

PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ALGERIA
Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific
Research University of Tlemcen



Faculty of Letters and
Languages Department of English

The Evolution of Female Characters in Marvel Cinematic Universe: From Damsels in Distress to Superheroines

A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of English as Partial Fulfilment of the Master Degree in Literature and Civilization

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Academic Year 2022-2023

Dedications

This dissertation is dedicated to the younger Nadjima, the 6 year old girl who skipped a grade and found herself behind the curve. The girl who did not even know how to hold a pen and write the date, the girl who went back home crying her eyes out on her first day promising to never set foot in that school again especially when the teacher blamed her father, claiming that it was too late for her to learn. Good news is that eventually that little girl defied expectations and became one of that teacher's favourite pupils, and now, after 17 years of hard work, she is graduating. It is because of you that I stand here today, on the cusp of graduation, ready to embrace the next chapter of our remarkable story.

To my beloved family: my parents, my brothers, and my uncle Youcef for their steadfast support and encouragement throughout my journey. Your love, understanding, and belief in my abilities have been invaluable to me. I am incredibly fortunate to have been raised by such wonderful parents. Their dedication to my well-being, both physically and emotionally, has been remarkable. They have provided me with a nurturing environment that allowed me to grow and thrive.

To my dearest friends for being the light in my journey. Your friendship has not only made my university experience more enjoyable but has also played a significant role in shaping me into the person I am today. Your diverse perspectives, shared experiences, and unique personalities have enriched my life in countless ways, and I am truly grateful for that. Our friendship is a treasure that I hold close to my heart forever.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor Prof. Wassila MOURO for her guidance and support throughout the entire process of this work. Her expertise, flexibility, dedication, and commitment to academic excellence have been instrumental in shaping this research and ensuring its successful completion.

My earnest thanks go to the board of examiners; Dr. RAHMOUN Omar and Dr. YOUSFI Zeyneb who selflessly devoted their time, knowledge, keen observations and expertise to serve on this panel.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to Prof. Wassila MOURO, Dr. Omar RAHMOUN, Dr. Mohammed KHELADI, Dr. Souad BERBAR and Mr. Slimane MEGHAGHI for providing a nurturing academic atmosphere. Their commitment to excellence and the countless opportunities they have offered for intellectual growth have been the driving force behind my accomplishments. I am truly fortunate to have had the opportunity to be your student and to learn from you.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to all those who have supported me in my academic endeavors.

Abstract

Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is a franchise and multimedia storytelling platform created by Marvel Studios, consisting of a vast interconnected universe of films, TV shows, and other media. This superhero franchise holds significant influence over its large and devoted audience, concerning gender-related issues. Marvel Cinematic Universe has undergone a remarkable transformation since its inception in 2008. In its initial phase, it predominantly featured male superheroes, but it has since made significant strides towards inclusivity. The franchise now boasts a diverse ensemble of characters, with a growing representation of powerful female superheroes. This research explores the evolution of female characters in Marvel Cinematic Universe through a feminist lens, with a particular focus on *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel*. It analyzes the representation and development of these characters, tracing their progression from initial appearances to their own standalone films; by examining their portrayal in terms of agency, complexity, and narrative significance. This study aims to understand how MCU has addressed gender dynamics and empowered female characters within a traditionally male-dominated superhero genre. The work is divided into two chapters, the first covers the major theoretical dimensions necessary for the analysis that will be carried on in the second chapter, which is a practical application of feminist theory on Marvel female superheroes narratives.

Keywords: Marvel Cinematic Universe, gender gap, female representation, Black Widow, Captain Marvel.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Cinema and literature are intertwined forms of artistic expression that delve into the realm of storytelling. Literature held a prominent position as a popular mode of expression during the 18th and 19th centuries whereas cinema rose to prominence from the 20th century onwards. Despite their distinctions, both cinema and literature share a common purpose of transporting readers and viewers to realms beyond their own, offering an escape into imaginative worlds.

