who successfully break free from the chains of mind manipulation. However, their emancipation does not lead them to seek personal refuge; instead, they choose to return and extend their aid to their fellow Black Widows still ensnared by Dreykov’s control. This collective solidarity and collaborative effort prove to be fundamental in dismantling the Red Room and ultimately eliminating the source of their prolonged oppression—Dreykov himself. Kyle Killian (2023) contends that *Black Widow* (2021) disrupts the male-dominated female spy narratives by presenting a cohort of mentally linked, less overtly sexualized spies who extends mutual support, enabling them to confront and surmount issues stemming from the patriarchal system and addressing real-world challenges faced by women, including sexism, child trafficking, mansplaining, and misogyny, both within the narrative and in actuality (107). Despite their diverse backgrounds, each woman shares a profound bond and unyielding solidarity, driving them towards their shared objective. Natasha, in particular, forges profound connections with these female allies, united by the mutual experience of being disempowered by the Red Room. Together, they pool their strengths to triumph over their shared harrowing memories, embodying the very essence of sisterhood.

All in all, Elizabeth Galway (2012) contends that a certain level of independence, considered a masculine trait in heroism, is vital for a hero to possess and practice in order to attain and uphold their heroic status (75). Consequently, this often yields a heroic figure who spurns assistance to emphasize self-reliance and resilience, while evading any

hint of vulnerability from seeking aid. In the twenty-first century, female superheroines draw from the feminist quest heroine concept, embracing the potency of sisterhood. The action that disregards the value of teamwork becomes what prevents them from being successful superheroines, challenging the prevailing heroism ideology by converting collaborative strength into a catalyst for the success of the mission at hand. This shift rejects the equation of heroism with independence and instead links heroism with cooperation, effectively detaching it from exclusively hegemonic masculine connotations.

3.4. *HEROINE AS A CRITIQUE OF PATRIARCHY*

In recent times, the role of superheroines has evolved to convey a distinct purpose, diverging from the objectives associated with male heroes. Traditionally, the core aspiration of male heroes remains rooted in the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. Succinctly put, male heroes engage in combat not only to signify the concept of hegemonic masculinity but also to reinforce it as the narrative concludes. Their battles are waged with the intention of ascending to roles of rulership, conquest, or leadership within a specific domain. Consequently, this perpetuates the ideals of control, power, strength, influence, and authority, often culminating in an ending that solidifies these notions, leaving little room for deviation. As Jeffrey Brown (2016) states, heroes are strong, always right, fight the villains, and get the girls at the end (131). In other words, they engage in combat to showcase masculine traits, legitimize them as appropriate behavior, and uphold the patriarchal dominance.

On the other hand, while the feminist quest heroine depiction revolves around heroines who engage in activities that reclaim the power of femininity, I argue that the concept also frame heroines with the purpose to scrutinize the patriarchal dominion over women. Unlike the role of superheroines in the past that was generally used to reinforce patriarchal ideas: as a sexualized object to satisfy the male gaze, superheroines, particularly in the modern era, assume a distinct function by serving as a commentary on the oppressive structures imposed by patriarchy upon women. Through their characters, they embody, communicate, and problematize the struggle of women who confront and confrontational against these societal adversities. While male heroes are relatable to men through shared traits of hegemonic masculinity, female heroines establish relatability based on their collective experience of patriarchal oppression, bridging a connection between genders.

She-Hulk (2022) stands out as a prominent example of narratives that appropriate the superhero genre not to exalt hegemonic masculine values but, rather, to critique and deviate from its conventional understanding, heavily molded by patriarchal influences. Through the character of She-Hulk, the narrative consistently conveys messages about her oppression within the systemic power structure. Unlike her cousin Bruce, who requires time to grapple with his dual identity, Jennifer Walters swiftly harmonizes her

powers. While this might initially appear as a positive portrayal, it underscores the societal oppression that women have historically endured, which could contribute to her adeptness at achieving this power equilibrium. The crux of controlling her Hulk persona lies in managing her emotions. As the character herself asserts, women like her are conditioned throughout their lives to regulate their emotional expressions in alignment with societal expectations.

To be able to reconcile both personalities, Jennifer Walter needs to well manage her emotions. Under the patriarchal society, women seem to be “well-prepared” to become a She-Hulk as they are constantly told to control anger and emotions to be well-practiced at seeming not to mean, not too much, and not too pageful when being catcalled in the street or when incompetent men trying to explain the women’s area of expertise (Abad-Santos 2022, n.p.). Consequently, being part of the oppressed group, she effortlessly toggles between her two forms—unlike her cousin, who has never undergone such systemic oppression and, as a result, requires more time to achieve the same level of control. The path to successfully control the Hulk side that both superheroes have to navigate reflects different configurations of societal oppression that men and women experience under the patriarchal society.

Another salient critique presented by the feminist quest heroine frame through its portrayal of superheroines is the examination of how women, particularly those assuming the role of superheroines, might have flourished in the absence of the systemic oppression propagated by the Euro-American concept of patriarchy. This critical exploration finds its expression through a comparative analysis of the transformative journeys undertaken by Shuri, Captain Marvel, and She-Hulk. The trajectory of them unveils a poignant dichotomy in their respective paths to superheroism. Captain Marvel and She-Hulk, products of a society deeply entrenched in the norms of Euro-American patriarchy, grapple with formidable obstacles as they endeavor to carve out their heroic identities. Their narratives are intricately interwoven with the struggle to validate their capabilities and challenge the constraints of binary gender roles. Captain Marvel, in particular, grapples with the incessant demand to exert control over her powers and emotions, aimed at proving her worthiness even in the absence of her superhuman abilities. Similarly, She-Hulk contends with pervasive public misogyny that targets powerful women, exacerbating the challenges she faces as a heroine.

