

Wonder Woman on Screen: From Feminist Symbol to Stereotypical Figure

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Abstract: Wonder Woman, a founding female figure in superhero fiction, was initially celebrated as a symbol of women's empowerment in the 1970s but faced criticism in the 2010s for embodying fetishized objectification. This article aims to explore the gender representation of the 1970s TV series *Wonder Woman* and the 2010s *Wonder Woman* movie through a feminist approach. The portrayal of Wonder Woman in the TV series challenged the traditional stereotypes of femininity and the subordinate roles of women under patriarchy at that time. The *Wonder Woman* movie, however, lacked diversity under an intersectional framework and signified the beauty myth for male pleasure, which undermined her validity as a feminist icon. Through close analysis, it is revealed that the white feminist privilege and fetish fashion of superheroines traditionally recognized as feminist icons are problematic, calling for more scholarly attention on discriminatory gender representation in contemporary popular culture.

Key Words: Wonder Woman, Gender Representation, Intersectionality, Feminism

1. Introduction

DC Comics, also known as DC, is a major American comic book publisher and the primary division of DC Entertainment. Produced by DC Comics, Wonder Woman is one of the most influential female superheroes in Western society. As a founding female figure in the genre of superhero fiction, Wonder Woman became an iconic symbol of feminism in the 1970s when the *Wonder Woman* TV series was aired. In view of the historical underrepresentation and misrepresentation of female characters, the cinematic portrayal of Wonder Woman challenges the dominance of male characters in the genre of superhero fiction (Robinson, 2004, p. 95). Thus, as suggested on the cover page of *Ms.* magazine in 1972, Wonder Woman was regarded as a pivotal figure of feminism at that time (Steinem, 1972). However, in 2016, Wonder Woman had her feminist role of "Honorary Ambassador for the Empowerment of Women and Girls" revoked in the UN, for she was criticised as "oversexualized" (Marso, 2016). Even though the commercially successful film *Wonder Woman* enjoyed widespread popularity among viewers in 2017, the ongoing feminist critique of Wonder Woman continued, criticizing her as a figure of fetishized objectification and sexual disempowerment (Killian, 2019). Contrasting with prevailing 1970s viewpoints, notable shifts in feminist perspectives on Wonder Woman's media representation on screen became evident in the 2010s.

Existing feminist research on Wonder Woman, mainly based on comics, focuses on her toughness (Inness, 2018, p. 56), female autonomy (Ormrod, 2018), and spectacular body (Emad, 2006). Despite the popularity, the TV series and movies related to Wonder Woman are relatively unexamined through feminist approaches. As popular culture became a natural site for feminist identity formation and female empowerment, it is important to explore the portrayal of Wonder Woman on TV and film in view of her increasing visibility in contemporary culture and feminist discussion.

Since various versions and adaptations of the stories related to Wonder Woman have been produced in the TV and movie industry, I mainly focus on the first episode of the *Wonder Woman* TV series starred by Lynda Carter in the 1970s and the *Wonder Woman* movie starred by Gal Gadot in 2017. The contents of these two audiovisual media adopt similar storylines of how Wonder Woman saves Steve Traver and fights against the Nazi party for the USA, which make them suitable for comparison. Although many scholars criticize the wave metaphor of feminist movements for it conflates the ongoing discussion within feminism into an unilinear and sequential timeline (Reger, 2017), I employ it to frame the shifting cultural contexts where Wonder Woman in different eras should be situated. Within the context of feminist discourse spanning different waves of feminism, the feminist identity of Wonder Woman on screen is revealed to shift from a feminist symbol to a sexist figure, corresponding to second-wave feminism and fourth-wave feminism.

2. Feminism and Comic Wonder Woman in the 1970s and 2010s

The 1970s and 2010s marked the rise of second-wave and fourth-wave feminism, concurrent with the evolution of Wonder Woman's gender representation. Existing feminist studies on Wonder Woman mainly focus on her

identity in comic books as a cultural construct, discussing her shifting roles from a feminist icon to a symbol of gender stereotype (Robinson, 2004, p. 63; Emad, 2006; Wright, 2017, p. 10).

