

Empowerment and Objectification: Dual Perspectives on Female Superheroes in Contemporary Cinema

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Abstract

The rise of female superheroes in contemporary cinema reflects a significant cultural shift toward gender equity and representation. Once relegated to secondary roles, women now take center stage as symbols of empowerment, with characters like *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel* redefining heroism through strength, resilience, and agency. These narratives provide vital role models for women and girls, challenging entrenched gender stereotypes and inspiring broader societal change. However, this progress is complicated by persistent patterns of objectification. Female superheroes are often portrayed through the male gaze, with costume design, cinematography, and marketing emphasizing their physical appearance over their depth. Characters like Black Widow and Harley Quinn illustrate this duality, where empowerment is undermined by hypersexualization. This paper explores the interplay of empowerment and objectification in the portrayal of female superheroes, highlighting cultural progress while critically examining the challenges that remain in achieving genuine gender equity in cinematic representation.

Keywords: female superheroes, objectification, gender representation, male gaze

1. Introduction

The rise of female superheroes in contemporary cinema marks a transformative moment in popular culture, reflecting broader societal shifts toward gender equity and representation. Historically confined to secondary roles or reduced to love interests, women in the superhero genre now take center stage as characters of strength, resilience, and agency. Films like *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel* have redefined the genre, offering female-led narratives that inspire audiences and challenge long-standing gender stereotypes. However, this progress is accompanied by persistent complexities. While female superheroes

symbolize empowerment, their portrayal often remains tied to objectification and the male gaze. Costume design, camera angles, and marketing materials frequently prioritize their physical attractiveness, reducing their depth and reinforcing outdated gender norms. Characters like Black Widow and Harley Quinn highlight this tension: though their arcs showcase independence and complexity, their early depictions leaned heavily on hypersexualized imagery. This duality reveals the cultural double standards embedded in the genre. Male superheroes are celebrated for their power and heroism, whereas female counterparts are often burdened with the dual expectation of being

both strong and visually appealing. This essay explores how female superheroes embody both empowerment and objectification, reflecting progress while exposing the challenges of achieving genuine gender equity in cinematic representation.

2. Female Superheroes as Symbols of Empowerment

The rise of female superheroes in contemporary cinema marks a pivotal moment in the evolution of popular culture, mirroring broader societal transformations and heightened demands for gender equity. Historically relegated to the periphery, women in the superhero genre were often cast as sidekicks, love interests, or damsels in distress. They existed to further the development of male protagonists or to serve as objects of desire, with little agency or depth of character. However, the emergence of female-led superhero films in the 21st century has begun to disrupt these patterns, ushering in narratives where women are no longer defined by their relationships to male characters but by their own strength, intellect, and resilience. These characters have stepped into the limelight as central figures, embodying empowerment and offering an alternative vision of heroism that resonates with contemporary feminist ideals.

This cultural shift toward female-led superhero stories has been fueled by larger societal movements such as #MeToo and the broader push for gender representation in all spheres of life, including politics, business, and entertainment. Female superheroes such as Wonder Woman in *Wonder Woman* (2017), Captain Marvel in *Captain Marvel* (2019), and Shuri in *Black Panther* (2018) serve as cultural milestones, reflecting and reinforcing these changes. They challenge patriarchal norms by redefining what it means to be powerful, heroic, and independent. For instance, Wonder Woman, portrayed by Gal Gadot, embodies compassion and strength in equal measure. Her story emphasizes justice and love as sources of her power, distinguishing her from traditional male superheroes whose arcs often revolve around vengeance or egotism. By centering empathy and moral integrity as central to heroism, Diana Prince breaks stereotypes, presenting an empowering alternative to traditional masculinity-dominated narratives.

Similarly, Captain Marvel, played by Brie Larson, explores themes of reclaiming agency, autonomy,

and self-worth. Carol Danvers' journey of self-discovery and transformation in *Captain Marvel* mirrors the challenges faced by women in real life as they strive to assert their identity and power in a society that often seeks to undermine or marginalize them. The film's tagline, "Higher, further, faster," is emblematic of her relentless pursuit of excellence and her refusal to be confined by societal expectations. These narratives resonate not only because they offer aspirational role models for women and girls but also because they reflect universal struggles for self-determination, equality, and justice.

