

## WONDER WOMAN (2017): AN AMBIGUOUS SYMBOL OF FEMINISM

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### ABSTRACT

Wonder Woman is a popular fictional character who promotes the idea of an independent and powerful woman. Her name is glorified as she is assumed that she changes to the idea of the world being solely led and dominated by men. A remake film released in 2017 brings this popular character back into the silver screen. Despite being highly anticipated, not everyone supports Wonder Woman as an ideal symbol for women's empowerment as dreamed by the feminists. Instead, the perception directed to Wonder Woman is divided into two lenses. One side believes that Wonder Woman is in line with the idea of feminism. In contrast, the other believes that she is the ideal example of a character who conforms to the standard set by patriarchal ideology. In investigating this idea, this paper applies Kate Millett's concept of "personal is political" and how men and women's roles in society have been passed down to the younger generation. The discussion illustrates that patriarchal power has infiltrated the character of Wonder Woman. Therefore, Wonder Woman becomes an ambiguous symbol when used for the women empowerment movement.

**Keywords:** *ambiguous; feminism; film; patriarchal power; Wonder Woman*

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### INTRODUCTION

Taking setting of time during World War I, Wonder Woman (Jenkins, 2017) tells a story about Diana Prince, the Wonder Woman, who is searching for a god called Ares. Ares is jealous of humanity and then he leads humans to destruction. At the same time, Zeus has created the Amazonian living in the Themyscira, also called as the Paradise Island, to protect the human from destruction

orchestrated by Ares. The Amazonian is a race of women warriors hidden from the men's world where the great war (World War I) has consumed human and created despair for everyone. To keep the balance in human life and avoid Ares to create destruction, Paradise Island is hidden and protected from the men's world. However, it all changes when Steve Trevor, a US pilot captain and also a spy, enters the area of the Paradise

Island by mistake when the magic shield camouflaging the area of the Paradise Island weakens. Captain Steve Trevor eventually becomes Diana's love interest and accompanies her in searching for Ares who is in the men's world. Diana, now taking the role as Wonder Woman, is willing to hunt Ares and kill him, so that the great war could end.

Wonder Woman (Jenkins, 2017) is a superhero film based on a comic published by DC Comics and firstly appeared in 1941. The popularity of Wonder Woman as a comic character makes it was adapted to a television series portrayed by Lynda Carter in 1975-1979. Carter's Wonder Woman was successful in shifting girls' idol from blonde-haired and blue-eyed Barbie to a brunette-haired and dark-eyed Wonder Woman which at the same time sets a new beauty standard for the girls and promotes the outstanding quality of an ideal woman: self-reliant; independent; and powerful. Therefore, Wonder Woman, created by psychologist William Moulton Marston, is often associated with the feminism movement which proliferates in the middle of the twentieth century.

When Wonder Woman was only a comic character, she appeared on the first issue of Ms. Magazine in 1972 underneath a banner "Wonder Woman for President" (Kilkenny, 2017). Ms. Magazine is an American feminist magazine founded by feminists Gloria Steinem and Dorothy Pittman Hughes. Thus, the appearance of Wonder Woman in Ms. Magazine in 1972 implied how the hero became a symbol for the second-wave feminism. Ms. Magazine featuring Wonder Woman has become an influential moment until present days.

In 2016, United Nations recruited the fictional character Wonder Woman to be "an Honorary Ambassador for the Empowerment of Women and Girls on 21 October 2016, in support of Sustainable Development Goal 5 – to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (United Nations, 2016). The United Nations believes that Wonder Woman has been recognized across the globe for her commitment to protecting the others as depicted in her comic, television series, and film. She is the model for women and girls' empowerment in the world. What is done by the United Nations shows how Wonder Woman has great influence because she can convince a prominent world organization to believe in the values that she brings.

The use of Wonder Woman in the past makes the remake film in 2017 was highly anticipated by many people. Now being portrayed by Gal Gadot in the twenty-first century, the new Wonder Woman film continues the legacy of the character from the twentieth century. Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman (Jenkins, 2017) still portrays similar quality as set by Lynda Carter. Even though the new film adaptation is slightly different from its original character portrayed in the comic, Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman still becomes a symbol of women empowerment.

