# GENDER STEREOTYPES IN ACTION MOVIES: A STUDY OF WONDER WOMAN AND BLACK WIDOW

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**Abstract.** This study analyzes gender representation in Wonder Woman (2017) and Black Widow (2021), two important works that introduce female characters as main protagonists in the superhero genre. Although both feature strong, independent, and agency-filled female characters, this analysis shows that both films are still influenced by patriarchal elements that objectify women through the representation of the bodies and visual appearance of the main female characters. Using the male gaze theory introduced by Laura Mulvey (1975) and the perspective of gender analysis in media, this study aims to reveal how, despite efforts to empower women, visual depictions still highlight the sexual dimension of the female characters' bodies, reminiscent of visual structures that tend to focus on male fantasy. This study also discusses how these depictions remain trapped in a socio-cultural framework that perceives women in terms of physical beauty and sexual attractiveness. Using a qualitative approach, this study uses content analysis of key scenes in both films to trace gender representation and explore the narratives and characters that develop throughout the story. The results show that although there is room for empowerment and change in the superhero genre, women's bodies are still unavoidably objectified in these films. This research is expected to contribute to developing gender representation theory in film and offer further insight into the transformation of women's roles in Hollywood film narratives.

**Keywords:** Gender representation, Wonder Woman, Black Widow

**Abstrak.** Penelitian ini menganalisis representasi gender dalam film Wonder Woman (2017) dan Black Widow (2021), dua karya penting yang memperkenalkan tokoh perempuan sebagai protagonis utama dalam genre superhero. Meskipun keduanya menampilkan karakter perempuan yang kuat, mandiri, dan penuh agensi, analisis ini menunjukkan bahwa kedua film ini masih dipengaruhi oleh elemen patriarkal yang mengobjektifikasi perempuan melalui representasi tubuh dan penampilan visual karakter utama perempuan. Menggunakan teori male gaze yang diperkenalkan oleh Laura Mulvey (1975) dan perspektif analisis gender dalam media, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap upaya pemberdayaan perempuan, penggambaran visual tetap menonjolkan dimensi seksual dalam tubuh karakter perempuan, mengingatkan pada struktur visual yang cenderung berfokus pada fantasi laki-laki. Penelitian ini juga membahas bagaimana penggambaran ini tetap terjebak dalam kerangka sosial budaya yang mempersepsikan perempuan dalam kaitannya dengan keindahan tubuh dan daya tarik seksual. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif, penelitian ini menggunakan analisis konten terhadap adegan-adegan kunci dalam kedua film untuk menelusuri representasi gender, serta menggali narasi dan karakter yang berkembang di sepanjang cerita. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa meskipun ada ruang untuk pemberdayaan dan perubahan dalam genre superhero, tubuh perempuan masih merupakan objek yang tidak terhindarkan dalam film-film ini. Penelitian ini diharapkan dapat memberi kontribusi pada pengembangan teori representasi gender dalam film serta menawarkan wawasan lebih lanjut mengenai transformasi peran perempuan dalam narasi film Hollywood.

**Kata Kunci:** Representasi Gender, Wonder Woman, Black Wido

## INTRODUCTION

Films play an important role as a cultural medium that entertains, reflects, and shapes societal values (Harbord, 2022). In the action film genre, gender representation is often a relevant issue to analyze (Williams, 1999). Female characters in action films are generally faced with stereotypes that reinforce patriarchal ideas, such as being portrayed as male supporters or hypersexualized figures who only serve as visual appeal. (Mulvey, 1975). However, in recent decades, the film industry has begun introducing more complex and empowered female characters, such as Wonder Woman (2017) and Black Widow (2021), which have sparked new discussions about gender representation in action films (Tavares, 2022).