2.1 Second-Wave Feminism and the 1970s Comic Wonder Woman

In the mid-19th century, first-wave feminism emerged with the Seneca Falls Convention, advocating for women's suffrage from a legal perspective. With roots in first-wave feminism, the founding of the National Organization for Women marks the complicated origins of second-wave feminism and its internal divisions. The second wave of feminism, spanning from the 1960s to the 1980s, was referred to a series of feminist activities that sought to challenge the oppression of women in various areas, including sexual autonomy, workplace equality, and domestic violence (Thornham, 2004, p. 37). Feminists in the second wave criticize the systematic oppression of women as "other" under the dominance-submission binary model of masculinity and femininity (Firestone, 1970, p. 98). Regarding femininity as their highest value and only commitment, women who internalize the ideology of femininity are sexually passive with their reproduction processes under male control, which is another social issue that second-wave feminism addresses (Friedan, 1963, p. 63). As diverse and multifaceted second-wave feminist movements are launched, a range of diverse branches of feminism emerge to address gender equality and sexual autonomy from different perspectives, including radical feminism, liberal feminism, socialist feminism, etc.

As a fictional character, the comic image of Wonder Woman is viewed as a symbol of second-wave feminism among feminist scholars for she challenges the oppression of women (DiPaolo, 2007, p. 151). As a powerful warrior, Wonder Woman is prodigiously strong, invulnerable to physical harm, sophisticated in combat prowess, and immortal. From a feminist perspective, her superpower, traditionally associated with male fictional characters like Superman, interrogates the stereotypical yet prevailing notions of womanhood as vulnerable, dependent, and submissive at that time (Wright, 2017, p. 10). Moreover, Wonder Woman is closely associated with radical feminism for her storylines question the patriarchal norms. According to J. Lenore Wright (2017), the feminist spirit of Wonder Woman originates in her homeland Paradise Island, a fictional all-women utopia, that challenges the institutionalized oppression and exclusion of women in politics, economics, and social lives (p. 8). Paradise Island implies radical feminist ideas in the second wave, arguing that gender is the primary contradiction and women can constitute a sex-class (Echols, 2019, p. 3). Meanwhile, Diana Prince, the cover identity of Wonder Woman, can be associated with liberal feminism in the second wave since she resolves her personal dilemma as a female immigrant by engaging in male-dominated political and military systems like the Department of Metahuman Affairs (Cobble, Gordon and Henry, 2014, p. 163). Mitra C. Emad (2006) sees these storylines as a calling for political reform on gender inequality women face in their personal experiences. As an unconventional and emancipated female character, Wonder Woman became a feminist symbol for women who seek to address gender discrimination in their personal lives by advancing their socio-political status.

2.2 Fourth-Wave Feminism and the 2010s Comic Wonder Woman

Originating in the early 1990s, third-wave feminism critiques the overgeneralization of white female experiences in second-wave feminism to address racial and social class inequality intersecting with gender issues. Borrowing ideas of intersectionality from third-wave feminism, fourth wave of feminism, which could be dated back to 2008, emerged with the savvy use of digital media (Looft, 2017). Specifically, modern feminist activists utilize social media as an essential tool to pursue social justice and gender equality in fourth-wave feminist movements (Baumgardner, 2011, p. 250). Rather than regarding females as a homogeneous social group, feminists in the fourth wave engage with the intersectionality of race, class, and sexuality among women in the online movements (Curtis and Cardo, 2017). In addition, feminists in the fourth wave adopt fashionable feminist ideas that emphasize the plurality of female discourses through clothing. Under the conservative political agendas promoted by increasing right-wing politicians like abortion bans, the solidarity among fashion designers and feminist activism can be witnessed as more and more feminist online slogans, such as # Metoo, are printed on clothes to raise public awareness (Caldeira, 2020). The diversity of fashion designs for different female body sizes under the feminist viewpoint of body positivity, which is exemplified in ads shot by plus size models like Paloma Elsesser in 2017, can be interpreted as the milestone of "fashion embraces feminism" (Titton, 2019).

However, the comic stories of Wonder Woman in the 2010s not only lacked racial diversity but also amplified the thin ideal of female fashion. In the Odyssey storyline from 2010 to 2011, most of the female figures were portrayed as white and heterosexual figures from traditional Eurocentric mythology, indicating the lack of racial and socioeconomic diversity in the stories of Wonder Woman (Ormrod, 2020). Even though Wonder Woman is praised for her "girl power" message in popular culture (Lachover, Davidson and Ramati, 2021), it should not be

neglected that her stories fail to challenge the heteronormativity and racial prejudice from the perspective of fourth-wave feminism (Maddox, 2011). In addition, the comic images of Wonder Woman's costume still adhered to kinky and flesh-baring clothing in the traditional national flag-like style in the 2010s, which was politicalized not for self-identity under feminism to show her conformity under patriotism (Emad, 2006). Even with jackets and trousers, the costumes of Wonder Woman were designed for heterosexual male pleasure, which foregrounded her mesomorphic body type with sexual attractiveness as an inherently hypersexual character.

