

Women and Action: The Representation of Hollywood Superhuman Film *Wonder Woman*

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In the past seven years, a major number of superhero action-adventure films such as *Batman*, *X-Men*, *Fantastic Four*, *Spiderman*, *Hellboy* (1 and 2), *Hulk*, *Ironman*, *Avengers* and host of other such ‘men’ have flown, stomped, fallen and swung across the screens in Hollywood (Stabile, 2009). In fact, Richard J Gray II, a French film theorist & Betty Kaklamanidou, a lecturer in film history and theory in the film studies department at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece describes a superhero as someone who usually possesses a combination of mental and physical strength more than an ordinary human being and fights evils succeeding against all odds (Gray & Kaklamanidou, 2011). Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary (8th Edition) defines ‘hero’ as a person, especially a man, who is admired by many people for doing something brave or good, whereas ‘superhero’ is a heroic character with a universal, selfless pro-social mission; who possess superpower – extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical and/or mental skills (including mystical abilities). From the definitions, the differences between ‘Hero’ and ‘Superhero’ are vividly discerned. Since time, the world has been witnessing the emergence of such superheroes and their roles are basically adapted from comic books published years ago. However, the comic world is filled with male heroes who either fight crime or are patriots fighting for the nation. American activist and writer Gloria Steinem proclaimed while commenting on the mythic

status of a comic heroine 'Wonder Woman' in the introduction to the book *Wonder Woman* (1972) that mythology is a collective human memory (Steinem, 1972). However, characters in superhero films are presented in a stereotypical manner where they either present male heroes and female damsels such as in *Superman Returns* (2006), the *Spider-Man* films (2002, 2004, 2007) or else allow a few female superheroes to be a part of male-run-crime-fighting collective, such as in *X-Men* Films (2000, 2003, 2006), the *Fantastic Four* franchise (2005, 2007), *Black Panther* (2018) and *Avengers* (1998, 2015, 2018).

The first comic heroine to make an appearance in a DC Comic book was 'Wonder Woman', created in 1941. *Wonder Woman* is one of the most visible and powerful super heroines ever created. Born out of feminist ideals and concepts, she represents and embodies feminism and the strength of women. Also, her creation at the height of the turn of the 19th/ 20th century during an intense feminist movement was meant to resonate with women at a time when they were first beginning to get out of the kitchen to join the workforce. Although Wonder Woman's story has changed over the years, her feminist background and ideals are still evident. According to Forbes Media, the date 15th May 2017 is historical in Hollywood in several aspects – first, the world witnessed the release of the very first feminist superhero movie- *Wonder Woman*; second, a movie based on the comic female superhero character for the first time began soaring high with grand success (*IMDb* rating- 8/10 and *Rotten Tomatoes* rating – 92%); third, for the first time, a female director is entrusted with 149 million USD for the movie. As the fourth aspect, the film fraternity experienced a great directorial skill of a lady director named Patty Jenkins who successfully provided a blockbuster female superhero movie. In the magazine entitled '*American Scholar*', (1944), explanation of William Moulton Marston, creator of 'Wonder Woman', is given as: "Not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, and power. Not wanting to be

girls, they don't want to be tender, submissive, peace – loving as good women are. Women's strong qualities have become despised because of their weakness. The obvious remedy is to create a feminine character with all the strength of 'Superman' plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman." (Marston, 1994). There is no question that the 2017 film, *Wonder Woman* displays a story shaped by feminist ideas; however, it also represents some strong anti-feminist components too.

Wonder Woman, as created by psychologist William Moulton Marston was an 'Amazonian warrior', in line with Greek mythologies. The Amazonian background story has changed severally in the past. However, according to the original story, Wonder Woman comes from a feminist utopian fiction, on an island known as 'Paradise' where she and her people, the Amazonians, have lived for centuries. The Amazonians are athletic, beautiful and have lived without any male influence for centuries. Before then, they were enslaved by Hercules, but their Queen Hippolyta freed them with the help of Aphrodite. Aphrodite insisted that they should wear bracelets made of 'Amazonium metal', the strongest metal on Earth, as a reminder that they should never submit to men's domination and to always be aware of their deceit (Bunn, 1997). When a British army captain and spy named Steve Trevor crashed into the island 'Paradise' after a flight accident, the queen held a contest to choose a 'Wonder Woman', who would ensure the safe return of the man into 'his world'. Her daughter, Diana won the contest and assumed the role of Wonder Woman (Delaney, 2004). She was given a costume with stripes and stars of the US flag, the Lasso of Truth and a 'Tiara'. Some of these costumes and indeed their designs and powers changed over the years. According to Marston, Wonder Woman was created to establish a standard among children and young people of a courageous woman. Marston believed that women had a greater competency to rule a peaceful society as compared to men due to the former's nature of affection and inclination to love and therefore, would use love