Wonder Woman serves two sides of a contrasting idea which in one hand illustrates the idea of feminism, but on another hand, her character shows the contradictory idea. How people perceive her is split in two. On one side, Wonder Woman is glorified among its audience, both feminists like in the 1970s and the non-activist. This fictional character is also well-accepted by the audience because of the personal quality she promotes. Her

character shows how equality for women should be. Her beauty is accompanied by her heroic traits: powerful, self-reliant, and independent. However, on another side, Wonder Woman has a side that backlashes the idea of feminism. The controversy of Wonder Woman is also indicated how some people sent a petition to the United Nations to remove Wonder Woman as its honorary ambassador only around two months after Wonder Woman was appointed to the “job” (McCann, 2016). They basically objected to the idea of Wonder Woman being UN ambassador because they believe that Wonder Woman is unfit since they believe that she reflects the men domination in her characterization which makes her not suitable to represent the empowerment for women and girls across the globe promoted by UN.

Therefore, this paper is going to investigate the ambiguous side of Wonder Woman who brings the concept of women empowerment and men domination. To investigate how Wonder Woman becomes an ambiguous symbol of feminism, this paper is going to apply Kate Millett’s feminist criticism which also explores the men domination as discussed in her books.

Women have been regarded as the second-class group in a structured patriarchal society. They are treated as a mere object, rather than an equal partner to the men who are the subject in a society that believes in a patriarchal system. Patriarchal ideology is seen as a concept for a feminist. This ideology starts from the biological difference between men and women, then exaggerated by social and cultural practice and it becomes a social construction. Sultana (2012, p. 3) stated that this ideology:

exaggerates biological differences between men and women, making certain that men always have the dominant, or masculine, roles and women always have the subordinate or feminine ones... The patriarchal system is characterized by power, dominance, hierarchy, and competition. So, patriarchy is a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women.

The position of men and women has rooted in society for years and it shapes what is perceived to be *normal* and *abnormal* in society, like the role of men and women. In the beginning, the division differentiates men and women because of their physical or biological difference, but then this difference is extended to the social and cultural role of men and women. Then, it is stretched again to the unequal position of men and women. There is a power relation that determines the hierarchy of men and women in society. As a more dominant group, men of the patriarchal society set women as their subordinates.

A problem occurs because the man-made hierarchy mentioned above results in how women are treated unfairly in various aspects of life, like politics, economy, cultural and social life. The unfair treatment directed to women here is because they are physically and psychologically women. For example, it is shown by how women in the United States of America had no right to vote before 1920 and how women got lower wages compared to men when doing the same job in the middle of the twentieth century. This inequality has a reason, which is:

Individuals living in the United States today are encouraged to believe that (only) white men are fully human; and because (only) white men are fully human, society is organized around their

needs, reality is seen from their perspectives, their attributes are seen as most valuable and productive, and they (naturally) dominate politics and culture. (Becker, 1999, p. 23).

Thus, the feminism movement is born to fight for justice and equality for the dominated, oppressed and exploited women. This idea supports what Simone De Beauvoir described in her *The Second Sex* (1949): that women have been treated as lower than men ever since in the biological level which is believed that women are 'incidental' and passive being (p. 35) also since the beginning of the patriarchal days, men have held women to be in the state of dependence and established her as the Other (p. 159). As it is continued for a long time, men glorify their domination, and women are oppressed to stay passive and dependent. Then, it shapes how men and women have a certain role in society. The role difference becomes pervasive and becomes the norm. Inequality and mistreatment for women, as a result, proliferate.

Kate Millett, an American author, is one of the prominent feminist figures who put the foundation of American feminism, specifically for the second wave movement through her book entitled *Sexual Politics* which is published in 1970. In her book, there are two important ideas. First, Millett established the ground theory of "the personal is political" which later is adopted as the slogan of second-wave feminism. Men as the ruling class consider the problems of women are personal, therefore they exclude it from political analysis (Grant, 2013, p. 33). While at the same time, women's *personal* problem has happened for a long period. The problem of inequality and mistreatment towards women should have been a concern

for society. In fact, the *personal* problem is neglected, and it establishes the male supremacy. It emphasizes that what happens on a personal level is a reflection of how a bigger structure works politically. It is well described in women's disadvantageous position in the market, male-center-ed marriage, the portrayal of women in the advertising and entertainment industry, and how women's psyche seen by clinical psychology (Hartmann, 1981, p. 13).

The next important point is how Millett analyses patriarchal power. She believes that the power of men has been institutionalized. The domination of men is socially constructed. She stated that "sexual politics obtains consent through the "socialization" of both sexes to basic patriarchal politics with regard to temperament, role, and status" (2000, p. 26). The institutionalized patriarchal power manifests in how young girls and boys have been socialized to their *normal* temperament, role, and status, where the boys whose masculine personality is the superior one and the girls whose feminine personality as the inferior one. Women are raised and socialized since childhood to accept patriarchal values and norms. It makes women's conformity or submissiveness to the established system appears to be natural, whereas it is actually forced by the men domination, not natural. Men set the standard of what is classified as normal for society. The men's standard manifests in how women are pictured in many conditions. Men take a bigger role in leading and shaping society by claiming that it is their role to be active in public affairs, dealing with politics and economics whereas women are tied to do household chores. Even in a family, women do the house chores and raise the children

under the husband's shadows that are in a higher hierarchy.

