

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the Study

Media representation is vital in shaping how people perceive racial and gender relations. The film engages with audiences by forming an ideological framework around their social environment (Zhang, 2023). A film is a form of art that uses moving images to tell stories or convey ideas to an audience. The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is a series of interconnected superhero films produced by Marvel Studios. The films are based on characters in Marvel Comics and feature a shared universe in which many characters and plot elements are interwoven. The MCU has created a cohesive, interconnected world of multiple films and TV shows. The films in the MCU have been praised for their storytelling, character development, and visual effects.

The MCU, founded by Marvel Studios, comprises a vast narrative tapestry that weaves films and television series across multiple phases. As the MCU continues to captivate global audiences, one of its most significant and transformative developments has been the prominent inclusion of female superheroes in its narratives. The Marvel Cinematic Universe, often referred to as the MCU, is an expansive and interconnected storytelling universe that had its inception with the release of "Iron Man" in 2008. It represents a groundbreaking

cinematic venture that has garnered worldwide acclaim and enthusiastic fandom. The MCU's narrative structure is characterized by individual films and television series that interconnect characters and storylines, creating a rich and immersive cinematic experience for its audiences.

The MCU predominantly featured male superheroes as central figures in its earlier phases. Characters like Iron Man, Captain America, and Thor took the lead, embodying traditional ideals of heroism. The plot lines are intertwined, and Marvel is known especially for the Avengers, a crossover team of countless heroes and stories. Historically, this superhero action genre has been male-dominated, as men have been assumed to be the primary audience (Manya Gupta, 2020). Female characters, while present, often occupied secondary roles or were defined by their relationships with male protagonists.

However, as the MCU expanded and evolved, so did its commitment to diversity and representation. The deliberate choice to introduce and emphasize female superheroes within the MCU was a response to shifting cultural norms and recognizing the need for greater gender diversity in the superhero genre. This decision also acknowledged the growing influence of feminist discourse within the entertainment industry.

The evolution of heroine representation in the MCU signifies a significant departure from one-dimensional, passive female characters to multidimensional, empowered protagonists. These heroines challenge traditional gender stereotypes by embodying strength, resilience, and complexity. According to a journal website,

only 26.7 percent of the Marvel and DC comic superheroes are female (Shendruk, 2017). The percentage of female superheroes within the MCU has progressively increased, reflecting a conscious effort to achieve a more equitable balance between male and female characters. This creates a major disparity in terms of representation. Even in this 26.7 percent, there is an evident difference in the appearances of female and male superheroes (Umansky, 2022). This evolution transcends mere commercial success; it underscores the MCU's commitment to providing a platform for meaningful discussions and social progress.

Superhero films have become dominant in popular culture, shaping narratives and influencing audiences worldwide. However, these films have not only been praised for the only sometimes nuanced portrayal of female characters. Enter Natasha Romanoff, or Black Widow, a skilled assassin introduced in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). While seemingly empowering, her journey raises crucial questions about representation, specifically the hypersexualization and "femme fatale" tropes associated with her character.

The femme fatale is an archetype that has appeared throughout history in various cultures, including ancient Greece, China, and the Middle East. The term "femme fatale" is French for "fatal woman" and refers to a seductive and beautiful woman who brings disaster to anyone with whom she becomes romantically involved. The archetype has been present in mythology, art, and literature for centuries and became a principal character in hard-boiled detective novels and classic film noir of the 20th century.

The femme fatale is often characterized by their intelligence and beauty, which drive the plots of the stories in which they appear. They are often portrayed as stock characters who embody negative tropes about women but are multifaceted and complex. Their intelligence is as essential to the archetype as their beauty, and their conniving often drives the plots. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the femme fatale archetype became popular in art, particularly in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's depictions of deadly women. In the 21st century, the femme fatale archetype has evolved to include more complex and sympathetic characters, with women owning the role and being portrayed as heroes rather than villains. Examples include Sharon Stone's character in *Basic Instinct*, Linda Fiorentino's performance in *The Last Seduction*, and Kim Basinger's award-winning role in *LA Confidential*.