Wonder Woman, directed by Patty Jenkins, is often considered a milestone in the representation of female characters in Hollywood (Karlyn, 2018). The film depicts Diana Prince as a physically and morally strong figure without sacrificing her humanity or feminine softness (Ghaisani, 2020). On the other hand, Black Widow, directed by Cate Shortland, provides an in-depth look at Natasha Romanoff's background as a secret agent who has often been reduced to a supporting character in other Marvel films (Sherick, 2021). This film is an opportunity to reconstruct Natasha's characterization and offer a new perspective on female characters in action films (Garthwaite et al., 2025).

However, criticism of the representation of female characters in both films has persisted (Arfanaldy, 2024). Some have pointed out that while these two characters are portrayed as empowering, they are not entirely free from the trappings of old stereotypes (Azis & Sunra, 2022). The costumes they wear, the choice of dialogue, and the focus on physical aspects still give off a sense of visual exploitation (Smith et al., 2019). This raises questions about how modern action films can break gender stereotypes or whether these changes are merely superficial adaptations to market demands (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996).

This study aims to analyze how the characterizations of Wonder Woman and Black Widow reflect or challenge gender stereotypes in action films. It examines narrative and cinematic elements that influence the construction of women's representation and assesses the contribution of both films to changes in gender discourse in popular media. This study is expected to enrich the discourse on women's representation in film and provide new perspectives on how popular media interacts with evolving social norms. This study has a novelty in its comparative approach by comparing two female characters from two major Hollywood franchises, the DC Universe and the Marvel Cinematic Universe. This analysis combines feminist film theory and cultural studies to explore the dynamics of gender

representation in depth (Sutherland & Feltey, 2017). This study not only discusses how the two characters are presented narratively and visually but also how their representations are received by society as a new discourse in modern action films. This approach is expected to provide relevant theoretical and practical contributions to the study of film, gender, and popular culture.

**METHOD**

This study uses a qualitative approach with a content analysis method to explore gender representation in the films Wonder Woman (2017) and Black Widow (2021) (Pratama et al., 2021). A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth analysis of both films' narrative, visual, and cinematic elements that shape female characters. The focus of the analysis includes the depiction of the main characters, action scenes, dialogues, and visual symbols relevant to gender representation theory (Chow, 2001). Primary data analysis will be carried out based on the main scenes and dialogues in the film concerning the male gaze theory (Mulvey, 1975) and the theory of cultural representation in her book (Brooks, 2002) entitled Postfeminisms (Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms). Through this analysis, it is hoped that these two female characters are manifested in the context of the Hollywood film industry, which is dominated by patriarchal norms.

In data collection, systematic observation of important film scenes will be used as the main basis for analysis. Additional data comes from literature reviews, film reviews, and relevant journals on gender representation and feminist films. The analysis will identify key themes, such as gender stereotypes, narrative roles, and visual objectification of women in both films. Triangulation techniques are also applied in this study to validate the analysis results by comparing various data sources and film critics' reviews, strengthening the findings' accuracy (Henderson, 2011). This study aims to reveal the extent to which Wonder Woman and Black Widow have succeeded in deconstructing or simply reproducing patriarchal discourse in gender representation in modern action films.

**RESULT**

This study examines gender representation in two highly popular superhero films, Wonder Woman (2017) and Black Widow (2021), focusing on how these two female protagonists are portrayed through narrative, visuals, and character construction in the context of a male-dominated film industry. The analysis shows that although both films reflect progress in the representation of women as strong and empowered heroes, both are still trapped in several patriarchal elements that continue to maintain the visual objectification of female characters

(Hajariah & Briandana, 2013). In Wonder Woman, Diana Prince (Gal Gadot) is depicted as a brave, intelligent, and physically powerful hero. Through the film's narrative that focuses on Diana's journey to uphold truth, justice, and equality, Wonder Woman depicts women in a central role rarely found in action films that are usually dominated by male characters (Hall, 1997). However, although Diana's character is very strong in the narrative, she is still dressed in a costume that emphasizes her body as a visual object, a concept explained by (Mulvey, 1975) in his theory of the male gaze, where women are often used as objects to satisfy the gaze of male audiences.