## DISCUSSION

After visiting the ideas of feminism as described by Millett, investigating Wonder Woman (Jenkins, 2017) as a symbol of feminism becomes a more thorough discussion. It is true that Wonder Woman serves the desired set of traits of the ideal woman: self-reliant; independent; and powerful. But at the same time, we need to recognize her as a character of popular culture that her attraction lies in the promise of the utopian dream of the American collective desire (Storey, 2006, p. 9). Wonder Woman is the imagination of the ideal women desired by the audience who wish for equality for women because, in reality, it is difficult to have the personality and position that Wonder Woman promotes. In simpler words: because it exists in the film, it means that it does not really exist in reality.

### **“Personal is Political” in Entertainment Industry**

In real life, it is difficult to be like Wonder Woman because the ideology of patriarchy is still pervasive in almost anywhere across the globe. Like what Millett stated about personal is political, it also refers to a small thing in our daily life that is actually a reflection of political ideology, including how women are portrayed in the entertainment industry. When Wonder Woman is approached, it is found that despite how symbolic Wonder Woman is, “contemporary television presents women as “desirable” whenever they engender one of three traditional female archetypes: nurturer, vixen, or victim” (Wright, 2003, p. 40). This is because the idea of women—people who

are needed to be consoled—has rooted in a patriarchal society. Even a fictional character has unconsciously influenced by at least one of those female archetypes. As a nurturer, a woman is associated with motherly quality that is intuitive and caring, like the willingness to assist someone, protect the loved ones, and saving lives. This archetype also includes the tendency for women to develop by their domestic function: caring for the family by doing household chores and cooking for the family. A vixen archetype refers to the female trait which is associated with short-tempered, emotional, aggressive, and do not think deeply before doing something. Then, the victim archetype covers the idea that the female character in the entertainment industry, including film, must have endured oppression by a more dominant character. These archetypes interestingly exist in Wonder Woman as portrayed by actress Gal Gadot by its film remake released in 2017.

The first archetype of Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman shows the nurturer archetype. Even though she is portrayed as a superhero, she is embedded with a motherly trait. She intuitively cares about people's suffering because of the war. It leads her to bravely engage herself in a battle after talking of a helpless mother carrying her baby in a war zone. She sacrifices herself to make a progress in the battlefield ignoring the danger she might receive. Being a superhero who is caring may be a usual trait possessed by a superhero promoting a just world for people. However, in a patriarchal society, women are associated with domestic affairs: being a mother and a wife. These domestic roles turn to be problematic in patriarchal society because women who are mothers or wives are set to be dependent on men (the husband and

father) in the family. By this, women or wives are put into a secondary position to the men or husband. This concept actually has existed a long time ago since the colonial period of America. Porterfield stated that the authority within marriage in Puritan family, husbands should rule the wives and wives should be dependent on their husbands, subject to the men's will as justified by religion (1992, p. 20). The idea of inequality between men and women in a family problematizes the portrayal of Wonder Woman.

The idea of "women are dependent" to men is seen through how Wonder Woman is portrayed as having love interest with Captain Trevor. Even though their love story is not well developed because Captain Trevor sacrificed himself, this aspect becomes unnecessary in building Wonder Woman's image as a desired future woman of America. The existence of this love narrative reminds us that Wonder Woman is *only* a woman who longs for man's love. Captain Trevor's sacrifice also indicates the idea that even a Wonder Woman needs (to be dependent on) a man's help. It seems that the man character has more power provided by his knowledge of how the world runs. He knows a better strategy to stop greater destruction. He thinks logically too, less emotional than Wonder Woman herself who is tied to her desire to kill Ares, her enemy.

The second archetype manifested in Wonder Woman is the vixen archetype which is shown by how eager she is in searching for Ares even though she has no clue about how Ares looks like or where Ares is. She decides to follow Captain Trevor to go to the men's world where the great war is taking place. One real example of the vixen archetype possessed by Wonder Woman is that when

she aggressively attacks General Erich Ludendorff because she believes that he is Ares in disguise. After killing him, she witnesses that the war is still going and the production of deadly gas used to mass killing is still running. Then she realizes that General Erich Ludendorff who she has killed is not Ares. He is only a man whispered by Ares to do mass destruction to human life. What happens in this scene shows how aggressive Wonder Woman in getting Ares.