While literature primarily uses the written word to create narratives, cinema combines visuals, sound, and motion to bring stories to life on the screen. Both mediums share a fundamental goal: to engage and captivate audiences, evoking emotions and provoking thought. Literature and cinema explore similar themes, from love and loss to the complexities of the human psyche, offering profound insights into the human condition which helps the audience connect with the moment more closely.

In the ever-evolving landscape of popular culture, superheroes have emerged as powerful symbols that reflect social values and aspirations. The superhero genre has garnered immense popularity, captivating audiences with its extraordinary characters and narratives. Marvel Cinematic Universe has accumulated a staggering box office revenue over \$18 billion (Echezabal&Olifidipe, 2021). This immense financial success has firmly established MCU as an integral part of popular culture. This dissertation delves into the exploration of female superheroes in Marvel Cinematic Universe and their evolution within the broader context of contemporary literature and popular culture. This research aligns with the modern movement towards inclusive storytelling, aiming to analyze the transformation of female superheroes and their impact on gender dynamics.

The primary focus of this study revolves around two iconic female superheroes in MCU: Black Widow and Captain Marvel. Through a comprehensive analysis of their character development, and reception by audiences, this dissertation aims to shed light on the shifting representation of

women within the superhero genre. By examining these two characters' journeys, we will delve into the complex themes of empowerment, identity, and agency as portrayed through the lens of gender dynamics.

The representation of women in MCU has evolved from limited and stereotypical roles to more multifaceted, empowered, and central characters. The inclusion of superheroines has not only enhanced the richness of storytelling within the franchise but has also contributed to the broader cultural shift towards greater gender equality and representation in the superhero genre. This has triggered the following research question:

- How have female characters evolved within Marvel Cinematic Universe ?
- What impact did women off-screen have on the development and growth of these characters?
- What were the initial portrayals of Black Widow and Captain Marvel and how was their journey to light?

The starting hypothesis for the main research question suggests that MCU has demonstrated a clear evolution in its representation of female superheroes, reflecting the changing cultural climate and the demand for more inclusive and empowering narratives. Through the introduction of characters like Captain Marvel and Black Widow, the franchise has shifted away from limiting female superheroes to archetypal roles, to providing multidimensional characters with agency, complexity, and narratives that resonate with diverse audiences.

As for the sub-questions, the starting assumption is that the journey of Marvel's female superheroes from being sexualized and objectified to empowered has been an evolving process, driven by a combination of factors including changing social attitudes, increased representation, and the efforts of both creators and fans.

To explore the answers of these questions, and to achieve its purposes, this work is divided into two chapters, which discuss the topic from different perspectives and views.

The first chapter employs an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from feminist film theory, gender studies, and cultural analysis to deconstruct the representation of Marvel superheroines. It aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of these characters, uncovering both the empowering aspects and potential pitfalls in their depiction. It seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how these characters and their narratives intersect with issues of sexism and gender stereotypes and how they evolved over time and imposed themselves in a male-centered industry.

The second chapter deals with the analysis of two prominent Marvel superheroes: Black Widow and Captain Marvel, focusing on their evolution over time. Both characters have opened doors for greater representation and diversity within the superhero genre. Their stories have resonated with audiences worldwide, emphasizing the importance of well-rounded and authentic female characters who can inspire and empower viewers. The former portrayed by Scarlett Johansson, made her first appearance in MCU in *Iron Man 2* (2010). Initially depicted as a highly skilled spy and assassin, Natasha Romanoff, alias Black Widow, played a supporting role in several films, gradually becoming a fan favorite due to her complex personality and formidable combat skills. Over time, the character evolved beyond her initial portrayal as a femme fatale and transformed into a more nuanced and multidimensional character. Her journey culminated in her standalone film, *Black Widow* (2021), where her character received further development and closure.

