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# A Study Of The Strength Of Female Heroines in Gary Ross' Film The Hunger Game

In what ways have contemporary action films such as 'The Hunger Games' represented female characters as being more powerful? To what extent and why does this appeal to young female audiences?

Over the years, the representation of women in the media has changed dramatically. Due to a rise in feminist movements and women becoming more independent, there has been an increase in greater social equality, opportunities and power for all women in our society. As a result, this change has impacted the way in which females are being represented in many action films as many recent movies have featured tough female lead characters that include The Hunger Games, Divergent, Lucy and Salt etc. A lot more women are now involved in taking on lead roles and portraying characters that are tough and powerful which can appeal to young female audiences. In this essay I will be exploring the development of masculine femininity in action films in contemporary society.

Traditional gender roles of women in our society have changed and is a lot more different compared to a society in the past. The traditional gender roles of women include being vulnerable, emotional, polite and nurturing. This causes women to be sexualized within the media as a result of concepts such as the male-gaze theory so they can be used to attract men. Functionalist, Ann Oakley stated that gender socialization into boys being dominant creates a male dominated nature in society, which has an effect on the way they view women because they are under their control. Therefore women are represented as sex objects in order to appeal to male audiences. Many individuals in society hold the view that men are the cause of women's exploitation and oppression because society is male dominated and controlled by them. Radical feminists suggest that the patriarchal system needs to be destroyed in order to change societies views on the way women are expected to behave so that society no longer views women as an object. They hold the view that society is highly patriarchal which results in the exploitation of women, which is unequal therefore, it needs to be changed. The traditional view of a woman as a housewife or low-status worker has been kick-boxed out of the picture by the feisty, successful 'girl power' icons.

The rest of society viewed females as individuals that become housewives and carry out expressive roles within the household therefore; being tough is a trait that was never expected of them. Society had created an ideology that young girls would grow up to become housewives, who do not work and become dependent on the husband/male in the house. However, a rise in feminist movements (especially after the 'Suffragettes') had become a wakeup call in society causing women to respond to this consensus by acting against the traditional gender roles by adopting 'masculine traits' such as powerful, strong, independent and competitive. These traits were gender stereotypes influenced by the family and media and used, in order to place onto children by parents so they can follow the expected norms of society. This is evident within The Hunger Games through the main character 'Katniss' who is a hunter that stays away from romance. Katniss Everdeen has very stereotypical masculine traits because she takes on a more masculine role by being a breadwinner and providing for her family. This creates her a personality that involves being strong and highly powerful, identifying

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closely with masculinity as much as femininity. The concept of masculinity and femininity defines qualities that determine behaviors of men and women in society. Femininity is usually associated with being 'weak' and masculinity with 'tough'. Therefore, this involves Katniss having aggressive and stubborn traits that make her masculine but also innocent and an emotional side that makes her feminine. Characters such as Katniss are important in our society today as they can challenge stereotypes that cause women to be neglected. By adopting more masculine traits, they are resisting against the gender norms of society, which allows them to have more control over their behavior, instead of being controlled by men. According to the Marxist theory, the hegemonic view of society provokes an inequality between social groups, including gender, in a way in which, men take advantage of women for their own benefits, such as comfort, work .etc. Representations and stereotypes, including the objectification of women reinforce dominant ideologies in society. Furthermore, due to a patriarchal society, family life and the workplace is generally male dominated, therefore, women do not have a lot of say. As a result, women are oppressed and taken advantage of in order to take on a housewife role and fulfill the needs of the male. This can appeal to the target audiences of The Hunger Game, which are young teenage girls, to see strong lead female characters as transformative figures that struggle for survival as independent individuals. Therefore, young females can watch these films and create a self-fulfilling prophecy where they can adopt strong characteristics that allow them to be independent. Young girls would view Katniss Everdeen as an icon that represents a symbol of independence so they can look up to her.