The femme fatale archetype has been criticized for its role in hypersexualization, particularly in the portrayal of female characters in popular culture. The archetype embodies negative tropes about women, such as seductiveness, manipulation, and danger, which can contribute to the objectification and sexualization of female characters.

Hypersexualization refers to the portrayal or treatment of individuals, particularly women and girls, as sexual objects. It involves the attribution of a sexual character to a product or behavior that has nothing intrinsically sexual about it. Hypersexualization can be seen in magazines, videos, films, the fashion industry, and particularly in advertising. It can lead to the trivialization of sexuality, the use of sexual stereotypes, and the objectification of women. Hypersexualization can

also influence young people's perception of sexuality and lead to precocious sexual behavior among young people (Ohwovoriole, 2022). Hypersexualization affects women in popular culture in several ways; women are often depicted as sexual objects in popular culture, from movies and video games to magazine advertisements and Instagram posts. This can lead to the objectification of women and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes. The hypersexualization of women in the media can lead to anxiety about appearance, feelings of shame, eating disorders, lower self-esteem, and depression. It can also affect the mental, emotional, and physical health of girls and women on a global scale.

Hypersexualization influences young people's perception of sexuality and can lead to precocious sexual behavior among young people. It can also generate a distorted understanding of gender relationships, beginning at a very early age. The sexualization of women in the media is linked to violence against women and girls worldwide. It reduces the likelihood that acts of violence against girls and women — especially acts of sexual violence — will be reported. These show how hypersexualization affects women in popular culture, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and contributing to negative mental and physical health outcomes. The Male Gaze and hypersexualization are related in popular culture, as the Male Gaze contributes to the hypersexualization of women. The Male Gaze is the way men look at women and what they look for, and it is a concept prevalent in American popular culture, particularly in the media, advertising, and fashion industries (Samikoglu, 2021). The Male Gaze sets unrealistic standards for women to achieve and feeds the hypersexualization of women.

The "Iron Man 2" (2010) movie success and the portrayal of Tony Stark, played by Robert Downey Jr., are critical to understanding the MCU's evolution and impact on popular culture. The film's themes, characters, and narratives get into the cultural review, influencing beyond films, television shows, and even music. "Iron Man 2" (2010) explores issues of identity, power, and responsibility, which become crucial to the MCU's storylines. These themes are expanded after that film, creating a rich and complicated universe. On the other hand, "Iron Man 2" (2010) highlights how introducing a new character, Black Widow, as one of the superheroines turns her into an object of male sexual desire, particularly Tony Stark.

Black Widow, portrayed by Scarlett Johansson, is depicted as a highly skilled and lethal assassin and a sexualized and objectified figure. Johansson has openly criticized this portrayal, stating that her character was "hyper-sexualized" and treated more like an object or possession than a person. Black Widow's introduction in the film emphasizes her physical attractiveness and sexual allure. Tony Stark is immediately captivated by her and attempts to flirt, even going so far as to refer to her as "a piece of meat" at one point. This portrayal perpetuates damaging gender stereotypes and contributes to the objectification of women in the media.

Johansson has discussed how such portrayals affected her sense of self-worth, noting that she once measured her value based on comments about her physical appearance (Pulver, 2021). In "Iron Man 2" (2010) movie, Black Widow is introduced as a mysterious and captivating character, embodying the femme fatale archetype. She is depicted as a highly skilled and deadly assassin but also as

a sexualized and objectified figure. This is evident in how she is framed and lit in the film, with a strong emphasis on her physical appearance and sexual allure.