3. Wonder Woman in TV Episode: a Symbol of Feminism

In the first episode of the *Wonder Woman* TV series aired in 1976, Wonder Woman was portrayed as a powerful, charming, and independent female figure, challenging the conventional gender roles and stereotypes associated with femininity. Moreover, the plots and character designs in this episode implied feminist critiques of patriarchy.

3.1 The Contention Over Traditional Femininity

The first episode of the *Wonder Woman* TV series begins with a scene on Paradise Island, a peaceful society governed by females, which is borrowed from Greek mythology. The utopian all-female society on Paradise Island, although in a fictional world, challenges the normalization of labour division between men and women based on biological differences. It shows that women can do the work typically associated with males, such as participating in political activities or engaging in wars, which can be read as questioning the "class/caste system" based on "natural reproductive difference between the sexes" and "tyranny of sexual division based on biology" proposed by Shulamith Firestone (1970, p. 198). Wonder Woman, as the symbol of Paradise Island, has numerous valuable qualities that redefine femininity. Despite the high social status of Wonder Woman as a princess on the island, she treats other women from different classes and races with respect as well as equality, helping them with chores like taking care of the patients. In the competition for the honour of becoming Wonder Woman, she does not utilize her superpower to gain herself advantages. As a heroic figure and role model, her identity challenges the gendered prejudices of femininity, which is stereotypically referred to as submissive, appearance-focused, and emotionally fragile (Echols, 2019).

Challenging the gender stereotypes on women, Wonder Woman actively engages with American social issues, symbolizing female empowerment. After escorting Steve Trevor, an American Major accidentally crashes his plane on the Themyscira, to the US, Wonder Woman disrupts the conspiracy of the Nazi party. She intervenes in the secret mission of stealing classified information of national interest by single-handedly defeating a squad sent by the Third Reich. She also prevents a raid against an American bomb factory in Brooklyn conducted by Nazi Colonel Oberst von Blasko. As an admirable crime fighter, Wonder Woman finds fulfilment by actively engaging in American social and political life rather than through "sexual passivity" or "nurturing maternal love", which disputes the "feminine mystique" proposed by Betty Friedan in 1963. To some extent, Wonder Woman reshapes the image of femininity as an inspiring female figure. The female audience of the *Wonder Woman* TV series might be motivated to pursue career paths other than a housewife, which was believed as the only definition of female fulfilment in the 1960s (Friedan, 1963).

3.2 The Dispute Over Patriarchy

In the TV episode, Wonder Woman attempts to challenge the collective male dominance by disobeying the rules set by men in the US. After stopping three male thieves from robbing the bank, Wonder Woman is questioned, if not interrogated, by a policeman in a contemptuous manner. Rather than filling out forms required by the police officers to show her obedience, Wonder Woman simply walks away, demonstrating the potential female agency to unhinge the structure of repressive patriarchy (Acker, 1989). She also contests the exploitation of female workers conducted by a male circus owner, who treats her as a hypersexualized performer. Exploiting her labour, the greedy circus owner asks Wonder Woman to bounce bullets with her bracelets without any safety precautions during a circus show. Upon realizing that the circus owner intends to kill her to evade paying for her work, Wonder Woman uses her superpowers to demand a fair salary for workplace equality. Resisting the unfair treatment imposed by the male policeman and circus owner, Wonder Woman challenges the patriarchal social structure that Kate Millett (1970, p. 136) may describe as "male ruling females". By opposing the male dominance that problematizes gender relations, Wonder Woman demonstrates the potential women's autonomy and self-reliance in her individual efforts from the perspective of liberal feminism, which can be read as calling for social reform addressing gender discrimination and equality.

After defeating Nazi colonel Oberst von Blasko and female spy Marcia in the US, Wonder Woman says: "You obviously have little regard for womanhood. You must learn to respect" and "Women are the wave of the future" (Wonder Woman, 1976). By emphasizing "womanhood" and "women" as an umbrella term for all females from different ethnic and class backgrounds, the statements made by Wonder Woman provide a sense of unity, which is in line with the notion of "sisterhood" in the second-wave feminism (Morgan, 1970, p. 187). It is undeniable that the term can be problematic and dishonest as a bonding mechanism for it neglects the "heterogeneity" and "hierarchical structures" among women (hooks, 1991, p. 135). But in this TV episode, the term "sisterhood" signifies not only collectivism but also solidarity amongst women, especially feminists, in recognition of the shared effort against sexism under patriarchy (Evans, 2015, p. 79). In addition, in the conversation between Wonder Woman and her mother Queen Hippolyta back on Paradise Island, Hippolyta says: "I name this island paradise for an excellent reason: there is no man on it. Thus, it is free of their wars, their greed, their hostility, their barbaric, masculine behaviours." The all-women government ruling the island can be read as women's liberation under radical feminism that dismantles patriarchy as the structure of male domination. As the masculine characteristics are portrayed as undesirable traits, Wonder Woman and Amazon people question the notion of male superiority under patriarchy while cherishing sisterhood with an inspirational purpose from a radical feminist perspective.

