



GENDER AND POWER DISCOURSE: HEROINE REPRESENTATION IN MARVEL FILMS THROUGH RUTH WODAK'S APPROACH

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the representation of female superheroes (heroines) in Marvel Studios films using Ruth Wodak's Critical Discourse Analysis approach. By examining three films: Captain America: The First Avenger, Black Panther: Wakanda Forever, and The Marvels, this study explores how the construction of gender and female power is presented in the narrative, dialogue, and visualization of female characters. Using Wodak's model, which focuses on historical, social, and political contexts, this study reveals how female representations are influenced by specific ideologies and social changes in the entertainment industry. The analysis reveals that despite the strengthening of women's roles as central and powerful characters, dominant narratives persist that subtly reproduce gender stereotypes and inequalities. This study demonstrates the importance of critically interpreting the representation of women in popular media, as well as how the construction of women's power and identity in fictional spaces also reflects gender dynamics in real society.

Keywords: Gender Representation, Feminism, Critical Discourse Analysis

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis representasi superhero perempuan (heroine) dalam film-film produksi Marvel Studios melalui pendekatan Analisis Wacana Kritis model Ruth Wodak. Dengan menelaah tiga film, yakni *Captain America: The First Avenger*, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, dan *The Marvels*, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana konstruksi gender dan kekuatan perempuan ditampilkan dalam narasi, dialog, serta visualisasi tokoh-tokoh perempuan. Melalui model Wodak yang berfokus pada konteks historis, sosial, dan politik, penelitian ini mengungkap cara representasi perempuan dipengaruhi oleh ideologi tertentu dan perubahan sosial dalam industri hiburan. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa meskipun terdapat penguatan peran perempuan sebagai tokoh sentral dan kuat, tetap ada narasi dominan yang mereproduksi stereotip atau ketimpangan gender secara halus. Penelitian ini menunjukkan pentingnya pemaknaan kritis terhadap representasi perempuan dalam media populer, serta bagaimana konstruksi kekuatan dan identitas perempuan di ruang fiksi turut mencerminkan dinamika gender di masyarakat nyata.

Kata Kunci: Representasi Gender, Feminisme, Analisis Wacana Kritis

I. INTRODUCTION

Superhero films are one of the most popular and beloved genres. In the past, superhero stories were dominated by damsel-in-distress stories, where female characters often needed



help from male characters. For example, in the Spider-Man films, Mary Jane must rely on Peter Parker to be rescued. Such stories persisted in American superhero films until 2015.

A superhero can be defined as someone who is heroic, universal, and selfless, has a goal to help others, possesses extraordinary or extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical and/or mental skills, including magical abilities, and possesses a superhero-like identity (Ridwan, 2014). Superheroes always have a purpose and strive to do good. They have costumes and nicknames that become their iconic characteristics (Coogan & Rosenberg, 2013).

The superhero trend first began when Jerry Siegel and Joe Shushter created the character Superman, who first appeared in Action Comics #1 in 1938 for DC Comics. That same year, DC Comics released the Crimson Avenger in its Detective Comics, and in 1939, DC released The Sandman and Batman for the first time. At that time, the United States was experiencing the Great Depression. The emergence of these comics generated a warm, even overwhelming, response in the United States, as if they needed an extraordinary hero to help them out of economic hardship and the hardships of everyday life (Purwoko, 2021). In 1941, the United States produced its first film adaptation of a superhero comic book from Fawcett Comics, entitled "The Adventures of Captain Marvel." The film earned a Guinness World Record for being the first superhero film.

The trend of adapting superhero comics into films continued. Marvel Comics, then relatively unknown, also began its first film adaptation of the Captain America character in 1944. Twenty-seven years later, Marvel released its first Spider-Man film in 1971. In the 1990s, Marvel experienced a financial crisis, forcing it to sell the Spider-Man license to Sony in 1999, resulting in a second film in 2002. In 2008, Marvel made Iron Man, marking the beginning of a cinematic universe that remains unrivaled today.

This trend has led to the dominance of male characters in superhero cinema. However, since 2017, heroines have become a breakthrough in the superhero film genre with Patty Jenkins' Wonder Woman, which grossed over \$822 million worldwide. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a heroine is a woman who is admired by many for her courageous actions and her commitment to goodness. Heroines often appear in stories, novels, and films. Compared to traditional, passive gender depictions, the role played by modern heroines is different. The heroine drives the story, makes decisions, and fights in its struggles. Modern heroines also possess strong physical and emotional strength, a strong

sense of curiosity, and idealized heroic traits (strength, courage, and the degree of injury or death they may experience) (Brown, 2015).