Similarly, the latter Captain Marvel, portrayed by Brie Larson, made her debut in MCU with her eponymous film, *Captain Marvel* (2019). The film provided a fresh perspective by showcasing Carol Danvers' transformation from an Air Force pilot to a powerful superhero. Captain Marvel's introduction marked a significant step for female representation in MCU, as she became the first

female superhero to receive her standalone film in the franchise.

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Chapter One: Female Portrayal in Marvel Cinematic Universe

1.1 Introduction

Cinema, also known as “The Seventh Art”, has had a profound impact on society since its inception in the late nineteenth century. It has the ability to tell stories, evoke emotions, and transport audiences to new worlds. The effect of Cinema is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has been explored by scholars from various disciplines, including film studies, sociology, psychology and cultural studies.

One of the most significant effects of Cinema is its ability to shape and reflect cultural values and attitudes. In fact, films can serve as a powerful tool for social critique, challenging dominant ideologies and presenting alternative perspectives. They can also reinforce and perpetuate cultural norms and stereotypes, sometimes unintentionally.

Cinema has also been shown to have a strong emotional impact on audiences. Films can elicit a range of emotions from joy and laughter to fear and sadness. They can also inspire empathy and a sense of connection with characters and their experiences. This emotional resonance can lead to increased social awareness and engagement.

Cinema has long been a platform for gender stereotypes, perpetuating certain norms and expectations about masculinity and femininity. These stereotypes are deeply ingrained in our culture and can have harmful effects on individuals and society as a whole. Hence, this chapter tries to explore this notable world and shed light on its patent part “Marvel Cinematic Universe”, by diving deep into the cultural and global perspectives of its famous movies and the impact the latter can have on gender roles.

1.2 Marvel Cinematic Universe

Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is a collection of superhero movies created by Marvel Studios that showcase the adventures of iconic superheroes. According

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to Gerard and Poepsel (27) since its introduction in 2008, MCU has amassed more than \$12 billion in worldwide box office revenue, solidifying its status as the highest-earning film franchise ever (Echezabal&Olufidipe 2021).

Launched in 2008 with the debut of *Iron Man*, Marvel Cinematic Universe has grown into a pervasive transmedia phenomenon. Its distinctive interconnected storytelling offers promising material for academic exploration. The franchise intentionally portrays larger-than-life superheroes as multi-dimensional and deeply emotional characters, forging significant bonds with each other (Allison, 2019).

Marvel Cinematic Universe has emerged as the most financially successful film franchise to date, captivating audiences worldwide with its science-fiction-themed content (Echezabal&Olufidipe 2021).

MCU has generated approximately \$22.59 billion at the box office alone, establishing itself as a prominent part of popular culture, especially in the United States. According to Sabine Lebel, superheroes have become iconic figures that are continuously revisited and incorporated into popular culture, serving as vehicles to express and examine various themes, tensions, and concerns related to American ideology, including genre, gender, sexuality, class, politics, science, and culture. Consequently, the portrayal of women in these movies both reflects and influences societal attitudes towards women (Barranco, 2021).

1.2.1 Definition

Marvel Cinematic Universe is a shared universe for a total of 22 films showcasing various comic book characters. While each film has its unique narrative, they also interconnect to weave a larger and cohesive storyline. This storytelling approach mirrors the technique employed by Stan Lee, the trailblazing figure behind Marvel Comics with staggering earnings exceeding \$18.2 billion (£13.7 billion) to date, MCU stands as the most triumphant film franchise in history (Foley, 2019).

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According to Davies (2016), Marvel has utilized Transmedia storytelling in a manner that is markedly different from other superhero franchises, leading to a potentially groundbreaking new form of media. The revolutionary nature of Marvel's approach could serve as a starting point for the development of a more influential and impactful medium (Cited in Ray, 2020, p.1).

