Gender Portrayal in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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Abstract

This paper will explore the way gender is portrayed within the popular Marvel Cinematic Universe. It will explore literature and studies regarding gender roles as well as how they relate to the relatively few female characters within this universe as well as issues relating to gender within the Superhero genre as a whole. This paper will also look at how female characters are treated by other characters, their relative importance, the gendered stereotypes that they are bound to, and the relationship between the fans of Marvel and the Marvel company itself. This paper will make an argument that while the Marvel Cinematic Universe has made steps toward equal gender representation, many issues relating to this can still be found within it and must be addressed and solved.

Introduction to Gender Portrayal Within the Marvel Cinematic Universe

Female fans of Marvel have long claimed that the company does not show equal representation of women in its media than it does of men. The view is far from an objective fact, however. Many men as well as Marvel representatives either deny this claim or else seek to justify it. This argument is very controversial and has been an important debate within the Superhero genre for decades, and many fans and scholars have debated one side or the other. This paper explores both sides in order to make an informed argument on the issue.

The discussion below will recognize the impact that media can have on society as a whole. Pop culture has a large impact on people's opinions and personalities, particularly during their formative years. The Superhero genre is diverse in that in most respects it appears equally popular to both teenage and adult audiences. The Marvel Cinematic Universe, in particular, can be seen this way, and has some of the highest box office numbers within the movie industry as a whole. Teenagers and older children are watching these movies and becoming lifelong fans during the years that are central to developing their identities and opinions. Because of this, the Marvel Cinematic Universe has a huge impact on the formation of these identities. While Marvel seems to be aware of this and almost always appears to show good morals and values outweighing bad ones, one area in which they are lacking is the equal representation of female characters.

To fully explore this, we must first come to a conclusion on the definition of "equal." This concept goes further than the pure numbers of female characters versus male characters. While this plays a part in it, it is also about how the characters are shown in terms of how they interact with other characters, how similar these characters are to characters of the same gender, and how they are depicted visually. Once we can accept this definition of "equal" gender representation, it becomes clear that currently the gender portrayal and representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe is not equal. In order for the Marvel Cinematic Universe to have equal representation of both genders, it must address and find solutions to all of these issues. The Marvel Cinematic Universe shows unequal portrayal of the genders, which is harmful to audiences as well as society as a whole.

An Evaluation of Gender Roles Within the Marvel Cinematic Universe

 Gender roles have always been prominent in the male-dominated realm of Superheroes, which can be clearly seen by observing the Marvel Cinematic Universe. As Carolyn Cocca states in her book 'Superwomen : Gender, Power, and Representation', "They (female Superheroes) are mostly white, able-bodied, and heterosexual. They are conventionally attractive, strong, and capable. They do the same things that male superheroes do. Still, and unlike male superheroes, attention is called to their gender both within the texts themselves as well as outside of them" (215). According to Stephanie Green in her scholarly paper 'Fantasy, Gender, and power in *Jessica Jones*', there is a prominent display of toxic masculinity and rape culture in *Jessica Jones,* which represents and critiques the representation of gender in the Marvel Cinematic Universe as a whole (175). Dr. Brenna Clarke Gray writes that there are many issues within the world of the Marvel Comic books that are widely unaddressed, which contributes to the Marvel Cinematic Universe as these issues are transferred from the movies' source material (the comic books) to the movies themselves (2).

 One of these issues within both the Marvel comics and the Marvel Cinematic Universe is that women are not widely accepted as part of the super hero industry. In a powerful quote, Production Chief of Marvel Victoria Alonso states: "I grew up in production and visual effects, which is a man's world. You have to own your place. When I walk into a room, I do a head count of males and females. When I leave, I say it. Every room, every time. I get no pride, no power by being by myself. I'm happy to hold the banner, but I don't want to be there alone." Dr. Brenna Clarke Gray writes that although the Marvel Cinematic Universe tries to instill values into its young fanbase, these values are traditionally male-bodied and are geared for how white men exclusively should act (5). Perhaps we would have had strong female characters within the Marvel Cinematic Universe more recently if not for some measures conducted by Sony Pictures: "Sony Pictures would continue to finance, distribute, own, and have final creative control of the *Spider-Man* films. (...) by November 2015 the Venom and Sinister Six films, as well as spin-offs based on female characters in the Spider-Man universe, were no longer moving forward" ("Marvel Cinematic Universe").