From one perspective, being vixen is like another level of being a courageous individual. Being *aggressive* is often associated with the absence of smart and careful thinking prior to the action taken. It is not an intelligent or wise choice that is taken in a critical battle. Instead, what motivates Wonder Woman is an emotional urge, even though she has a good purpose: to end the war. This is a drawback of her heroic action and makes her an ambiguous symbol of feminism. At first, the feminist believes that Wonder Woman puts an end to the idea that women are "less capable than men of controlling their emotions and making moral judgment dispassionately" (Bein, 2017, p. 120). But what happens in the Wonder Woman film remade in 2017 backlashes the feminist's thought. Emotional move dominates Wonder Woman's battle in the film whereas she has the basic concept as an intelligent woman since she is portrayed as someone who has read books and trains to combat on her regular basis. It implies that the knowledge she has gained no wisdom and the training she received lacks in tactical strategy. On the contrary, the strategy is offered by Captain Trevor, the lead man actor, and Wonder Woman could not establish a tactical action. It indirectly

convinces the audiences: that the lead man character is better on the battlefield.

Besides, Wonder Woman looks so awkward and insensitive in the new environment of the men's world. Even though it is her first time going to the men's world, attaching this cluelessness becomes a drawback to the idealization of Wonder Woman as an ideal woman. She looks like a clueless person and she seems to have no prior knowledge about the men's world even though she has read a lot of books according to the earlier scene when Wonder Woman just left the Paradise Island with Captain Trevor. This is not surprising because, in a patriarchal society, women are considered as individuals who use emotion more than their thinking. According to the patriarchal dichotomy of men and women, women are emotion driven. This indeed backlashes the idea of women for feminist because it emphasizes women as flawed individuals who is inappropriate to have a certain role.

The third archetype is the concept that a woman character is a victim who is pitied, but at the same time becomes her driving force to excel her potential. Wonder Woman becomes the victims because of the bitter history of the past fight involved Zeus, her mother, and Ares which then caused a prophecy for her; the death of her aunt and love interest. She needs to end the war which she did not start. In the Wonder Woman film 2017, it is told that she is a demigod, the child of Zeus, even though in the comic, Aphrodite is the one who creates Wonder Woman and the rest of the inhabitant of the Paradise Island. Because Wonder Woman is the child of Zeus, she is given a task to kill Ares to bring balance to the world. At first, she has no idea that she is the child of Zeus and a half-sister to Ares.

The truth has been hidden by her mother because her mother, Queen Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazonian, is afraid to let Wonder Woman fight Ares. The pitied side Wonder Woman is stressed by the death of her mentor that is considered as a great loss for the heroine, but before she could deal with her grief, she must follow Captain Trevor to hunt Ares down. In addition, at the end of the film, Wonder Woman also losses her love interest, Captain Trevor, who assists her in stopping Ares. This is suffering that she must endure.

This narrative conforms to the notion that either men or women have their position. Once women move from their designated position, they would have a bad experience because of it. It implies that being an independent woman in a patriarchal society somehow guarantees her to suffer. Besides, how courageous and independent women are, they are under the domination of men. As Sultana stated that "men always have the dominant, or masculine, roles and women always have the subordinate or feminine ones" (2012, p. 3). Women follow the vision of the men who are considered as the ones who *give* a chance to women to be active in the community. Whereas, women are merely *given* the opportunity to empower themselves. This is another evidence that women in the Wonder Woman film are under the power of men. Women play a role as an object while men are the subject.

### **Institutionalized Patriarchal Power as Manifested in Wonder Woman's Appearance**

As explained by Millett, patriarchal power has been institutionalized. It has manifested in Wonder Woman's appearance.



Wonder Woman was firstly created by a man, psychologist William Moulton Marston. Even Marston portrays Wonder Woman as how the future ideal woman should be, the way he defines *woman* could not be separated from his point of view as a man. He sees the future woman should be independent because an independent woman in a patriarchal society is not the norm. According to De Beauvoir,

the independent woman—and above all the intellectual, who thinks about her situation—will suffer, as a female, from an inferiority complex; she lacks leisure for such minute beauty care as that of the coquette whose sole aim in life is to be seductive; follow the specialists' advice as she may, she will never be more than an amateur in the domain of elegance. (1989, p. 646).

This idea believes that independent woman is regarded as a flaw in the society, they are the Other, therefore it is *normal* to expect that the independent woman will suffer when being in a solid patriarchy society. In response to the inequality problem, Marston then created Wonder Woman, who he sees as the future ideal woman. But how he portrays Wonder Woman is still in accordance with men's standard: male gaze. Becker believes that "most heroines are thin and beautiful" (1999, p. 22).