In contrast, Shuri’s path unfolds within a distinct context. Hailing from Wakanda, a society relatively untouched by the tendrils of Westernized patriarchy, her journey to superheroism unfolds in the absence of these stifling influences. Wakanda is the Afrofuturistic imagination of a space that has never been colonized by Westernized concepts, thus setting it free not only from diseases and poverty but also patriarchy and sexism, making women in Wakanda “fully actualized people” (DeLuca 2022, n.p.). The freedom from such concepts leads to the depiction of how heroism could have been and how

women could have been a part of it. Liberated from the burden of refuting deeply ingrained gender biases, Shuri is empowered to channel her innate strengths and talents without the encumbrance of disproving gender-related presumptions. This comparative analysis prompts a contemplation of the transformative impact that the absence of patriarchal oppression could have on the trajectories of female superheroines. By juxtaposing the experiences of Shuri, Captain Marvel, and She-Hulk through the framework of Feminist Quest Heroine, it is possible to underscore how societal structures can significantly shape and reshape the paths of superheroines, either stifling their potential or fostering their empowerment.

In the case of Shuri, her ascension to the mantle of the new Black Panther, following the passing of her brother, is strikingly unburdened by the gender-related struggles faced by her counterparts. As a citizen of Wakanda—an insular nation unmarred by Western colonization or influence—Shuri’s identity remains untainted by the pervasive Westernized perceptions of gender. In Wakanda, women are exempt from the yoke of patriarchal oppression, excelling across various domains that would typically pose challenges to women entrenched within the Westernized gender construct. For example, skills related to STEM fields and martial prowess—which represent typically male-dominated spheres—mark the depiction of women in Wakanda as they not only participate but even excel. Shuri’s path to heroism is thus defined by a different set of obstacles, distinct from gender-related adversities, such as her personal journey of grieving her brother’s demise. Consequently, the portrayal of heroism within this narrative serves as a powerful commentary on the potential of women unhindered by the binary gender constructs perpetuated by Western patriarchy. The movie presents an alternative society—one where women can wholeheartedly embrace the role of heroines, unrestricted by traditional gender norms reinforced by the patriarchy of the Western world, the type of heroism that women like Captain Marvel and She-Hulk who live in the patriarchal world are led to experience.

The roles of traditional male heroes and twenty-first century superheroines diverge remarkably. Male heroes reinforce the connection between heroism and masculinity, whereas modern superheroines critically challenge and subvert patriarchal power’s impact on heroism, critiquing established gender norms and power dynamics. These superheroines illuminate their struggles against patriarchal constraints, revealing the oppressive grip on heroism’s definition. They also offer an alternate view: heroism in a world untouched by Westernized patriarchy. Their narratives embody a potent critique, exposing patriarchy’s influence and advocating for an empowered, unconstrained concept of heroism. Through their evolution, these superheroines boldly challenge systemic forces and advocate for women’s resilience and potential, providing an inspiring counterpoint to entrenched patriarchal norms.

4. CONCLUSION

Traditionally, heroism's link with masculine traits has cemented it as a primarily "male heroism," perpetuated by historical gender norms. These norms prescribe masculine qualities for heroic acts, such as physical prowess and courage, emphasizing male heroes' strength and bravery. Independence and emotional restraint are expected, shaping male heroes as solitary figures who avoid emotional vulnerability. This traditional male heroism, however, fosters the denigration of femininity, rooted in historical patriarchal norms. This leads to damaging stereotypes and constraints for women within heroic narratives. The damsel in distress trope, emblematic of male heroism, portrays women as dependent and passive, requiring male rescue. Emotional dismissal undermines women's feelings and is dissociated from heroism. Furthermore, female characters often face objectification and sexualization, becoming rewards for male heroes. This analysis underscores how traditional heroism is deeply entwined with masculinity and reinforces gender inequalities.

In the modern era, superheroines at the center of twenty-first century hero narratives often embody the notion of the feminist quest heroine. This approach aims to reshape the conventional model of heroism by reclaiming and challenging the association of femininity with heroic traits. Unlike traditional heroism, which diminishes feminine attributes, the feminist quest heroine seeks to empower qualities traditionally deemed feminine. These women do not need to suppress their femininity or adopt more stereotypically "masculine" traits to be heroic. In fact, it is precisely these aspects of traditional femininity that elevate them to heroic status. Moreover, they are not required to masculinize their physical appearance to fit the heroic mold. Instead, they can embrace a form that is seen as "traditionally feminine", even if it is perceived as delicate or weak. In essence, within the feminist quest heroine framework, female superheroines can maintain a slim and slender physique and even have non-muscular or blonde attributes, challenging the notion that only certain masculine body types embody heroism. This approach subverts traditional gender norms and redefines heroism on their terms.

Feminist quest heroines challenge the emphasis on independence and individualism in male heroism. Instead, it presents female superheroines who value connection, transforming it into sisterhood—a source of collective female power for achieving goals. This subverts the notion of heroism as a solitary pursuit, emphasizing that it is about leveraging the strength found in meaningful relationships and collaborative efforts. Moreover, I add another layer to the concept of a feminist quest heroine criticizing and problematizing patriarchy through the portrayal of heroic women. It exposes how this male-oriented power dynamic creates obstacles for women seeking heroism, whereas such hindrances are not encountered by male heroes. This type of quest demonstrates that femininity can be linked to heroism without needing to reject or conceal it for the

sake of becoming a hero. In essence, it is a transformative approach that challenges traditional norms and offers an empowering perspective on heroism for women.

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