The connection between Black Widow's hypersexualization in "Iron Man 2" (2010) movie and her depiction as a femme fatale is significant. The film presents her as a mysterious and captivating character, emphasizing her physical appearance and sexual allure. This portrayal is evident in how she is framed and lit, focusing on her body and facial features. The hypersexualization of Black Widow in "Iron Man 2" (2010) movie is important because it mirrors societal attitudes toward women and their bodies (Barranco, 2021). The film's depiction of Black Widow as a sexualized and objectified character reinforces harmful gender stereotypes and perpetuates the objectification of women in media.

The primary focus of this thesis is on the character Black Widow (Natasha Romanoff). This character has played pivotal roles in the franchise, and her development and portrayal offer profound insights into the "femme fatale" myth and hypersexualization of female characters. MCU has deepened representation in the media by creating a superhero movie with female leads who discuss female issues. The film, "Iron Man 2" (2010) is a repudiation of the character's retrograde origin story and grapples directly with the things that once oppressed her: sexism, objectification, and even human trafficking.

In addition to this character, the following films have been selected for analysis: Black Widow's Journey is about the "femme fatale" myth and her hypersexualization in "Iron Man 2" (2010), a film that stands as a cornerstone in

the establishment of the MCU. However, as her character is unveiled to the audience, an undercurrent of "femme fatale" myth and hypersexualization are evident. In this initial portrayal, Natasha Romanoff's character is largely defined by her physical attributes and sensuous presentation, echoing a traditional approach to female characters in the superhero genre. This emphasis on hypersexualized aesthetics overshadows her character's agency and narrative depth. However, as the MCU unfolds, so does the character of Black Widow.

As we embark on this in-depth exploration, the primary goal is to trace the trajectory of Black Widow's character. By analyzing films that showcase her journey, we aim to shed light on the complex interplay of hypersexualization and "femme fatale" in popular cinema. This thesis undertakes a comprehensive examination of the "femme fatale" sign and considers the impact of the male gaze on hypersexualization. So, the researcher contributes to a deeper understanding of how a single character's transformation mirrors and influences the broader discourse on hypersexualization and "femme fatale" in contemporary cinema.

A comprehensive theoretical framework was employed to examine these inquiries, encompassing the following elements. The male gaze theory of Laura Mulvey is where women in the media are viewed from the eyes of a heterosexual man, and these women are represented as passive objects of male desire. Audiences are forced to view women from the point of view of a heterosexual male, even if they are heterosexual women or homosexual men (Sampson, 2015).

The Male Gaze theory is a concept that is prevalent in American popular culture, particularly in the media, advertising, and fashion industries. It is defined as the way the world perceives women through the lens of heterosexual desire. Black Widow's actions and dialogue work to subvert the Male Gaze that Laura Mulvey says characterizes most Hollywood films. An intersectional theory can help to understand how race or ethnicity, sexuality, and gender intersect and affect each other, resulting in complex representations of sexualized and racialized bodies.

Semiotic theory could be applied to analyze how gender is symbolically constructed through signs and symbols in media. The theory includes exploring visual elements, such as clothing, body language, and facial expressions, as signs that contribute to the semiotics of gender representation. Semiotic theory can be employed to scrutinize cinematic imagination, identifying visual cues that align with or challenge the conversations of the femme fatale with other male characters. The theory examines how signs and symbols in visual storytelling contribute to portraying and objectifying the "female fatale myth."

Through investigating these questions and applying a robust theoretical framework, this thesis, titled "Hypersexualization of Black Widow in the "Iron Man 2" Movie," encapsulates the central themes and focus of this research. It delves into the character development and portrayal of Black Widow to unearth the intricate transformation from an initial state of hypersexualization and the sign of "femme fatale." This research serves as an example of the hypersexualization and "femme fatale" within the realm of popular cinema.

B. Problems Formulation

1. How does Black Widow's character portray the "femme fatale" myth through her actions and decisions, as analyzed by Barthes's theory?
2. How is hypersexuality defined and portrayed in the character of Black Widow in the "Iron Man 2" (2010) movie?