4. Wonder Woman in Movie: a Figure Under Gendered Stereotypes

In the *Wonder Woman* movie released in 2017, Wonder Woman was portrayed as a stereotypical white middle-class woman in the storyline that lacks racial diversity. No longer a symbol of feminism, her clothes in the movie signified the beauty myth under the male gaze.

4.1 The "Whiteness" of Wonder Woman

In the opening scene of the movie, Wonder Woman is portrayed as a pale and slender female with a tall nose. She wears a sumptuous evening dress and stylish high heels in Paris. As a researcher on cultural anthropology and archaeology, which is her cover identity, Wonder Woman has her own office in the Musée du Louvre with considerable pricey antiques as her collection. She acts in an innocent and natural way of enjoying unmarked privileges without any explanation of how she manages to succeed (Clark Mane, 2012). Her privileged status can be traced back to her childhood living on Paradise Island before she arrived in the US. The young Wonder Woman is acted by a white child actress, which reinforces and reaffirms the "whiteness" of Wonder Woman. It should be noted that there are only two actresses who are explicitly portrayed as women of colour on Paradise Island, a maid and an unskilled female warrior trained by other warriors. It is evident that women from racial minority backgrounds take subordinate, if not inferior, roles on Paradise Island. Wonder Woman is, or at least should be, one of the women of colour on the island. However, due to her high rank in the monarchy as a princess, she is served and protected by female figures from various races, signifying the intersectionality of gender issues and race issues with class (Davis, 2008). The film depiction of Wonder Woman and Paradise Island in the movie shares some similarities with the TV series in the 1970s. Although such cinematic portrayal might be acceptable or even welcomed in the 1970s, it should be read as the symbolic annihilation of women from underrepresented communities, signifying the class privileges of white women. The privileged position of white females should be criticized for it reinforces the representational power of whiteness "as the symbol of humanity" (Lavender, 2011, p. 157). In such circumstances, the sisterhood foreground on Paradise Island can be read as a bounding force for non-white women, forcing them to embrace the acceptable forms of resistance for gender equality set by white women, which is symbolized as the movie plot of sending Wonder Woman, a woman with "whiteness", to be the superheroine representing the Amazons and "the face of feminist movement" (Beck, 2021, p. 97).

In addition, the diversity of sexuality is also excluded from the narrative of the film since the heterosexual relationship is presented to be normalized as the only pattern of romantic relationships. The queer elements are inherently embedded in the Amazon as an all-female society (Ormrod, 2020, p. 45). Therefore, in the first half of the movie, Wonder Woman can be viewed as a queer icon, stating that "men are essential to reproduction, but not necessary to the pleasures of the flesh". However, all the figures attracted to Wonder Woman portrayed in the movie are male and Wonder Woman is converted to heterosexual orientation in the end. Fighting against Ares as the climax of the movie, Wonder Woman states that "I believe in love", but all the memories she can recall in the flashback are her romantic experiences with Steve Trevor, her male lover. By implicitly coining the term "love" to heterosexual relationships only, it signifies the dominant position of heterosexuality and the attempt to normalize as well as naturalize it. Therefore, Phil Jimenez (2018) criticizes Wonder Woman in the

movie as a “love icon” rather than a symbol of feminism or queer icon under the intersectional theoretical lens for the movie fails to challenge heteronormativity.

