

Rey, The New Feminine

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Abstract

The action heroine presents an insightful lens through which to examine changing gender roles and their representation. They can be viewed from two standpoints - regressive symbols of male fantasy or challengers of established cultural codes of gender. While Star Wars has traditionally been celebrated as an epic space opera with a timeless theme, the introduction of a principal female character, Rey, has marked a significant shift in a mostly male-dominated storyline. This paper argues that Rey, unlike many of her predecessors, is a desexualized action heroine not pandering to the traditional male gaze. A close examination of the film also reveals several instances of gender role reversals that establish Rey as the dominant character whose decisions drive forward the narrative of the film. Finally, the paper looks at how Rey challenges the very constitutional elements of traditional femininity, defining herself as a new feminine in the process.

Keywords: New Feminine, Male Gaze, Gender Representation, Star Wars.

Introduction

Star Wars is an epic space opera that was created by George Lucas and has been a part of American popular culture since the release of its first instalment in 1977. Since then, its fan base has spread globally and characters like Yoda, associated with wisdom, are popular even among those who may not have watched the series. The popularity of Star Wars has been escalating with the franchise developing into an enormously lucrative merchandising industry. The main story of Star Wars is told in trilogies while there have been other related standalone films such as *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016) and related television series such as the animated series *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*. Although a majority of the Star Wars fan base were initially young, white males, the franchise has gained popularity with African-American, Hispanic and Asian fans while the number of female fans has increased too (Pianka, 2013). The present owners of the franchise have been sensitive to this development and have incorporated a principal female character in the latest instalment of trilogies, beginning with *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) where audiences are introduced to Rey who is poised to become a Jedi and follows a path rather similar to that of Luke's in *A New Hope*. The film passes the Bechdel test and seems to be an attempt at widening the scope of the narrative to allow for more gender diversity. This paper discusses the character of Rey as being an action heroine whose portrayal can be read as a new feminine in the symbolic world of film, where cultural codes of gender often dictate onscreen male and female subjectivities.

It is something of a cliché to state that women are underrepresented in films and that their representations are largely sexualized, rarely challenging hegemonic representations of gender as demonstrated in various studies (Smith, Choueiti, Scofield, & Pieper, 2013; Smith & Beighley, 2015). In the present film scenario where characters largely fulfil expectations of gender norms, the action heroine has been a subject of much debate. Feminist film critics and academics attempt to grapple with such characters using mainly the binaristic perspective of psychoanalysis. There is legitimate concern that action heroines such as Sonja in *Red Sonja* (1985), played by Brigitte Nielson and Lara Croft of the *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001) are sexualized and their characterization and outward appearance play to the male gaze – a man's fantasy of what a heroine should be. Pamela Anderson's titular character in *Barb Wire* (1996) is another often cited example of such heroines. Tasker (2002) says that they embody "the big-breasted sexualised fantasy woman of comic-book traditions." However, this reductive tendency to view sexualised women as male fantasies having no agency is countered by MCAughey (2001)

who argues that white male fantasies, which make up for most of the images in Western culture, can also be appropriated for feminism. Brown (as cited in Bampatzimopoulos, 2015) has also contended that while the action heroine is a complex figure that can be viewed as a regressive symbol of male fantasy, they also have transgressive potential, at once pushing gender boundaries and traditional understanding of gender roles. Hill (2012) addresses this divide by arguing against the sufficiency of binaristic frameworks to analyse female heroines. She problematises psychoanalysis' positioning of males as essentially active and females as passive. Using Deleuzian notion of becoming, Hill proceeds to analyse the character of Ripley from *Alien* (1979), often categorized as a masculine figure, in a new and creative mode that is not constrained by the limitations of psychoanalysis.

Aim of the Study

This paper examines Rey as an action heroine whose being is more an assemblage of various qualities and actions, rather than as a female with masculine qualities. We argue that through her desexualisation and successful reversal of gender roles, Rey emerges as a new feminine.

Rey is De-Sexualised

Hollywood has produced a number of films that involve action heroines in the past. However, there has been much debate centred on their visual presence that is usually sexualised (Catwoman in *Catwoman* (2004), Natasha Romanoff from *The Avengers* (2012)). We argue that Rey is completely desexualized in how she is visually portrayed in the film. In the first shot that Rey appears on screen, her face is completely covered. It is difficult to discern if the character is female or male. The shot even makes it difficult to know if she is human or a humanoid alien creature as has been seen in the previous Star War films. The few scenes that follow showcase an athletic and capable scavenger at work. It is only when Rey exits the ruins and removes her headgear that her gender is revealed. In other words, Rey is introduced as a de-gendered character and this is the neutral bedrock upon which impressions of Rey as a character will be fashioned in the minds of the viewing audience.