The representation of female superheroes in leading roles has broader cultural implications that cannot be overstated. By occupying spaces of influence in global cinema, these characters challenge long-standing conventions of what a hero looks like, providing visibility and validation to women who have been underrepresented in this genre for decades. Representation matters, particularly in shaping the perceptions and aspirations of younger audiences. The presence of female superheroes on screen sends a powerful message: women can be leaders, warriors, and saviors; they can be powerful, capable, and courageous. This shift not only challenges the male-dominated status quo of the superhero genre but also contributes to the broader narrative of gender equality by normalizing female leadership and strength.

However, the emergence of female superheroes is not merely about representation; it is also about reimagining the concept of heroism itself. Unlike the hyper-masculine, aggression-driven heroism that has long dominated the genre, female superheroes often embody a more holistic and nuanced understanding of power. Their strength is frequently rooted in qualities such as empathy, collaboration, and resilience, offering a counterpoint to the traditional glorification of brute force. For example, in *Wonder Woman*, Diana's decision to fight Ares, the god of war, is not motivated by a desire for personal revenge or conquest but by her commitment to protecting humanity from destruction. Her approach to conflict prioritizes resolution over domination, reflecting a more inclusive and compassionate vision of heroism that resonates with contemporary audiences.

The cultural significance of these narratives is amplified by their global reach. Blockbusters like *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel* have

grossed hundreds of millions of dollars worldwide, proving that female-led superhero films can be both commercially successful and culturally impactful. This success challenges the outdated notion that audiences are uninterested in stories centered on women and highlights the appetite for diverse and inclusive storytelling. As such, these films have paved the way for other female-driven narratives in the superhero genre and beyond, inspiring studios to invest in projects that celebrate women's strength and agency.

The empowerment represented by female superheroes exists in tension with the persistent issue of objectification, which continues to undermine the progress they symbolize. While these characters have achieved unprecedented visibility and cultural significance, their portrayal often remains entangled in the legacy of the male gaze. This duality—the coexistence of empowerment and objectification—underscores the complex role that female superheroes play in contemporary cinema. They are both reflections of progress and reminders of the challenges that remain in achieving true gender equity in media representation.

Female superheroes in contemporary cinema represent a paradigm shift, challenging entrenched stereotypes and providing powerful role models for women and girls. Their stories of empowerment reflect broader societal movements toward gender equality, inspiring audiences with their strength, resilience, and humanity. However, their representation remains fraught with contradictions, as the industry struggles to balance commercial imperatives with genuine progress. By continuing to celebrate and critically examine these characters, we can better understand their impact and the cultural forces that shape them.

3. The Persistent Issue of Objectification

While the rise of female superheroes in contemporary cinema is often celebrated as a victory for gender representation, their portrayal remains burdened by the pervasive issue of objectification. Despite embodying strength, agency, and empowerment, these characters are frequently depicted through a lens that prioritizes their physical appearance, catering to the desires of the male gaze. This phenomenon, theorized by Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,"

highlights how women in visual media are often positioned as objects of male pleasure, undermining their narrative and symbolic significance. The superhero genre, with its visual emphasis on exaggerated physiques and dramatic aesthetics, has struggled to fully escape this legacy, leading to a tension between empowerment and objectification.

One of the clearest manifestations of this tension lies in the costume design of female superheroes. Unlike their male counterparts, whose costumes often prioritize functionality and practicality, female superheroes are frequently clad in skin-tight, revealing outfits that accentuate their physical attributes. For example, Black Widow (Natasha Romanoff) from the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is a character whose visual depiction exemplifies this dynamic. Although Natasha's narrative arc—particularly in films like *Avengers: Endgame* (2019)—showcases her intelligence, resourcefulness, and emotional depth, her earlier appearances leaned heavily on her sexual appeal. Films like *Iron Man 2* (2010) introduced Natasha through sequences designed to highlight her body, such as slow camera pans emphasizing her physique, while her fighting style and choreography often incorporated suggestive poses. These choices positioned her less as an autonomous hero and more as a figure of male fantasy, reducing her complexity in favor of visual spectacle.