4.2 The Clothing Choices of Wonder Woman

On Paradise Island, all the Amazons, including Wonder Woman, wear leather off-shoulder tops and mini-skirts. Their clothes are designed in a skin-tight style, accentuating their breasts while revealing their slim arms, shoulders, and thighs. Compared with the clothes the Amazons had in the 1970s *Wonder Woman* TV series, the dressing style in the movie is more revealing, if not more sexualized. In addition, the Amazons wear their studded leather war armours throughout the day in the movie, whether they are training for war, playing around, or just reading bedtime stories. In comparison, the Amazons portrayed in the TV series can choose their clothing from athletic styles, bohemian styles, and other clothing choices. To some extent, the dressing style of the Amazons in the film signifies their physical aggressiveness with swords, shields, and amors, which can be associated with masculinity, especially hegemonic masculinity. The aggressiveness is explicitly shown as Antiope, the general of Paradise Island, uses the metaphor of “scorpion must sting” and “wolf must hunt” to describe the Amazon people. Their choices are made in a specific context where revealing sexuality and showing aggressiveness is normalized on Paradise Island based on Rosalind C. Gill’s (2007) ideas of the cultural context of fashion choices. Rather than “autonomous choices” (Duits and Van Zoonen, 2006) that challenge the stereotypical notion of femininity, Amazon’s clothing style in the movie should be understood in terms of the external influence of the inherently militaristic culture of Paradise Island. Therefore, it is problematic to read the clothing of Wonder Woman, along with other Amazonia, as a feminist symbol of their confidence in their fit bodies and sexuality with hidden messages of sex-positivity and self-reliance (see Ormrod, 2020). In view of the pervasive repressed self-representation in the Amazon society, Wonder Woman, as the princess and symbol of Paradise Island, might be far from a feminist symbol wearing the iconic Amazonian style of clothes that signifies militarism and masculinity.

After Wonder Woman lands in the United States, the first instinct of Steve Trevor, the American pilot saved by Wonder Woman, is to change the clothes worn by Wonder Woman for they are not in line with the beauty fashion in America. When Wonder Woman sees girdle as tummy-control shapewear in a luxurious boutique before changing her clothes, she asks Etta, the female secretary of Steve Trevor, “Why must you keep them (tummies) in?” (Wonder Woman, 2017). Etta, who is relatively overweight, rolls her eyes and replies “Only women with no tummies would ask that question”. Aided by Etta, Wonder Woman tries 226 outfits, including a vintage Lolita dress, a striped linen shirt with a pencil skirt, and a jacket skirt suit. However, it should be noted that clothes in the stores are predominantly presented with tummy-control design features, such as a belt around the stomach area, which signifies the prevailing cultural discourses of the “beauty myth” of a standardized slim body under male gaze (Maddox, 2021). The discourse defines the “objective and universal beauty” that all women “must want to embody” (Wolf, 2002, p. 14).

In the movie, the emphasis on tummy-control cloth design can be interpreted as a beauty myth that advocates beautiful women should have defined stomachs as the “docile body” proposed by feminists using Foucault’s work (Butler, 1990, p. 144). Wonder Woman’s and Etta’s perceptions of bodies are disciplined under the prevailing sociocultural discourses of attractiveness. Therefore, their consciousness about the tummy-control design can be read as a perpetual self-surveillance process through monitoring their own bodies and comparing them with the ideal body promoted in the boutique. It also explains why Etta rolls her eyes in a sarcastic way and responds to Wonder Woman’s question with an envious attitude, although she does not have any harmful intention. The appearance of Wonder Woman makes her reflect on her overweight body size and becomes slightly frustrated about it. Coming from a foreign country with no prior knowledge of the beauty myth in America, Wonder Woman happily accepts it and becomes enthusiastic about trying out different stylish outfits, rather than challenging it like the Wonder Woman in the TV series. In the TV series, Wonder Woman refuses to change her Amazonian clothes, maintaining her cultural identity until she is forced to wear a different outfit for her cover identity. In the latter half of the movie, Wonder Woman even intentionally steals a beautiful evening dress to signify her sexual capital in order to attract the German general Erich Ludendorff in her mission. Dressed in a stylish outfit, Wonder Woman embraces, rather than challenges, the fashion that is designed for male pleasure, which makes her an objectified figure for male pleasure.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the cultural shift of Wonder Woman from a symbol of feminism to a figure under stereotypical gendered representation on screen is closely related to the decline of second-wave feminism in the 1970s and the emergence of fourth-wave feminism in the 2010s. Wonder Woman was an inspirational role model and symbol of female empowerment in the 1970s, redefining the biased ideas of femininity and challenging patriarchy. As a fictional character, she demonstrates the independence and agency of women as an inspiring role model for females in the TV series as is encouraged in second-wave feminism. However, in view of the inclusiveness and racial diversity advocated by fourth-wave feminists, the storylines of *Wonder Woman* movie in the 2010s fail to acknowledge the various ethnicities, class backgrounds, and sexual orientations among women as a heterogeneous group. Her clothing choices demonstrate her yielding gestures to the millenarian cultural context on Paradise Island and the beauty fashion serving male pleasure in the US from the perspectives of fourth-wave feminism. To a certain extent, the shifting roles of Wonder Woman from a feminist icon to a stereotypical figure marks the changing agenda of different waves of feminism for a more progressive view on gender issues.

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