 While representation of women in the Marvel Cinematic Universe is far less common than representation of men, another issue is that the roles of female superheroes are vastly different than those of male superheroes because of the gendered stereotypes the female characters are bound in. While the new *Captain Marvel* movie has been applauded for promoting a strong female Superhero, it's source material shows less powerful feminism: "In the comics, Carol Danvers spent decades as Ms. Marvel after gaining her powers, a conscious nod to Ms. Magazine. In the '70s, the character even left a job at NASA to run a feminist publication called Woman while wearing Gloria Steinem–inspired scarves. (Paradoxically, she spent her nights fighting crime in a getup that was basically a bathing suit)" (Dockterman, 49). Expanding on this, a study conducted by Erik Palmer coded Marvel comics from the year 1961 to the year 2004 in terms of gender roles that were shown on their covers and found that harmful gender roles such as the prominence of the females versus the prominence of the males were becoming less prevalent very quickly in the earlier years, but have since stagnated (12). These gender roles can also be found in the popular movie *Watchmen* (which is not a Marvel movie and is instead based on the *Watchmen* comics, yet still highly relevant to the depiction of women in the Superhero genre), where the only strong female character, superhero Silk Spectre, is seen almost purely as a sexual being (through her actions/personality as well as her costume), as well as the weakest member of the male-dominated superhero group (Brownie and Graydon 140).

Solutions to the Evaluated Problems

Some claim that solutions to the problem of harmful gender roles within the Marvel Cinematic Universe (and thus the Superhero industry as a whole) are right around the corner, while others claim we still have a long way to go. *Jessica Jones* has been lauded for its display of a strong female character who is both physically strong and displays no dependence on a male character, which seems to be a huge step in the right direction: "Following the release of *Jessica Jones*, David Priest at c|net wrote about how the series rescues 'Marvel from itself … Jessica Jones takes big steps forward in terms of theme, craft and diversity. It's a good story first, and a superhero show second. And for the first time, the MCU seems like it matters. Our culture needs stories like this'" ("Marvel Cinematic Universe"). Stephanie Green suggests in her paper that Jessica Jones is the beginning of a new era of female Superheroes, and that positive change for feminism is on the horizon of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (180). Captain Marvel follows in the footsteps of Jessica Jones, while bringing strong female superheroes to the big screen: "Danvers isn't concerned with making her male fans feel comfortable, a point of contention among viewers who complained that the character doesn't smile enough when the first trailer dropped. Captain Marvel exemplifies a completely different kind of female strength, one that some men may find more threatening" (Dockterman 49).

Others claim that Marvel will listen to its fans and that the Marvel Cinematic Universe will reflect the social change that the fans wish to see if they continue to be vocal about it: "You have to build a foundation so you can see the floors rise, right? Having people in front of and behind the camera that represent who we are as a culture and as an audience is exactly what is needed. This is not a political move for us. We answer to the fans, we answer to the characters. We have built this company on that philosophy; this is what the company is about" (McClintock). This sentiment is echoed in Erik Palmer's study, in which the conclusion suggests that the comic book industry shifts with the times, so while women may be more sexualized and depicted in a sexist light currently, this is purely to cater for their demographic of older, sexually motivated men, which suggests that perhaps if female and feminist fans continue to voice their support for strong female characters, the comic industry will hear this and shift towards using fewer harmful gender roles (12). Dr. Brenna Clarke Gray, however, disagrees with this, as she writes that it is not the job of the fans but the job of the company to identify the harmful flaws found within the media it produces and correct itself (4).

Identity can be as important to a community as it is to individuals, and if your gender is not accurately represented within an industry, it can strip the power of your gender as a whole. Although Watchmen does not occur in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, it is interlocked with the subject of gender portrayal in the Superhero genre as a whole. Brownie and Graydon write "Having cornered the rogue vigilante, the police's first instinct is to 'get his mask off!' knowing that this will immediately reduce his power. Rorschach, whose civilian face is not explicitly revealed to the reader until his unmasking, is suddenly neutralized. The antihero, whose strength came in part from the ambiguity of his masked face, is reduced to a powerless 'little zero'" (141). Men within the superhero media industry have been stripping the identity of women by shoving what could be powerful role models for them into sexualized gendered constructs, which Dr. Brenna Clarke Grey brings up in her paper in which she also makes the point that men in this industry need to be more responsible about recognizing toxic masculinity and themes of sexism within the media surrounding superheroes (7). While Jessica Jones and Captain Marvel may show progress towards equal representation of

women within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Stephanie Green writes that we still have a long way to go before we reach that point (182).

An Argument for Marvel to Portray Gender Equality in the Marvel Cinematic Universe
Now that we have established that Marvel does not portray gender equality within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, it seems clear that this must be addressed and fixed. Marvel needs to take responsibility for these issues and make a visible effort to resolve them. Many issues relating to gender equality can be found within the movies in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. As a whole, these show that the women featured in the Marvel Cinematic Universe are not given equal portrayal to the men shown in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Women make up a large portion of Marvel's fanbase and are unfairly portrayed by the company. Not only is this an issue, but many children view the Marvel movies and comic books as well, and are being taught harmful ideals about gender equality because of these movies.