Similarly, Harley Quinn, as portrayed by Margot Robbie in *Suicide Squad* (2016), represents another character caught between empowerment and objectification. On one hand, Harley's chaotic independence and rebellion against patriarchal control, particularly through her abusive relationship with the Joker, establish her as a symbol of female resilience and agency. However, her portrayal in the film is heavily sexualized, with her costumes, makeup, and camera angles often drawing attention to her body rather than her personality or narrative role. While Robbie's performance imbues Harley with charisma and depth, the character's visual presentation detracts from the potential of her story, reducing her to a hypersexualized caricature rather than allowing her full complexity to shine through.

This duality of representation is not merely a visual issue; it reflects deeper cultural tensions within the superhero genre. Female superheroes are expected to embody empowerment while simultaneously conforming to traditional beauty

standards and heteronormative expectations of desirability. This double standard becomes even more glaring when contrasted with the portrayal of male superheroes. While male characters such as Captain America or Thor are undoubtedly idealized, their physicality is framed as a byproduct of their strength, heroism, and sacrifice. In contrast, the sexualization of female characters is often gratuitous, serving no narrative purpose beyond catering to an imagined male viewer.

The objectification of female superheroes reveals an ongoing struggle within the film industry to reconcile commercial imperatives with authentic representation. While emphasizing physical attractiveness may broaden the films' appeal, it risks alienating audiences—particularly women—who seek narratives that respect the integrity of female characters. This dynamic not only undermines the progress achieved in representation but also perpetuates outdated gender norms, limiting the potential for female superheroes to be seen as fully realized individuals.

Efforts to address this issue are visible in more recent portrayals, as filmmakers and studios strive to move beyond the male gaze. For instance, *Wonder Woman* (2017), directed by Patty Jenkins, reimagined Diana Prince's costume to be both functional and respectful, while the film's cinematography avoided gratuitous sexualization. Likewise, *Birds of Prey* (2020) reframed Harley Quinn's character, allowing her narrative of self-liberation to take precedence over her visual appeal. These examples demonstrate that it is possible to celebrate female strength and complexity without reducing characters to objects of desire.

Nonetheless, the broader industry continues to grapple with these tensions, as the economic incentives of sexualized imagery remain a significant factor. For female superheroes to truly embody empowerment, their representation must go beyond aesthetic appeal and embrace a deeper commitment to authenticity, complexity, and respect. Only then can the genre fulfill its potential to inspire and uplift audiences across all genders.

4. The Cultural Double Standard

The cultural double standard in the portrayal of superheroes reveals a deeply ingrained bias in the way gender is framed in the superhero genre, exposing the inequities in how male and female

characters are represented and perceived. While both male and female superheroes are often idealized, the purposes and implications of their idealization differ drastically. Male superheroes such as Thor, Superman, and Captain America are portrayed as paragons of physical perfection, their muscular physiques acting as symbols of their strength, endurance, and capacity to protect. These exaggerated forms serve a clear narrative purpose, emphasizing their power and heroism. Their physicality is rarely objectified but is instead depicted as a functional and symbolic aspect of their character—a natural consequence of their demanding roles as protectors and leaders.

In contrast, female superheroes face the dual burden of embodying strength while conforming to narrowly defined beauty standards that cater to societal and commercial expectations. Their appearances are frequently designed to prioritize their physical attractiveness, blending their empowerment with elements of sensuality to appeal to the male gaze. This approach reduces their depth and agency, placing undue emphasis on their visual appeal rather than their actions or character arcs. For example, Wonder Woman's iconic armor, while significantly modernized in Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* (2017) to reflect functionality and dignity, has historically been depicted as revealing and impractical, prioritizing aesthetics over practicality. This duality illustrates the challenge female superheroes face in navigating a space that demands both empowerment and sensuality, often to their narrative detriment.