In films, women are typically portrayed as weak, dependent on men, and in need of protection (Indriyani & Rakhmawati, 2019). Men are portrayed as having the duty to protect women, demonstrating strength and courage. This depiction of women and men is still prevalent in many films. Many films still depict women as weak, while men's strength is portrayed as being created to protect them.

Such depictions of women are still common in major films. For example, the character of Mantis in *Guardians of the Galaxy* is depicted as a half-alien woman with a pleasant disposition and the power to manipulate the minds of her opponents. However, Mantis's role in *Guardians of the Galaxy* is not particularly crucial. Her powers cannot be used in combat; in fact, she is merely a supporting character who entertains the audience. As such, Mantis is portrayed as someone who must always rely on Star-Lord and his friends for protection, and her role is not superior to that of men. Another example is several Marvel Studios films from Phases 1-3. These phases are dominated by male superhero characters such as Iron Man, the Incredible Hulk, Thor, Captain America, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, Ant-Man, Doctor Strange, and Black Panther. In these films, men's strengths are portrayed as stronger than women's. Thus, men are portrayed as masculine, while women are portrayed as feminine.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses qualitative methods. According to Strauss and Corbin, qualitative research is a type of research that produces descriptive data about the behavior and speech of observed individuals. According to Bogdan and Taylor, qualitative research is a type of research that produces findings that cannot be achieved through quantification techniques or statistical procedures (Sujarweni, 2014). In-depth and significant data can be obtained through a qualitative approach. Qualitative methods are used to obtain in-depth data, data that contains meaning. Qualitative research results emphasize meaning rather than generalizations (Sugiyono, 2013).

The approach used in this research is Ruth Wodak's critical discourse analysis. Ruth Wodak's critical discourse analysis model is an in-depth and critical analysis of how language and rhetoric are used to address important current issues. It aims to increase our understanding of how language can shape and maintain ideology and power (Uluk & Nurhadi, 2023). This research will involve three stages in the analysis using Ruth Wodak's discourse analysis approach. First, the researcher will map and analyze primary texts to identify and analyze

scenes related to the research in tabular form. In the second step, the researcher will analyze intertextual and interdiscursive relationships to link them to other issues and discourses, such as women in culture, women in society, and women in politics. In the third step, the researcher will decontextualize and recontextualize the texts to remove them from their original context and place them in a new context.

The data collection technique used by the researcher is as follows: First, the researcher will watch the three selected films. In the second step, the researcher will select scenes related to women's issues and the concept of the heroine. Next, the researcher will analyze the details of the films from the selected scenes and dialogue.

The data analysis technique used in this study is to examine the language of feminism in the three Marvel Studios films, which will then be analyzed using Ruth Wodak's critical discourse analysis theory.

III. RESEARCH RESULTS

Superhero & Heroine

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a superhero is a benevolent person with extraordinary heroic attributes and superhuman powers, often appearing in fictional stories. A superhero can be defined as someone who possesses a heroic, universal, selfless character, a goal of helping others, possesses extraordinary or extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical and/or mental skills, including magical abilities, and possesses a superhero-like identity (Ridwan, 2014).

Superheroes are typically characterized by their strength, courage, and the degree of injury or death they may experience, such as war heroes or people who attempt to escape danger (Alliso, Goethals, & Kramer, 2016).

Gender and Feminism

In a social context, the term "gender" refers to the differences between men and women based not only on biological factors but also on roles constructed within society, as described by the term "social sex." In general, some people still feel "foreign" or reluctant when hearing the word gender. In general, the reasons why society is still reluctant to accept the concept of gender are due to the following (Dalimoente, 2021):

1. The idea of gender originates from the West, so many people still believe that gender is propaganda of Western values spread with the aim of changing society, especially in Eastern countries.

2. The idea of gender is considered a dangerous movement because it can change religion and culture, as it contradicts human nature.
3. The idea of gender stems from the anger and frustration of women demanding equal rights with men. This is because women feel their rights have been violated by men. In general, Indonesia does not have a gender problem because the state has guaranteed equal rights for all its citizens, as stated in the 1945 Constitution.
4. Some people have a very rigid and conservative mindset regarding how the assigned roles for men and women are already established and cannot be changed (for example, a woman's nature is to raise children, and a man's nature is to earn a living).