Figure 1. Left to right: The Flash, Superman, Cyborg, Wonder Woman, Batman, Aquaman (Justice League, n.d.)

It also applies to Wonder Woman's appearance. To make it clear, the poster in Figure 1 clarifies how superheroes and superheroine are seen and expected by the audience. Figure 1 portrays Wonder Woman when she joins the Justice League, after the death of Superman. With Batman, she recruits The Flash, Aquaman, and Cyborg to fight the villain.

The most noticeable difference among these superheroes is their costume. All of the superheroes covering their skin, their body, arms, and legs to get fully protected when engaging in a battle, but Wonder Woman, the only superheroine, wears a more revealing costume: off-shoulder top and a short skirt, plus a pair of boots. Indeed, the way she dresses is in accordance with the Amazonian culture where she comes from. But a question should be directed to the creator of Wonder Woman: why do Wonder Woman and the rest of the inhabitant of Paradise Island who is all women dress that way? They are all warriors. They train to combat on a regular basis. A more protective armor should help them in defending themselves during a battle.

What happens in the portrayal of Wonder Women above is what Millett calls as institutionalized patriarchal power. The patriarchal ideology, as a dominant ideology which has been striving for years in many institutions like religious institution, political and economic institution, affects how a fictional character like Wonder Woman is born. It indicates that the male gaze is prominent in the creation of Wonder Woman. According to a male gaze, women are sexual objects. Laura Mulvey, a film critic, "emphasizes that the act of *looking* is an important factor of the male gaze, stressing that the scenario most often involves the



man *looking* and the female being *looked at*" (Caffrey, 2020, n.p.). It covers three stages of the male gaze: the gaze of the person who creates the image; the characters within the work; and the gaze of the audience. In Wonder Woman's instance, she is created by Marston, a man who has manifested the concept of women according to the patriarchal ideology. Wonder Woman dresses to be an object seen by men's point of view. Her curve, arms, and legs are visible to satisfy what is expected by men. Thus, a revealing costume is put on Wonder Woman and her fellow warriors living in the Paradise Island and women warrior's costume that is revealing their body is considered *normal*, as Millett said that this kind of *normal* has been socialized to the young children since they are little.

The Otherness of Wonder Woman is highlighted by Wonder Woman's ancestry. Portraying Wonder Woman as the child of Zeus indicates that she is no human. In other words, she is the Other even though she promotes the idea of empowered women. It distances her with real women in real life. In fact, women are regarded as the Other in a patriarchal society. Again, it confirms the concept of "women are the Other".

## CONCLUSION

Wonder Woman (Jenkins, 2017) at a glance looks like a character that promotes the idea of feminism because she is a figure who is independent, self-reliant, and powerful (the ideal woman according to the feminism idea). Historically, she is given a role to promote women's empowerment. It makes her understandable when being associated with women's empowerment.

Kate Millett believed that personal matter reflects a political issue existing in a certain society. It includes entertainment. In entertainment like film, the characterization of the men and women in it is determined by the dominant ideology. In the case of Wonder Woman, the dominant ideology is patriarchy. The creation of Wonder Woman confirms the standard set by men in patriarchal ideology. These series of flaws in Wonder Woman's portrayal indicate how she conforms to the concept of ideal woman according to the patriarchal ideology: women are inferior; women are the Other. Millett also believes that the role of men and women have been socialized to young children. Then, they grow up understanding what is regarded as normal for men and women in accordance with the dominant ideology which has been socialized to them since young. As a result, they will unlikely object the definition of normal in their surroundings. Whereas, the "normal" here is subjective, following the standard of the dominant ideology which is patriarchal.

The analysis above shows that Wonder Woman backlashes the idea of feminism. If she is used to symbolizing the effort to achieve women's equality, then this symbol becomes an ambiguous symbol of feminism. Therefore, Wonder Woman could not provide a holistic portrayal of ideal woman longed by feminist, a character that is fully independent of the oppression of the men domination which has been socially structured. Instead, Wonder Woman is an example of the structured patriarchy ideology.

Patriarchal ideology has infiltrated almost every aspect of our life. It includes in the creative production of a film like Wonder Woman. In the production of a film, a dominant ideology in society influences the

creative process, then the product produced reflects that ideology. Even though the latest Wonder Woman film was released in 2017 when the feminism movement has made massive progress in fighting against women inequality, women are portrayed as the second-class group and more inferior compared to men. It also applies to women when they become the main character of the film. At the same time, the men counterpart is portrayed to have a higher quality which can be explicit or at least implicit. Thus, we need to be able to carefully analyze the characters in a film to really understand the ideology behind a certain film.

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