Black Widow (Natasha Romanoff) from the Marvel Cinematic Universe provides another vivid example of this double standard. In her early appearances, particularly in *Iron Man 2* (2010), Natasha is introduced through a heavily objectified lens. The camera lingers on her body, showcasing her figure in ways that highlight her sexual appeal rather than her skills or intellect. Although her later appearances, especially in films like *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), delve into her backstory, personality, and emotional depth, these elements are sometimes overshadowed by the lingering effects of her earlier portrayal. Her tight-fitting, leather-based costumes serve as visual shorthand for her desirability, which often competes with her narrative as a skilled fighter, spy, and deeply complex character.

Similarly, Catwoman (Selina Kyle) has long been depicted as a hypersexualized figure in both

comics and cinema. In films like *Batman Returns* (1992) and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), her characterization oscillates between empowerment and sexualization. On one hand, Catwoman is a symbol of independence, cunning, and self-reliance; on the other hand, her costumes and interactions with male characters frequently frame her through a seductive lens, reinforcing gendered expectations that women must be both strong and sexually appealing. This duality undercuts the impact of her agency, making her empowerment conditional on her ability to appeal to male audiences.

This dichotomy between male and female superheroes becomes even more apparent when considering how male superheroes' physicality is framed in relation to their character arcs. Characters like Thor and Captain America are idealized, but their muscular builds are depicted as tools of heroism, not objects of sexualization. Thor's strength, for instance, is a product of his godhood and a key aspect of his ability to protect realms. Similarly, Captain America's super-soldier physique is framed as an enhancement to his moral and physical courage, not as an invitation to ogle. Their appearances are celebrated as functional and aspirational, reinforcing their heroism. Female superheroes, however, are often objectified even when their physicality serves no narrative purpose. Their costumes, body language, and cinematography are crafted to cater to an imagined male viewer, reinforcing the idea that their value lies as much in their appearance as in their abilities.

This cultural double standard reflects broader societal pressures on women, who are often expected to balance the contradictory demands of strength and beauty. Female superheroes are not only tasked with saving the world but also with proving their worth while conforming to unrealistic, hypersexualized beauty standards. This expectation perpetuates a cycle of inequality within the genre, where women's empowerment is frequently undermined by reductive visual and narrative choices. Male superheroes are allowed to embody strength and virtue without being subjected to the same level of aesthetic scrutiny, while female superheroes are often required to justify their presence in the genre by appealing to male desires.

Recent efforts have begun to challenge this double standard, but progress remains uneven.

Films like *Wonder Woman* and *Black Panther* offer glimpses of change, presenting female characters like Diana Prince, Shuri, and Okoye in ways that prioritize their intelligence, courage, and leadership over their physical appearance. These portrayals demonstrate that female superheroes can be powerful and inspiring without being reduced to objects of desire. Yet, the legacy of objectification lingers, reminding audiences that the superhero genre still has a long way to go in achieving true gender equality. For female superheroes to fully embody empowerment, their stories must transcend the limitations imposed by aesthetic and commercial expectations, allowing their heroism to stand on its own terms. Only then can the genre reach its full potential as a space for genuine representation and progress.

5. Toward a More Nuanced Representation

To truly break free from the lingering patterns of objectification and double standards, the superhero genre must embrace a more nuanced and equitable approach to female representation. This shift requires a conscious effort by filmmakers, writers, costume designers, and marketing teams to reimagine female superheroes as multifaceted individuals whose narratives prioritize complexity and authenticity over aesthetic appeal. Rather than focusing on how female superheroes look, creators must delve deeper into who these characters are, exploring their motivations, vulnerabilities, and unique paths to heroism.

One of the first steps toward this goal is storytelling that foregrounds character development and emotional depth. Female superheroes should be granted the same narrative opportunities as their male counterparts to struggle, grow, and triumph in ways that feel authentic and relatable. This means moving beyond the reductive tropes of the "strong female character" archetype, which often prioritizes physical prowess at the expense of emotional nuance. Female superheroes must be allowed to experience and express a full range of emotions—anger, sadness, joy, fear—without being reduced to caricatures. By giving female characters rich backstories, meaningful relationships, and internal conflicts, filmmakers can ensure that their heroism is grounded in human experience rather than superficial ideals.