In terms of character depiction, although Wonder Woman serves as a strong protagonist, her very revealing costume still shows the sexual aspect of the character. This visual view reminds us of the male gaze theory expressed by (Mulvey, 1975), which states that classic films tend to present women as objects for male visual gratification. Even when these films present women in empowered positions, women's bodies are often exploited visually to attract the audience's attention, even though the character herself depicts strength and independence that defies dominant norms (Akhtar & Rasul, 2025). Therefore, although the narrative of the Wonder Woman film shows female empowerment, the visual depiction of the character still reflects the dominant patriarchal discourse in the film industry (Hall, 1997).

On the other hand, Black Widow (2021) offers a slightly different approach but is still rooted in the Hollywood action film paradigm. The character of Natasha Romanoff (Scarlett Johansson) is more formed through a narrative that combines physical strength and intellectual and emotional dynamics from the character's background (Killian, 2023). This study shows that although Black Widow provides more space for emotional exploration and development of female characters compared to other superhero films, some visual representations still show clear elements of body exposure. In several scenes, Natasha's character still wears a costume that shows off her body, even though she is a highly skilled secret agent. This can be understood within the framework of analysis of the depiction of women's bodies in action films, where, despite their toughness, female characters are still often exposed visually to strengthen the audience's appeal (Tasker, 2012).

The characterization in Black Widow is also not completely free from the influence of patriarchal culture that requires women to appear strong and visually seductive (Brown, 1996). Of course, Natasha is depicted as an agent with intelligence, high combat skills, and a figure full of emotion. However, the existence of a visual narrative that emphasizes her physical appearance remains relevant to analyze (Henderson, 2011). The visual discourse in this film reminds us of Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation, which argues that the construction

of meaning and representation in media—including film—comes from a larger social discourse. Although this film depicts women in a richer dimension, Natasha's character remains trapped in a particular visual narrative shaped by the tension between empowerment and objectification.

In both films, the representation of strong and independent women shows an attempt to create space for female characters in a genre synonymous with men as heroes (Gill, 2007). However, although we can see empowerment in these characters, they still work within a patriarchal framework that is inseparable from Hollywood films. The representations found in Wonder Woman and Black Widow illustrate that although female characters receive more attention and are portrayed as heroes, the depiction of the body remains an inseparable element of action films, even though an empowering narrative surrounds it (Brown, 1996). These two films provide important examples of how the film industry is slowly changing gender representation, even though there are still visual elements that point to gender inequality. This shows how film representation often overlooks social realities regarding gender equality. These films open up new opportunities for female protagonists in a genre that men dominate. However, the existence of patriarchal values recorded in the bodies and physical appearance of these female characters cannot be eliminated. (Tasker, 2012) The representations in Wonder Woman and Black Widow remind us of the tensions in modern popular culture, where women can simultaneously be shown as strong figures and remain visual objects.

Through the results of this analysis, it can be concluded that although these female characters are increasingly positioned in empowerment narratives, their representation in the visualization of the body and appearance still leads to the patriarchal discourse that has long dominated Hollywood films (Hall, 1997). This creates a space for us to question further the extent to which these films create change in gender representation or reinforce old patterns that already exist. Based on these results, discussions about gender representation on the big screen still need to be discussed, especially in terms of seeing the evolution of fairer and more complex representations of women in action films.

## DISCUSSION

The research results analyzed in the previous section show that both Wonder Woman (2017) and Black Widow (2021) can be considered milestones in the representation of women in the male-dominated superhero film genre. However, the depiction of female characters in these two films is not entirely free from the patriarchal construction that still haunts many popular media works. Although both films succeed in presenting strong, independent, and

empowered female characters, the visual depiction of the female characters' bodies in costumes and action scenes still reflects practices that are still heavily influenced by traditional gender norms, especially related to the objectification of women's bodies. As explained by Mulvey (1975) through the male gaze theory, women are often depicted as visual objects for the satisfaction of men's visual fantasies, and this can be seen in both main characters, even though they are shown with extraordinary strength in the narrative.