One issue relating to gender portrayal that can be found in the Marvel Cinematic Universe is the number of female characters compared to the number of male characters portrayed. Despite having dozens of movies, only Captain Marvel is centered around a female superhero, and it has only been released very recently. The only female superhero part of the beloved Avengers team is Black Widow, and she was killed off in Avengers: Endgame. This is disappointing, as equal portrayal begins with having enough female characters that female fans of the Marvel Cinematic Universe are able to feel represented in the Superhero genre (Cocca 5).

Another issue relating to equal gender portrayal within these movies can be seen in how these female Superheroes interact with the male Superheroes. While Black Widow and Captain Marvel are generally accepted by the Avengers as part of the team, there are still moments where their strength, power, and capability come as a shock to male characters. They are seen as abnormal because of how powerful they are for a woman. When male characters within the movies display equal levels of strength and power, it is very rarely seen as shocking by other characters. The only reason the female Superheroes are seen as particularly shocking and impressive is because it is unbelievable to other characters that any woman could be strong and powerful enough to rival a man. To show a female Superhero as being powerful for a woman automatically assumes that most or all other women are weak and in need of protection by men. This lens through which the female Superheroes are viewed automatically shows bias and sexism, as the Superheroes should be seen as impressive just for their powers, not because of the fact that they are a woman.

There also exists the issue of how similar the female Superheroes are to each other. If every female Superhero has a copy and paste personality, they are not an accurate representation of women. Black Widow and Captain Marvel are very similar in terms of personality. They are both stoic fighters who don't take anything from anybody (Dockterman 4). While this is perfectly fine for one female character, it becomes an issue when both of the female Superheroes who are portrayed in these movies seem to have strangely similar personalities. The burden of representation is put on the shoulders of these two Superheroes, as they are the only two female Superheroes in the main story of The Avengers (Dockterman 2). Because of this, they should display far more personality traits as well as different characteristics from each other. Female fans of Superheroes are looking to these characters to be accurately represented, which does not happen if the only two female main characters show almost the exact same personality traits. This becomes particularly problematic when looking at the wide variety of male personalities in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Steve

Rogers is an all-American boy-next-door, filled with patriotism and good morals. Tony Stark is a snarky tech genius who runs a huge company and always has a witty comment ready. Bruce Banner is a kind fatherly type who struggles against his temper. Thor Odinson is a strong and honorable warrior whose ignorance about Earth often provides comic relief. When looking at all of these very different and strong personalities, one begins to wonder why the only two female main characters are not only given so little personality, but also share many of these few personality traits.

Another issue prevalent in the Marvel Cinematic Universe is the visual depiction of the female Superheroes. Black Widow has largely been criticised for her skin-tight catsuit that she is always shown in when in combat (Brownie and Graydon 4). Not only is her uniform skin-tight, it is almost always unzipped to show off her cleavage. This is impractical for combat as well as something the character herself seems unlikely to wear. As the only female Superhero originally part of the Avengers team, many female fans were very disappointed in this sexualized appearance. Captain Marvel's uniform is slightly better and more practical, although still skin-tight. Although not a main character, Scarlet Witch also depicts a very sexualized uniform, as she is depicted wearing a tight corset that shows large amounts of cleavage. Gamora, the only female Superhero that is a main character in Guardians of the Galaxy, is also depicted in skin-tight clothing and a corset meant to show off her cleavage. This is a common theme found in the uniforms of Marvel's female Superheroes. These outfits are obviously meant to capture male attention, perhaps so that they will forgive the sin of a female character being given a starring role. These female characters are so strongly sexualized that it negates their strength (Brownie and Graydon 7). Instead of portraying strong female characters for women and girls to look up to, Marvel portrays sexualized women to keep men interested and satisfied. These characters cannot be feminist or portray equal representation for women as long as they are subjected to the male gaze and sexualization.

An Argument Against a False Claim

Many Marvel supporters will claim that these women have the right to wear sexual uniforms and act the way they do, just as modern women have the right to do so. Many claim that this is what "true" feminism is- accepting that women can act or dress in ways that other women claim are anti-feminist, because these women have control over themselves and their bodies and should not be looked down on because of it. While this is true of real women, I would argue that this does not apply to characters. These characters are created and designed, therefore their personality traits and uniforms are not their personal choice but forced upon them by their creators (Cocca 2). It would be fine if one or two female characters acted similar or dressed in a sexualized way- with the caveat that there were more female characters. If there are only two or three female main characters in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and they are all sexualized and depicted as having oddly similar personalities, this is not accurate or fair representation of women (Cocca 6). If there were as many female main characters in this universe as there are male characters, then it would not be an issue if one or two of them dressed in a sexual way or showed similar personality traits.

A Summarization of the Argument

The Marvel Cinematic Universe has a huge media presence, and thus greatly influences fans of the genre. The stated issues clearly show that Marvel does not give equal representation and portrayal to its female characters compared to its male characters. This is damaging to women everywhere as well as fans of the genre who are subjected to this inequality. Although Marvel has

made an effort to show more representation of female Superheroes in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, it has a long way to go before it reaches true equal portrayal of both genders within its movies.

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