Representation

According to Stuart Hall, representation is the process of creating meaning from existing ideas. Representation serves as a link between language and ideas, referring to real objects and imagination (Prasetyo, 2019). According to Hall, representation encompasses not only the use of language to convey something meaningful to others, but can also be considered the process of creating and exchanging cultural meanings using signs, language, and images that represent something (Irwandi & Apriyanto, 2012).

Film as Mass Communication

According to the Indonesian Dictionary (KBBI), film is a thin membrane made of celluloid used to hold negative images (to be made into portraits) or positive images (to be shown in cinemas). According to Suriasumantri, film is a work of visual communication with a storyline, so the success of communication depends on logical thinking (reasoning) and logical reasoning (inductive-deductive). As a result, science is framed within a philosophical framework (Suriasumantri, 2017).

Ruth Wodak's Critical Discourse Analysis

Ruth Wodak's Critical Discourse Analysis model is a discourse analysis approach that emphasizes understanding how language shapes and maintains social hierarchies, ideologies, and power structures. This model will be used to conduct a critical and in-depth analysis of how language and rhetoric are used in today's important issues. The goal of this analysis is to gain a better understanding of how language can shape and maintain ideology and power (Uluk & Nurhadi, 2023).

Heroines & Courage in Fighting Gender Discrimination Against Women in Captain America: The First Avenger

Feminism in the United States has been a powerful and influential movement throughout its history. From the initial struggle for voting rights in the first wave to the broader and more diverse movements in the second wave and beyond, feminism has played a crucial role in redefining and championing gender equality, inspiring significant social change, and continuing to challenge stereotypes and injustices facing women.

Feminism is a consciousness-raising awareness of injustices perpetrated against women worldwide. Feminism is also defined as an ideology that fights for equality for women (Sabhana in Indriyani & Rakhmawati, 2019).

Peggy Carter, a female military figure in *Captain America: The First Avenger*, faces discrimination and sexual harassment, reflecting the social realities of the time. Peggy Carter also represents a woman who has the courage to fight gender discrimination in the military. The symbolism displayed in Peggy Carter's character also encourages the recognition of women as individuals with the same courage as men and promotes the ideology of equality in society. Despite efforts to support women's empowerment in this film, elements of masculinity remain very dominant in military culture. Women entering this environment often have to integrate into male culture, resulting in efforts to fight discrimination that are not entirely genuine. They fight discrimination but also have to accept and adapt to existing masculine norms. Thus, despite support for gender equality, fighting discrimination still faces significant challenges due to the normalization of masculine culture in the military and other fields.

Heroine, Courage & Technological Expertise in Protecting the Nation in Black Panther: Wakanda Forever

Heroines are inseparable from leadership. Many heroines become leaders of organizations or countries, for example, Hippolyta, the leader of Themyscira in the *Wonder Woman* comics and films. In *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, the main character, Shuri, must replace her deceased sister and mother as leader of Wakanda.

This film also shows how Black women demonstrate superiority over men, specifically Shuri, who becomes the leader of Wakanda. In real life, women rarely hold positions in politics, especially in positions of power (Reyvonputra, Lesmana Fanny, & Budiana, 2023). However, in this film, Shuri, a Black woman, becomes the new leader of Wakanda.

Heroine & Women Empowerment in Protecting Themselves, Their Families, and the Universe in The Marvels

Captain Marvel is one of the strongest characters in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. In *The Marvels*, Captain Marvel is the strongest character, surpassing Monica Rambeau and Ms. Marvel. In this film, Captain Marvel plays a leader who not only protects Earth but also the universe, serving as an inspiration for Ms. Marvel. Monica Rambeau, who possesses extraordinary abilities after being exposed to energy, demonstrates her resilience and courage. Kamala Khan, as Ms. Marvel, is a powerful character. *Marvel* brings a fresh teenage perspective and the passion to be a hero despite their young age. These three characters not only fight physical enemies but also face social and personal challenges, demonstrating that female empowerment encompasses all aspects of life.

The Marvels, with its three main heroines, successfully showcases women's power. In some films, women are portrayed as weak and helpless. According to Rokhimah, labeling women as meek leads to violence and oppression, including physical and non-physical violence (Sentanu, 2022). However, in *The Marvels*, women are portrayed as courageous figures, such as Captain Marvel, who fights her enemies alone to protect the universe; Muneeba Khan, who bravely fights to protect her husband; and Monica, who bravely protects Prince Yan from Dar-Benn's attack and also protects herself. *The Marvels* also showcases the strength of women, as Marvel Studios' current films break the damsel-in-distress trope. In this way, *Marvel* shows that women can be equal to men in terms of physical strength, although Captain Marvel tends to be overpowered, potentially changing views on gender equality.