Radical feminists suggest that relationship between males and females in society is based on the patriarchy of men, which is seen as the root cause of oppression and sexualisation of women. However, according to liberal feminism, women can bring about equality between males and females through securing change by legal reform. If laws were to change and women were to have independence in controlling earning and property, then the view of the position of women in society will also change. This is idea can be represented through Katniss in The Hunger Games. Katniss tries to achieve equality within the society that she lives in. She adopts masculine traits in order to try and survive, as she needs to hunt and provide for herself and her family. This suggests that women in society need to adopt masculine traits so they can be viewed as powerful. The Genre Theory states that the genre of a film is portrayed through the storyline and its characters; therefore, the character of Katniss values a sense of masculinized femininity because it is an action film. Her empowering and aggressive characteristics reflect the genre of the film because she is expected to have them due to the genre of it being an action film. Moreover, this idea reflects the view that more women are getting involved in becoming independent and providing for their family rather than being dependent on a male figure to be the breadwinner of the house. Instead of having to rely on male figures, females 'become' the man themselves by portraying characteristics associated with masculinity (strong, independent .etc.). Additionally, it can reflect the contemporary woman that is present in our society today as the contemporary woman is seen to be more independent and reliant on working herself in order to provide for their children. Liberal feminists believe that there is an increase in women having equal opportunities to enter the workforce; therefore they are free to choose not to be housewives. However, if women are having to adopt male characteristics in order to be seen as powerful then this questions the idea that real equality may not be achieved in society. There are expectations to how characters such as Katniss should present themselves in order to show that women have achieved some equality. In contrast, it can be argued that there is still a stigma that is attached to women having children but still having to work. Many women in society are starting to take on a 'triple shift' which involves them going out and working, coming home after work and doing domestic work and emotional work.

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Issues that challenge gender stereotypes are seen as very significant issues to be raised by women. Katniss portrays a rejection of feminine stereotypes by using a bow and arrow as her weapon rather than a dusting cloth (that could be seen as the patriarchal expectation weapon of housewives) which suggests that a change in society can be brought about for people to see women equal to men. This can appeal to young female audiences in a way so young girls aspire to be independent and individualistic like Katniss as opposed to a character such as Bella from Twilight. Young girls who view Bella as an icon would be seen as a female who is more likely to be dependent on men and not stand up for themselves. This is because; Bella represents a female character in Twilight without a superpower. This can emphasize the fact that the male characters can only have this power in order to portray their strong masculinity; therefore she is perceived as a weak character. As a result, young girls would be more likely to be influenced by Katniss, rather than Bella because Katniss presents a rejection of female values that many female teenagers aim to seek in contemporary society. Traditionally, young girls would have an ideology to get married and be dependent upon a male figure because they are seen as weak and need to be protected by men. Radical feminists can support this, as they would suggest that Katniss and other heroine characters are needed and should be represented in the media so that young girls can start portraying values that reject feminine stereotypes and the acceptance of a patriarchal society. Furthermore, as young people grow up, the power of conforming can cause them to copy the gender models they see (idolizing someone they look up to) and learn the division between what is seen as masculine and feminine, therefore watching action with strong heroine characters can influence them to adopt characteristics like her rather than 'sensitive' or 'vulnerable' characteristics like a traditional female would be seen to.

On the other hand, there are still some action films such as 007 (James Bond films), Spiderman, Transporter, Abduction, and American Hustle. Etc., which are present in our contemporary society that portrays women as weak and objectifies them. One example of an action film where women are portrayed as weak, is Taken. In this film, there are various examples where the females within the film are neglected and oppressed because they are seen as sex objects. The film involves a gang that kidnaps the daughter of the main character Bryan Mills and her friends and leads them into trafficking. This involves the females to be taken advantage of because they are seen as sex objects that can be used by males. Marxist feminists can support this because they suggest that, due to the capitalist nature of society; women are exploited and taken advantage of as a result of being seen as people who are owned by men. They would argue that, this ideology would not benefit women in any way but make them feel weak because they would feel as if they have lost their power in a male-dominated world. The characters Kim (Bryan's daughter) and her friend Amanda becomes a target for trafficking, which end being saved by Bryan, a male character. This creates an idea that women are innocent and vulnerable therefore they are easy targets of danger, however they are also weak and fearful, which means they cannot save themselves so they would have to be dependent on a male figure in order to save them from danger. Radical feminists would strongly be against this type of action film because it fails to represent the increase of independent women in a contemporary society. They believe that society is over-represented with the fact that women are highly dependent on men because views of gender roles are mainly patriarchal. This can appeal to a young female audience to be influenced into believing that this is how all females in society should be. It may cause them to seeing the actions of these female characters as completely rational and view them as being characters to look up to rather than a powerful character such as Katniss Everdeen and develop values that females are meant to be powerless and reliant on men, causing them to act upon this view.

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