Costume design is another critical area for

improvement. Practical, functional costumes that reflect the realities of combat or the character's cultural and narrative context should replace the hypersexualized outfits that have long been a staple of the genre. Films like *Wonder Woman* (2017) set a precedent in this regard by redesigning Diana Prince's armor to be both empowering and functional. Patty Jenkins, the film's director, prioritized a costume that conveyed strength and regality while avoiding the gratuitous sexualization of earlier depictions of the character. Similarly, the costumes in *Black Panther* (2018) and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022) showcase how thoughtful design can enhance a character's cultural identity and individuality without diminishing their dignity or authenticity. Shuri, Okoye, and the Dora Milaje exemplify a type of heroism that is tied to their cultural heritage, intelligence, and resilience, offering a refreshing alternative to the typical focus on physical appeal.

Cinematography and marketing strategies also play a crucial role in shaping how female superheroes are perceived. Avoiding gratuitous camera angles or framing that objectifies female characters is essential for fostering a more respectful depiction. Films like *Birds of Prey* (2020) and *The Woman King* (2022) demonstrate the power of the female gaze in re-centering the narrative around the characters' strength, agency, and internal struggles. These films present their protagonists as fully realized individuals, rather than as objects to be consumed by the audience. Marketing campaigns, too, must reflect this shift by focusing on the themes and messages of the films rather than relying on sexualized imagery to generate interest.

Films like *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* and *The Woman King* provide a blueprint for how the industry can approach female superheroes with greater nuance and respect. These films emphasize leadership, intelligence, and resilience, showcasing women who are empowered not because of how they look but because of what they do and who they are. Characters like Shuri and General Nanisca challenge traditional notions of heroism, offering narratives rooted in community, identity, and self-discovery. By continuing to draw inspiration from these examples, filmmakers can redefine the superhero genre, ensuring that female superheroes captivate audiences without compromising their integrity or depth.

This shift is not merely a creative imperative but a cultural one. As global audiences become more attuned to the importance of representation, there is an increasing demand for narratives that reflect the complexities of gender and identity in meaningful ways. The continued success of films with nuanced female leads proves that audiences are hungry for stories that challenge stereotypes and celebrate the humanity of their characters. By embracing this opportunity, the superhero genre can lead the charge in reshaping the way women are portrayed in cinema, paving the way for a future where empowerment is not overshadowed by objectification but stands as its own unassailable truth.

6. Conclusion

The rise of female superheroes in contemporary cinema marks a watershed moment in the broader struggle for gender equality, signaling progress in representation and cultural perception. These characters, often hailed as symbols of empowerment, have broken barriers in a historically male-dominated genre by occupying spaces of influence that were once inaccessible to women. From *Wonder Woman's* empathetic heroism to *Captain Marvel's* unrelenting independence, these stories have provided aspirational role models for women and girls, challenging traditional gender norms and encouraging audiences to reimagine what leadership, strength, and heroism can look like. However, this progress exists in tension with persistent patterns of objectification that undermine the very empowerment these characters are meant to symbolize. The commercial nature of the superhero genre plays a significant role in this tension. Female superheroes are often depicted in ways that cater to male viewers, prioritizing their visual appeal over their depth as characters. This lingering influence of the male gaze reinforces outdated stereotypes, diminishing the potential for these characters to serve as authentic representations of female strength. Objectification remains a challenge, as the industry grapples with balancing its economic incentives with a genuine commitment to social progress. The frequent juxtaposition of empowerment and sexualization in female superhero portrayals highlights the cultural double standard in the genre, where women are expected to embody both strength and sensuality to justify their presence. For the genre

to evolve, creators must embrace nuanced storytelling that prioritizes character development over visual spectacle. Female superheroes should be allowed to grow, struggle, and succeed on their own terms, free from the constraints of aesthetic or commercial expectations. By rejecting the male gaze and celebrating authenticity, filmmakers have the opportunity to redefine the superhero genre. In doing so, they can ensure it becomes not just a space for entertainment, but a platform for meaningful cultural transformation that inspires and uplifts all audiences.

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