as a weapon rather than those that would result to war and violence (Delaney, 2004). For Marston, these attributes of love and affection were not to be equated with weakness but instead to strength. The message was particularly targeted at young boys and girls to inspire self-confidence and achievements in traditionally male-dominated professions in the latter and to combat the notion that women were inferior to men in the former. Hence, *Wonder Woman* is widely perceived to be a psychological propaganda tool, for the growing feminist movement of the 1940s. She was to be strong, independent, patriotic and beautiful according to the beauty standards of the time. While still retaining her warrior traits, 'Wonder Woman' was also supposed to have socially accepted feminine traits such as love and loyalty. Anyhow, at the end of the movie, the female 'superwoman' named Diana is seen to stay in the world dominated by a patriarchal society. In a way, Diana is portrayed subjugated to the social order laid down by the male members of society. Hence, though the movie broke such records as mentioned above, considering such instances, it is interesting to analyse whether the movie can be actually considered as that which broke down the 'glass ceiling' – whether it portrayed women as equal to men. The same can be done in many ways, especially through the analysis of the poster of the movie, its dialogues, and the costumes and actions of character 'Diana' or 'Wonder Woman'.

Looking at the posters of superhero/super heroine movies, Kevin O'Keeffe (2015), an Irish politician says in his article on *Mic Network Inc.* titled "*The Problem with How Superhero Movies Treat Women, in 11 Posters*" that if you want to know what is wrong with how superhero movies treat women, you need to look no further than the posters (O'Keeffe, 2015). O'Keeffe highlighted how the posters and banners of Hollywood Superhero films represent men and women. Though it is men who play the main role, women lead who help those men 'superheroes' are also showcased in such posters but in a

different way. As pointed out by film theorist Jermaine Dickerson on Twitter, neither the DVD nor Blu-Ray cover for *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) home release features Scarlett Johansson as *Black Widow* or Elizabeth Olsen as *Scarlet Witch*. In fact, it appears as if there are no women at all in those movies and just four male 'Avengers' plus the villain 'Ultron' himself (O'Keeffe, 2015). O'Keeffe later goes ahead to have a look at the posters of *The Fantastic Four* (2007), where he finds that one of the main woman superhero characters of the film, Kate Mara, is presented on the poster in a vulgar way. Her pose likely looked familiar to anyone who has seen a movie poster featuring a woman in the last decade – it emphasized curves and body over battle readiness – comparing Mara's angle to her male co-stars. Mara's pose has been the default pose and was since the last *Fantastic Four* reboot. Thus Women are given a 'unique' or a default pose even in the posters of superhero films. Such representations only seem to reveal the sexual aspects of women and not her readiness to fight against evil (O'Keeffe, 2015). Things changed when it reached to the posters of superhero movies like *Thor: The Dark World* (2013) where the women characters of the movie didn't appear in a poster for showcasing her exaggerated curves, but simply to lie safe in the hands of the male superhero (O'Keefe, 2015). The same style can also be seen in the poster of the movie *Ironman 3* (2013). However, contrary to what O'Keeffe said, the posters of *Wonder Woman*, on the other hand, stood different. The woman character Diana is portrayed in a way as if she looks 'powerful', having a raged face and glowing eyes. Though most of the posters of the movie released by DC Entertainments show her standing with her sword and shield, there are exemptions, as there are posters which exaggerated the curves of Diana's body. The costume of the character played an important role here, as even in the posters where Diana looked angry and powerful, her short or small costume revealed some parts of her body making some people comment the poster 'vulgar'. Hence, the default notion of

showing women in a similar pose with curves exaggerated is followed by the movie *Wonder Woman* too. The posters which stood out different lose its uniqueness because of the costume worn by Wonder Woman.

Considering the 'short' costume again, it is ironical to note that Diana is a fighter or an Amazonian who was born to fight as per the storyline. This is because fighters, especially those who use weapons like sword and shields cover their body as much as they can in order to protect themselves from cuts and wounds. In the movie *Wonder Woman*, Diana is given a dress that covers only half of her body, i.e., from her chest to the upper part of her thighs keeping her head, neck, hands, and legs vulnerable to enemy attacks. This is not the case with Diana alone, as all the women living on the island called Amazon followed the same dressing style. When Diana reached the land of humans with Steve Trevor, he insists her to change her costume saying "You are not wearing anything right now". This clearly shows that even the movie itself considers Diana to be not wearing anything. When Diana is provided with a European dress by the secretary of Trevor, though she seemed to be trying out different outfits that covered her entire body, she didn't seem happy about them and asks "How can a woman fight in those dresses?" Maybe director Patty Jenkins tried to convince the audience through such a dialogue that Diana is wearing a short costume just because she is a fighter, but that doesn't seem to make much sense. Even if Diana needed a costume that helps her to fight easily, she could have used a costume that covers her whole body but still flexible for making quick body movements. Costumes worn by men superheroes in movies such as *Captain America*, *Ironman*, *Thor*, etc. are examples of such costumes. All these heroes wear costumes that cover their entire body from neck to toes, which extend from head (helmet) to toes in the case of *Captain America* and *Ironman*. It remains unclear why is that only 'Wonder Woman' required a short dress in order to fight properly. Same the case with all the women fighters of Amazon.