Marvel & Disney Politics

Marvel and Disney are shifting their focus on hero characters, from previously predominantly male heroes to increasingly female ones. By making this shift, which began with the 2019 film *Captain Marvel*, Marvel and Disney seem to want to demonstrate social and political change in society through their films.

While the shift in the representation of women as superhero leads in Marvel and Disney films has increased, it has not yet demonstrated significant social and political impact. Discrimination is not limited to gender, but also includes discrimination against ethnic groups, such as Asians and Blacks, which is still evident in the Hollywood industry.

The representation of women as superheroes can be seen as part of the agenda of gender equality, feminism, and women's empowerment, which aims to demonstrate that

women have equal abilities to men. The introduction of this ideology through film is faster and more widespread than other media such as books, because films can convey messages more directly and influence a wider and faster audience. This may be a strategy for gradually and effectively inserting ideology.

Political movements inserted into Marvel films are gradually being shown. For example, in *The Eternals*, the character Phastos is shown married to a man and has a child. There's also a scene where Phastos kisses his partner before leaving to carry out his duties with the Eternals. Captain Marvel's character in *The Marvels* was also changed to bisexual. There's a scene where Captain Marvel meets Valkyrie, who appears worried about Captain Marvel's condition. Although the scene in *The Marvels* isn't as explicit as *The Eternals*, this kind of agenda has indeed become controversial. The agenda introduced by Disney and Marvel seems to be forcing the current situation. For example, the character of Captain Marvel, who in the comics is heterosexual, has a sexual orientation. This forced change has also provoked some Marvel Cinematic Universe fans because it forces its own agenda.

The undeniable impact of the representation of female heroes in Marvel and Disney films is an increase in female representation and identification within their audiences. This potentially introduces a political dimension into the analysis, given that film is not merely a medium for entertainment but also a vehicle for conveying intended messages. The characterization of women as heroes in the context of conspiracy theories or agenda-setting may indicate an attempt to systematically represent or inspire women through the medium of film, reflecting a larger agenda driven by the film's narrative.

IV. CONCLUSION

Throughout the long history of feminism in the United States, many women have continued to fight against gender discrimination, both in real life and through media representation. One example is Peggy Carter in *Captain America: The First Avenger*, which not only reflects the social realities of the time but also highlights the challenges women still face in a masculine-dominated culture. Based on the discussion on combating gender discrimination, feminism in the United States has evolved into a powerful and influential movement, from the initial struggle for voting rights to the broader movement for gender equality.

In the world of cinema, the representation of women as leaders and technologists is becoming increasingly important to challenge traditional stereotypes and promote gender equality. One film that successfully portrays Black women's leadership is *Black Panther*:

Wakanda Forever, in which Shuri takes a central role as a leader and brilliant scientist. Based on the discussion on the courage and technological expertise in protecting the nation, the heroine in the film is inseparable from leadership attitudes.

In discussions about women's empowerment and their role in protecting themselves, their families, and the universe, representation in popular media plays a crucial role. The Marvels successfully demonstrates female empowerment through its three main heroines: Captain Marvel, Monica Rambeau, and Ms. Marvel. Based on the discussion on women's empowerment in protecting themselves, their families, and the universe, The Marvels successfully demonstrates female empowerment through its three main heroines: Captain Marvel, Monica Rambeau, and Ms. Marvel. This film, through its heroine and mother figures, effectively breaks traditional stereotypes that depict women as weak and confined to the domestic sphere.

Based on the discussion on the politics of Marvel and Disney, it is apparent that despite an increase in the number of women in leading roles as heroines, a significant impact on social and political change has yet to be seen substantially. The dominance of white actors and issues of discrimination against ethnic groups remain strong in the Hollywood industry. This shift is likely made by Marvel and Disney in response to limitations on creativity and the growing influence of social movements such as feminism and LGBT. The representation of heroines in these films plays a significant role in shaping Western and Eastern audiences' perceptions of women as strong and influential figures. However, there is the potential that the agenda setting and political implications of this representation may extend beyond gender equality, giving rise to debate about its role and impact in contemporary culture.

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