C. Objectives of Study

The objective of this research, as presented in this undergraduate thesis titled "Hypersexualization of Black Widow in the "Iron Man 2" Movie,"

1. To explore how Barthes' theory deciphers the signs used to portray Black Widow as a "femme fatale" in the "Iron Man 2" (2010) Movie.
2. To analyze the hypersexualization of black widows within the male gaze theory.

D. Review of the Related Studies

This research is related to the topic of gender representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe:

"An Analysis of Black Widow (2021): Marvel's Most Feminist Film Features Powerful Sisters and an Attenuated Male Gaze". The author of the article is Kyle D. Killian. The article was published in the Journal of Feminist Family Therapy. The author is affiliated with Capella University. The problem of research addressed in the article is the representation of superheroines in comic books and

comic book movies, which often subscribe to the patriarchal logic of the male gaze. This results in the objectification and sexualization of female characters. The article specifically focuses on the portrayal of Natasha Romanoff, also known as Black Widow, in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

The theory used in the article is feminist textual readings of superheroines' depictions in comics and cinema. The author examines how Marvel Studios demonstrates a problematic postfeminist sensibility and how it has, and has not, progressed beyond the male gaze in its portrayal of Natasha Romanoff. The answer to the problem of research is that "Black Widow" is the most feminist offering in the Marvel Cinematic Universe to date. The film features powerful sisters resisting a powerful, rich, old, white male villain and fighting against his evil design to control the world. The article highlights the shift from the male gaze to representing strong female characters without hypersexualization.

Additionally, the article suggests that films like "Black Widow" can offer insights into what relationships constitute "family" in society. This study and the current research are comparable in that they both use male gaze theory and discuss the same character. However, there are some differences in this study. For example, the author solely focuses on one film in which the character of Black Widow does not exhibit the side of her impacted by hypersexuality. In this current research, I specify how the black widow figure is hypersexualized, as well as the black widow's struggle to unravel that hypersexualization. (Killian, 2023)

"Avenging Women: An Analysis of Postfeminist Female Representations in the Cinematic Marvel Avengers Series" by Mary Louise DeMarchi, published in June 2014, is affiliated with DePaul University. The thesis appears to significantly contribute to the academic exploration of gender representation in popular culture and media, particularly within the context of the Marvel Avengers film series. The focus on post-feminism, a theoretical framework that assesses how feminist ideals and gender dynamics manifest in contemporary media, is relevant and timely. The article's exploration of how the Marvel Avengers series represents female characters through this postfeminist lens provides a valuable perspective on the superhero genre, which has been traditionally male-dominated. By examining the evolving portrayals of women in the series, the article likely uncovers nuanced insights into how these representations reflect or challenge societal attitudes toward feminism, femininity, and gender dynamics. Understanding how the Marvel Avengers films navigate these complexities is crucial for comprehending the broader cultural impact of contemporary superhero cinema. This research shares a common interest in the portrayal of female characters within the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Both studies focus on the representation of women in the context of superhero films. Some notable similarities are that both the article and this research concentrate on characters from the MCU, demonstrating a shared interest in the representation of female superheroes in this popular franchise. The second concerns how female characters are represented within the MCU, making gender dynamics and the portrayal of heroines a common theme. Lastly, the use of a theoretical framework is similar. While the thesis employs a postfeminist lens, this

research is based on feminist film theory and intersectionality theory. However, there are some differences between the thesis and this research. The main difference is in the specific focus of each work. The thesis concentrates on postfeminist perspectives and contemporary gender dynamics within the Avengers film series. At the same time, this research delves into hypersexualization and the male gaze in the MCU, especially the character Black Widow. The publication date is also different, with the thesis dating back to 2014. Since then, the MCU has expanded, and there have been significant developments in superhero cinema, including the release of new films and series featuring female characters. While both studies use theoretical frameworks related to gender and feminism, the specific theories employed differ. This research combines feminist film theory and intersectionality theory, while the article primarily utilizes a postfeminist framework. (DeMarchi, 2014)

"Superheroines and Sexism: Female Representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe" by Folukemi Olufidie and Ms. Yunex Echezabal, this paper discusses the representation of female superheroes in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and the impact of feminist movements on their roles. It highlights the sexualization, lack of inclusivity, and marginalization of female characters in the MCU. The article argues the need to address these issues in the film industry. The limitation of this paper is that it primarily focuses on the portrayal of female characters in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and does not extensively analyze other film franchises or genres. This narrow focus limits the generalizability of the findings and conclusions to the broader film industry.