Analysing the dialogues of *Wonder Woman*, the dialogues of Diana in the initial part of the movie seemed quite funny, because of her 'foolishness'. Since Diana was born and raised in a mysterious island away from the real world, she is unaware of what all happened and what is happening in the human world. Hence, when Diana reaches the land of humans or the land of men, she is new to many things. This makes her behave like a child such as at instances when she sees a new city (London), European outfits, a car, a human baby, etc. Her temporary childishness is reflected in her dialogues that add humour to the movie. Since the movie came out as something that highlights the power of women, the protagonist of the movie itself behaving like a child may make the viewer's ascertain that she acts foolishly when she sees something new. Diana's dialogues like "Baby! A Baby!" etc. shows the same. Diana's other dialogues such as "Why is no one listening to him (Army General) when he is talking of peace", which she says after seeing the chaos in British Council chamber also depicts her 'act of foolishness.' Anyhow towards the middle of the movie, Diana's dialogues seem quite revolutionary. These include the dialogue said to British Council chamber, that "You will knowingly sacrifice all those lives (soldiers) as if they mean less than yours. Where I come from, generals don't hide in their offices like cowards. They fight alongside their soldiers. They die with them on the battlefield." Hence, it appears as if the movie puts forward Diana, and thereby women as a whole, as people who act foolishly when they see something new and exciting but talks revolutionary things about things familiar to them.

Coming to the actions of Diana or Wonder Woman, she is seen to be doing a good job of fighting with her enemies. Immediately after Captain Steve Trevor crashed on to Amazon Island and was rescued by Diana, the German soldiers who were following him reach the place and starts firing towards the island. The Amazonians immediately counter-attacked, with Diana being a highlight of the scenes. The fact that the

Amazonians could defeat with bows, arrows, and spears the German soldiers who were equipped with modern weapons like shotguns show the quality of the training received by them as fighters. The movie, therefore, portrayed how women can also be good fighters if they are trained properly. This same principle can be applied in the modern world also in a way that 'women can be better persons if they are provided with good training', which is none other than education. When Diana reached London with Trevor, her behaviour suddenly changed to like that of a child (as mentioned above) as she seemed to see many things in the human world for the first time. In such instances, it is Trevor who keeps her away from doing so, representing patriarchal domination. Scenes where Diana goes to take hold of a baby from the hands of a random woman and Trevor stopping her by holding her hand etc. are proofs for the same. Diana didn't know what a car was and Trevor had to move her away from the road as she stood in the way of a car without moving, though she saw it coming towards her. Diana behaved strangely like a child when she was provided with European outfit by Trevor's secretary and insisted on holding her sword and shield always with her as she didn't know such weapons were outdated in the human world. It is also shown that Diana finds it difficult to go out of a building equipped with a rotating door as she didn't know how to 'open' it.

Though Diana appears to be a 'fool' when she reaches the human world, the scenes thereafter proved different. When Trevor was attacked by German spies in London asking him to give back a diary which he stole from a German warehouse, Trevor resisted for which he was shot with a pistol. Diana immediately interrupted and saved Trevor with her timely action. The following scenes showed Diana's fighting skills, where she defeated all the attackers. However, when one among them committed suicide consuming cyanide, she seemed to be surprised by the sudden death as she didn't know what cyanide was. Similar instances are seen in later scenes also when she goes

to British Council chamber meeting along with Trevor though she was denied entrance by him. Her entrance to the meeting is an 'act of foolishness' as it was a meeting arranged only for the high officials of the British Army. Later, when Trevor was denied to take any action against the German Army's measures of making and using poisonous gases in the war, Diana interrupted there and raised her voice against British Army Generals.

Though Diana is seen doing something which one should not, the points she makes out in her dialogue are important. This shows her concern towards the human world and also her sense of responsibility that she must kill the god of war 'Ares' as soon as possible. Diana is also later seen going ahead into the battlefield only with her sword and shield, that too in her 'short dress' amidst the German bullets showered upon her. Her movement paved way for Trevor, his friends, and some British soldiers to advance helping them conquer at least a part of Germany killing many German soldiers. The same small conquer later helped them stop the war completely, with the death of Trevor and the assassination of Ares. Hence, with the timely actions emerged out of Diana's anger and with her care and love she showed to others like a mother, Diana's actions both incorporated the general consideration about a woman by the society (soft, gentle and caring) along with how a woman can be (angry, raged or furious like men) if she wishes to be.

Thus, from the above instances, it is still a matter of discussion that whether the claim of establishing gender equality in Superhero movies through woman-led films is nothing more than an illusion. It can be said that movies like *Wonder Woman* portrayed both the strong sides and weak sides of women as a gender, being neutral in itself. Having both strong and weak sides is a basic characteristic of human beings applicable to both men and women. But whether the movie subjugated women focusing more on their weakness or whether the movie actually portrayed those negative aspects deliberately in order to

showcase how it can be turned into positive aspects turns out to be another matter of discussion. Anyhow, the dream of a serene and sustainable world will never turn into reality unless and until gender equality is attained in every sphere of life.

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