This is a big shift from the other Star War films in the franchise. Princess Leia's introduction in *Star Wars Episode IV* (1977) was as a damsel in distress who was inserting that iconic bit of holographic information into R2-D2. While no overt sexualisation of Leia is detectable in the scene, she is still a beautiful damsel in distress with an aura of mystery around her. In these introductory scenes, there is already a massive difference in how the characters are positioned – the beautiful damsel in distress and the almost de-gendered scavenger.

The representation of the main female characters in the previous two trilogies of the franchise is clearly different from that in *The Force Awakens*. There has been sharp criticism of how the principal female characters in the films have been needlessly sexualised. In *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* Princess Leia is captured by Jabba the

Hutt and is made a slave where she is shown in the notorious metal bikini that needlessly sexualises her, an unequivocal example of catering to the male gaze. As Mulvey (1975) points out, fetishism builds up the physical beauty of the object, turning it into something satisfying in itself. Leia's character is graceful and there is an element of mystery that she exudes even when she is first introduced in *Episode IV: A New Hope*. The image of a beautiful, graceful and mysterious princess further fuels fetishised readings of Leia.

In the prequel trilogy, which is mainly the story of Anakin Skywalker from his childhood till his transformation into Darth Vader, we come across another strong female character: Padmé Amidala. But even here Padmé's character, in one of the Geonosis fighting scenes, is shown in a body hugging white suit enhancing her curves and showing her midriff. Though not as sexualised as Leia in the metal bikini, she is still the stereotypical princess who needs saving and protection by a knight, who in this case comes in the form of Anakin and with whom she eventually falls in love. Both Leia and Amidala are graceful in movement and appearance. In contrast, Rey is scavenging, fighting or piloting crafts, completely self-aware but with seemingly no regard for how she looks or sounds. Her unrefined nature is emphasised subtly by the similarity drawn between her and the vulture-like bedraggled bird that appears in the foreground as Rey speeds towards Niima Outpost towards the end of her first scene in the film. She is also not treated as a fragile thing by the male characters around her. Finn readily puts his feet and hand on Rey in a very inconsiderate manner as he climbs to take a look at what is capturing the Falcon.

Given the propensity of earlier instalments of the Star Wars franchise for undertones of sexualisation of their principal female characters, Rey is distinctly desexualized. Her clothing, for instance, throughout the film is pointedly modest. Her costume is an assemblage of light coloured, dirtied and worn out cloths and rags that cover most of her body. She has been given a costume that is more practical than revealing. An argument can be made that this is because she is a scavenger while Leia and Padmé are princesses. However, if the elements of exorbitance and glamour are overlooked and only the amount of skin revealed is examined, Rey's outfits throughout the film are not only constant but also modest. At any point in the film, only her calves, face, neck and a small bit of her arms are seen apart from her face. There is nothing provocative about how she dresses. In addition no make-up can be traced on Rey who sports a simple hairstyle as compared to the far better made-up and visually appealing Leia and Padmé. Pitted against the body-hugging, cleavage-revealing clothing that is usually the garb of choice for action heroines of Hollywood (and the male imagination), Rey's clothes are a point of contention when arguing for her desexualisation. They are also a conscious statement that point to the possibility of her narrative agency in this latest trilogy of the Star Wars franchise where, traditionally, female characters have had very little to do with driving the plot forward.

There is also the issue of masculinisation of the female hero where the attempt is to push against the male gaze to allow focus on the narrative agency of the characters. The masculinisation of "strong" characters such as Sarah O' Connor in *Terminator 2* (1991) and Ellen Louise Ripley in *Alien* (1979) led scholars such as Goodwill (2009) to discuss their "female masculinity." With the character of Rey, however, though physically strong, her muscularity is not conspicuous. Furthermore, Rey does not embody the ruggedness of other female action heroines. She does not carry around much weaponry (except for the staff and the light sabre towards the end) and does not own guns. In the whole film she rarely shows any interest in having a gun, and, interestingly, refuses to accept a gun when offered by Han Solo as they are about to enter Maz Kanata's place. On the other hand, there is also the case of deforming or branding the action heroine which is absent in Rey. Unlike action heroine Imperator Furiosa in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) who has a mechanical arm, Rey is neither given a physical deformity, nor is her appearance made less desirable by tactics such as short cropped hair or visible scars. The focus is more on her ability rather than physical appearance throughout the film which makes Rey an interesting presentation of the action heroine. While Rey may not be considered feminine by popular standards as idealized by Hollywood, she also does not fall into the territory of the overtly masculinised action heroines.