In Wonder Woman, the character of Diana Prince/Wonder Woman becomes a symbol of female empowerment. However, visual analysis shows that even though she is positioned as a strong main hero, she is still wearing a costume that shows off her body and emphasizes visual aesthetics, which is inseparable from the patriarchal view that objectifies women (Mulvey, 1975). This shows that even though the female character's role is very strong in narrative terms, their bodies are still constructed as objects that male audiences can see and consume. The use of Wonder Woman's revealing costume explains the tension between the empowerment narrative and visual expression that still maintains the visual principles of other male-dominated superhero films.

The same phenomenon is also seen in the character of Natasha Romanoff in Black Widow (2021). Although this film emphasizes the complexity of Natasha's character through a personal narrative that explores the character's background and emotions, several moments explicitly reveal her body, underlining her femininity that meets the standards of visual beauty. As stated (Tasker, 2012), the female body in action films is often an important aspect consumed by the audience, no matter how strong the character is depicted in the narrative. Natasha's costume and the action scenes that focus on her body show the tension between the strength and beauty of the body, which simultaneously reduces the character's complexity to a visual object that can be depicted.

These concepts assert that despite the shift in how these films depict female characters in a genre usually dominated by men, the visualization of the seductive female body remains substantially dominant. (Hall, 1997) analysis shows that representation in media such as films is not a real mirror but a social construction that can shape and influence audience perceptions of gender roles. Although there is a change in the depiction of women who are no longer just supporters or objects, the main female characters are still channeled through patriarchal narratives. They are faced with beauty and bodies that are used to attract the audience's attention. The change in representation in this film plays more of a role as a small step towards gender equality. However, there are limitations in eliminating the patriarchal dominance that is already attached.

However, an argument can be made that despite the apparent patriarchal influence, the presence of female protagonists in Wonder Woman and Black Widow also signifies a form of empowerment for female characters. The positive side of these two films is that they provide a bigger stage for women to appear as companions and as main characters with agency and power to act independently. In this case, the empowerment of women shown occurs in the narrative and how these characters manage conflict situations, build relationships between characters, and demand justice and truth. This depiction can be seen as a positive step towards a change in gender representation, although the existing aesthetic process still influences it.

The changes in the Hollywood film industry, especially in the superhero film genre, are an important example of the fact that although there are changes, these changes are gradual and cannot completely oppose the established social value system by choosing female characters as the main heroes, film creators open space for more inclusive and fair storytelling regarding gender roles. Nevertheless, this needs to be accompanied by a more radical shift in how films are produced and how society views women. This is in line with (Gill, 2007) argument about postfeminism, which states that although there has been visible progress in the representation of women in the media, these steps are often permissive and not enough to change prevailing norms significantly. These films' limitations are maintaining a strong view of the female body but remaining trapped in the old socio-cultural discourse.

Thus, while Wonder Woman and Black Widow have paved the way for female superheroes in the superhero world, there is still much work to be done to create representations that are completely free from patriarchal stereotypes. As important steps towards gender equality in film, these films show that women can have strong central roles. However, we also cannot disregard the fact that visual representation still greatly impacts how the public sees female characters. The future of female representation in action films will depend largely on how the film industry responds to these social critiques and how they can create more complex images of women without sacrificing their subjectivity or bodies.

**CONCLUSION**

From the analysis done on the films Wonder Woman (2017) and Black Widow (2021), it can be concluded that although both films have succeeded in introducing strong, independent, and agency-based female characters, the visual representations in both still contain unavoidable patriarchal elements. The depiction of the female character's body, especially in costumes and action scenes, still maintains a male perspective that often objectifies women, even though they are positioned as the main hero with an empowering narrative. This reflects how gender

representation in films is not only dependent on narrative but is also influenced by a larger social discourse about the beauty of the female body, which continues to be maintained despite progress in the representation of female characters as protagonists.

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