Additionally, the paper relies on textual analysis. It does not include perspectives from individuals directly involved in the filmmaking process, such as producers and costume designers, which could provide further insights into the marginalization of female characters. (Echezabal, 2021)

"Gender Portrayal in Marvel Cinematic Universe Films: Gender Representation, Moral Alignment, and Rewards for Violence" by Kristen Ray likely examines the depiction of gender in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) films, focusing on three key aspects: gender representation, moral alignment, and the potential rewards for violence. The article is expected to critically analyze how gender roles and behaviors are presented in MCU films. The article likely scrutinizes how male and female characters are portrayed in MCU films. The article could involve examining the diversity of gender roles, character agency, and the presence of stereotypes. The author may explore how gender is linked to moral alignment within the MCU. This could involve analyzing whether male and female characters are assigned specific moral attributes or whether traditional gender expectations influence their actions. The article might investigate if there are differences in how male and female characters are rewarded or punished for engaging in violent actions. It could assess whether there are gender-specific consequences for violence in the narratives. Then, this article discusses how these gender portrayals impact the perceptions and attitudes of audiences, examining how viewers interpret and internalize the representations of them on screen. The article analyzes gender portrayal in MCU films, comparing it to broader trends in

Hollywood or other media industries. The article also offers a critical perspective on the MCU's treatment of gender. (Ray, 2020)

"Distorted Asian Female Representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe: Old and New Pattern" by Jingjing Zhang, the thesis is expected to delve into how these portrayals have evolved, highlighting both persistent stereotypes and any positive changes in representation. The author analyzes early MCU films to identify stereotypes and biases associated with Asian female characters. This could involve examining portrayals of Asian women as exotic, submissive, or one-dimensional characters and whether there have been any improvements or changes in how Asian female characters are depicted in more recent MCU productions. This could involve looking at character development, agency, and depth. The thesis may consider how race, gender, and ethnicity intersect in portraying Asian women in the MCU. It may examine how these intersections contribute to reinforcing or challenging stereotypes. Then, it compares the representation of Asian female characters in the MCU with broader trends in Hollywood or other media industries to provide context and highlight any unique aspects of the MCU's portrayals. (Zhang, 2023)

These studies provide a comprehensive analysis of gender representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and highlight the gender dynamics and representation of the heroines.

E. Research Methodology

1. Data and Source of Data

1.1. Primary Data

The primary focus of this thesis is on the characters Black Widow (Natasha Romanoff) within the MCU. This character has played pivotal roles in the MCU, and her portrayal of the femme fatale affected the hypersexualization of her character. In addition to this character, the following film that has been selected for the primary data is "Iron Man 2" (2010) directed by Jon Favreau. This film portrays Black Widow in her initial introduction to the MCU.

The movie used can be accessed in the official Disney Hotstar+ application. These films and scripts are chosen to examine the concept of the male gaze and its role in portraying femme fatale, focusing on Black Widow.

1.2 Secondary Data

The secondary data for this thesis include the "Black Widow" (2021) movie, directed by Cate Shortland. This film serves as an in-depth exploration of the character of Black Widow and delves into themes of agency and identity. The movie used can be accessed in the official Disney Hotstar+ application. Additionally, scholarly articles, journal publications, books, and critical analyses that discuss themes related to hypersexualization, gender representation, male gaze theory, semiotic theory, and the portrayal of female characters in media, official interviews, commentary tracks from directors to actors, and production notes related to the Marvel Cinematic Universe films could serve as valuable secondary sources.