Reversal of Gender Roles

Hyde (2013) sums up the distinction in how men and women are portrayed in films noting that while men are presented as active, adventurous, logical leaders that move the plot forward, women tend to be passive, subordinate and marginal to the plot. Hill (1999) argues that "female action heroes confound binaristic logic in a number of ways, for they access a range of emotions, skills and abilities which have traditionally been defined as either 'masculine' or 'feminine'" (p.39). Following Hill's viewpoint, one can argue that the character of Rey transgresses traditional gender boundaries of the popular mind. While Rey is kind and sensitive, she is not over-emotional or melodramatic. Finn, a principal male character and Rey's friend, tends to over-react to situations. For instance, he hysterically shouts "Did you see that? Did you see that?" at Poe when he first shoots and takes out two cannons on the Finalizer. He also lords his superiority over Phasma, a captain of Stormtroopers, by emphatically asserting that he is in charge. On the other hand, Rey demonstrates restraint and barely reacts to situations with levels of excitement similar to Finn's. She is mostly calm throughout the film; for instance she hides her disappointment at receiving only one-quarter portion of food from Unkar Plutt, the scrap dealer, as payment for the parts that she had scavenged. Traditionally, it is female characters that are emotional while men are considered stoic and composed and Rey's character subverts this popular notion.

In the very first encounter with BB-8, Rey is established as a rescuer as she rescues BB-8 from the Jakku scavenger Teedo. When Finn first sets

eyes on Rey, she and BB-8 are being attacked by Unkar Plutt's cronies as they are trying to steal the droid from her. Even as Finn runs towards them with the presumed intention of rescuing her, he is taken aback by Rey's ability to defend herself and the droid. These incidents establish Rey as a rescuer and a protector, a role generally given to males in previous instalments of the franchise. It is interesting also to note that the speeder that Rey rides looks like a motorcycle. Mastery of vehicles has been linked traditionally to masculinity and Brown says (as cited in Bampatzimopoulos, 2015) that "symbolically the image of action heroines on motorcycles can be interpreted as a carefully orchestrated sign of liberation and empowerment" (p. 214).

The shots used for Rey are mostly low angle shots and straight eye-level shots. Even the first time she deals with Unkar Plutt, Rey is shot at eye-level and then with a low angle imparting a sense of equalness and strength to her even in a situation wherein Unkar is clearly in control of what she eats. Such shots confer a sense of power and dominance to Rey.

"Let go of me. I know how to run without you holding my hand."

Rey is a leader, someone always at the forefront of the action, the causal agent of events. This is a significant gender role reversal of males as active and females as passive. When they are being attacked by Stormtroopers, Finn takes Rey's hand twice as they run to escape. However, she throws off his hand both times. In one of the instances she tells him off shouting that she knows how to run on her own. Finally in a defining moment, Finn is knocked out by a blast. Rey wakes him up, gives him her hand and says, "Follow me". Finn takes her hand and from that point on, she becomes leader of the trio (Rey, Finn and BB-8). A point of interest here in this scene is that Finn willingly takes her hand, symbolically accepting Rey as leader and his role as a subordinate. This can be considered a turning point in the narrative (and also for the whole franchise) and from then on, Rey is the definitive leader as she takes decisions on their next move and piloting their escape craft. Her role as a leader is seen even in smaller acts like pointing Finn towards the gunner's position in the Falcon or asking him to give him the correct tool by (again) pointing to the one she needs as she repairs the damaged Falcon. In this reversal of roles, the man's position is defined by the woman. She is no longer the insignificant 'other' whose purpose is simply to fulfil the desires of a man, and in a dramatic reversal of circumstance, challenges the traditional leadership role of the male. It is also interesting to see on screen Rey fixing the ship, while Finn is simply there to assist her, handing her tools as she asks for them once again reversing male-active/female-passive gender roles.