2. Method and Technique of Collecting Data

In conducting research, the writer needs the research method to answer the research question. Before getting the data analysis and conclusion, the researcher needs much preparation to obtain the data. After that, the important thing is to understand what the research method is. The research method is primarily academic for collecting data for particular purposes and implementations. (Sugiyono, 2014) explains several data collection techniques, including observation, interview, questionnaire, documentation, and triangulation. The selection of informants is important to the objective of the study. Data collection can be done in any setting, from any source, and in any way. The researcher should precisely determine the techniques and data collection tools to obtain valid data. In qualitative research, various data collection techniques (triangulation) are used to obtain data from various sources. The data analysis technique used in qualitative research needs to be clarified. The researcher should systematically search and compile field notes to analyze the data.

The methodology will involve thoroughly viewing and documenting the selected film to gather comprehensive data for the research. This process will focus on capturing specific elements crucial to the analysis, including character identities, contextual details of scenes, dialogues, and interactions among the characters. Accessing scripts, when available, will provide additional depth to understanding character portrayals and narrative contexts. The researcher will employ various techniques to capture and manage data effectively during this phase.

According to the methods of collecting data, the researcher will use note-taking techniques while watching the films and series, which will be pivotal. This approach allows the researcher to record key observations, significant scenes, and relevant dialogue that showcase instances of hypersexualization or gender dynamics involving the character of Black Widow. Timestamping critical scenes or interactions further enhances data accuracy and enables easy reference during the analysis phase.

A structured data management plan will be implemented to ensure the systematic organization and accessibility of data. This plan will involve categorizing and storing information meticulously, including film titles, character names, coded interactions, and any supplementary details necessary for the analysis. By adhering to these methodologies and techniques, the research aims to capture a comprehensive dataset crucial for exploring hypersexualization in the portrayal of Black Widow in "Iron Man 2" (2010) Movie.

3. Method and Technique of Analyzing Data

The main analytical approach in this thesis is qualitative, with a central focus on conducting an in-depth examination of the "femme fatale" myth and the hypersexualization of Black Widow within the "Iron Man 2" (2010) movie. Qualitative research methods, including content analysis, textual analysis, and visual analysis, will delve into how Black Widow is portrayed in the "Iron Man 2" (2010) movie. These qualitative techniques will facilitate a thorough exploration of dialogues, character interactions, visual elements, narrative themes, and

character growth trajectories. Additionally, these analyses will be grounded in applying semiotic theory and male gaze theory, allowing for the interpretation of findings within the framework of these theoretical perspectives. Through this qualitative approach, a nuanced comprehension of the intricate and evolving representation of the "femme fatale" myth and hypersexualization of Black Widow in the "Iron Man 2" (2010) movie will be attained, along with insights into their broader implications for gender dynamics in popular media.

Furthermore, this qualitative investigation will incorporate the semiotic theory that focuses on the mythology of the "femme fatale," which depicts the character of the Black Widow, and also the male gaze theory, which explains how the hypersexuality of the black widow character is depicted of the "femme fatale." Additionally, a comparative analysis will be conducted to discern commonalities and distinctions in the development of characters and the thematic elements associated with heroines across diverse films.

Analyzing data focuses on the hypersexualization and the "femme fatale" of Black Widow. Techniques that could be employed are scenes-by-scenes and the scripts in the primary data, which is "Iron Man 2" (2010). Then, secondary data is used for primary data support. This analyzes scenes involving Black Widow, focusing on camera angles, framing, costumes, and her interactions. Researchers categorize the different aspects of "femme fatale" that affected the hypersexualization observed in the films by appearances and ambition.

F. Presentation

This study is presented in four chapters. The first chapter is the introduction, which consists of the background of the chosen object, problem formulations, study objectives, review of related studies, and research method. The second chapter consists of a theoretical approach and framework. The third chapter is a discussion that focuses on the discussion and analysis of the study. The last chapter is the conclusion, which describes the study results.