The "Force" is a central theme in the film and only few people have the ability to control or manipulate it. Rey's mastery of the Force is exceptional. Though untrained in the ways of the Force, she overpowers Kylo Ren when he is interrogating. She also uses the Force to control the guard as she escapes captivity. Rey also shows

immense strength against a much stronger, trained Kylo Ren in the Laser fight scene towards the end of the film. Rey's superiority to other principal male characters is also made obvious when she meets and interacts with Han Solo. Her capability as a pilot matches that of Solo's, next to whom she jumps in confidently, helping him co-pilot the Millennium Falcon. Subtle hints at Rey's remarkable intelligence are key to locating her as a leader. Not only does she understand many alien languages including the binary language of droids, her knowledge as a pilot is equal to if not more than that of Hans as she easily finds a fix for the hyperdrive on the Falcon (she knows that the compressor on the ignition line, that Unkar Platt installed, puts too much stress on the hyperdrive).

Her intelligence is also reflected in her representation as a decision-maker. Rey takes key decisions that move the plot forward. She decides to save the droid BB-8 knowing it was on a mission and further decides to take BB-8 up to its home base in the Illnuem system upon finding out the importance of the map that BB-8 must deliver to Leia. There is a scene thick with tension at Maz's place where Finn tries to persuade Rey to run away with him. This is an emotional moment for Rey who must choose between an important mission and her friend whom she's grown fond of. Ultimately, she decides to stick to the plan of returning the droid to the Resistance base, making a logical decision as opposed to an emotional one. The contrast between the two characters is made stark by how they are spatially positioned in the scene. Presumably standing on a staircase, Rey towers over Finn as they bargain with each other, a symbolic visual reference to her standing on higher moral ground. Towards the end of the film, Rey takes yet another crucial decision to find Luke Skywalker. This is an especially important act of Rey in the film because while she drives her own narrative forward, Rey's decision also indicates plots of future instalments of the franchise.

Rey as a New Feminine

The film is a refreshing take on the action heroine. The principal character Rey is not eroticised in the film at all. There are no instances of unnecessarily tight clothing or skin revealing outfits. If anything, she was completely desexualised in appearance, demeanour and actions, forcing us to view her not from one particular gender-based gaze, but from a neutral one. The film also unabashedly and quite successfully reverses roles and traits that are popularly associated with cultural norms of gender. Audience expectations of an action heroine conforming to a code where her beauty and appealing physical appearance is more important than her heroic actions is completely quashed as Rey goes about her business with no apologies for her lack of sexual appeal.

Conclusion

The Force Awakens successfully brings in two very strong arguments in favour of female heroes: one that principal female characters need not be sexualised, eroticised and objectified; second, gender roles are, like the very concept of gender itself, fluid and boundaries can be transgressed. However,

having effected the above, the film also comes up with another proposition, and this is the eventual denouement, which is that of breaking the cultural gender code. Having put forth the first two statements it may appear, and rightly so, that the third statement radically invalidates the first two, at least in the context on which the statements are based. The first two statements draw and make the assessments within the cultural codes of gender that the final argument is trying to do away with. Hill (1999), in the analysis of Ripley's character, says, "The use of phallogocentric logic to position resourceful, intelligent and courageous female survivors as 'figuratively male' seems to me to be a 'particularly grotesque' form of selection and interpretation and one which has severe political consequences for feminist film theory" (p 44). But it is necessary to make the first two points before the third is made simply because before making a new code, refuting the existing one would be excellently appropriate and powerful. The film comes out of the binaristic representation that defined the cultural gender codes and goes on to propose a new way to consider gender. Rey's refusal to conform to norms most obviously in terms of appearance and roles, gives a new perspective on onscreen female subjectivity which is as vigorous as it is appealing. In an interview the actor who plays Rey, Daisy Ridley (2015) says, "I hope Rey will be something of a girl power figure. She will have some impact in a girl power-y way. She's brave and she's vulnerable and she's so nuanced... She doesn't have to be one thing to embody a woman in a film. It just so happens she's a woman, but otherwise she transcends gender. She's going to speak to men and women." Although the notion of "transcending gender" may be somewhat naive and idealistic, Rey does give us a glimpse into the possibility of what femininity could look like if its definition were allowed to expand and be more inclusive. That is to say, a subversion of what constitutes the very quality of being 'feminine'.

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