MCU began with the release of *Iron Man* in 2008 and has since expanded to include over 25 Films, numerous Television Shows and various other media. Indeed, it follows a cohesive narrative structure where every movie and series plays a significant part in a broader and all-encompassing storyline that spans across several films and TV shows. MCU has received widespread praise for its ambitious scale, meticulous world-building and exceptional storytelling, establishing itself as one of the most prosperous and influential franchises in current popular culture (Cited in Ray, 2020).

Marvel Studios organizes its movies into distinct periods called "Phases," which are defined by significant years of movie releases. The initial phase , Phase One, commenced in 2008 with the debut of *Iron Man*. Subsequently, Phase Three concluded in 2019 with *Spider-Man: Far From Home* hitting theaters. Together, Phases One to Three are collectively referred to as the *Infinity Saga*. Given the remarkable success of Marvel Studios' films and the prominence of feminist movements in the 2000s, it is worth examining the advancement of female roles within the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the influence of fourth-wave feminism on Marvel Studios' decision to prioritize female representation in the upcoming Phase Four. This new phase will kick off in November 2020 with the highly anticipated release of *Black Widow* (Echezabal&Olufidipe 2021).

Marvel's cultural influence has been greatly amplified beyond just its Box Office success since it established its own movie studio. In the 21st century, the triumph of Marvel's films and the reactions they have sparked, have created a fresh and distinctive way of interacting with societal, political, and economic issues that question long-held beliefs and challenge established values. Hence,

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Marvel Cinematic Universe is not just a trendy topic for study, but a noteworthy phenomenon in its own right that merits serious academic examination.

1.2.2 Influences of Media

Media plays a prominent role in influencing people's vision and perception of the world. According to Alzahrani (2016), nowadays Media products such as Television, films, websites or social media are consumed voraciously by people of all ages all around the globe. Movies in particular, have emerged as a significant medium of communication that plays a pivotal role in shaping individuals' perceptions of the world. This is primarily due to their efficacy in conveying complex ideas and concepts, thereby exerting a profound influence on people's cognitive and affective responses towards the issues portrayed in them. Due to its wide reach and accessibility, it is believed that movies possess the ability to affect diverse social strata and hold the potential to influence their attitudes and beliefs (Cited in Demanty, 2019, p.02).

As per social psychologists, the images portrayed through mass media are capable of altering people's perceptions of social realities and may even induce deviant and violent behaviour such as delinquency and crime. Additionally, critical feminists view mass media as an instrument of promoting male chauvinism and reinforcing the negative gender role stereotypes of women. Consequently, this leads to the systematic representation of a male-dominated socio-cultural, political and economic order, which may contribute to gender-based discrimination and inequality (Manatu, 2003).

Bandura (2001) proposed the Social Cognitive Theory which examines the impact of media consumption on individuals. The Theory focuses on how media consumers are influenced by the content they choose to consume. Having more female superheroes portrayed as powerful and altruistic role models, similar to their male counterparts may encourage women to emulate their positive qualities. Since superheroes often represent various moral values, it would be advantageous

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for females to have more female superheroes as a source of inspiration.

According to the Cultivation Theory, media can have a substantial influence on individuals' thoughts and cognitive frameworks. The representation of female characters, including those with superpowers, in Marvel movies and their frequent recurrence may shape viewers' perceptions of women. Such portrayals could contribute to the perception of women as equally significant and capable as men. The expectation is that Marvel will persist in promoting the message of female empowerment. (Cited in Ray, 2020, p.26)

Pennell and Behm-Morawitz suggested that repeated exposure to stereotypical female victim characters in media, who are often portrayed with sexual appeal, may have detrimental effects on women's body esteem, reinforce traditional gender roles, and prioritize physical appearance over competence. However, the superhero genre has shown progress in portraying empowered female characters such as Storm, Jean Gray, and Dazzler in the X-Men films, who exhibit unique abilities and cognitive and physical competence. This representation of competent and commanding superheroines may potentially challenge traditional gender beliefs, enhance women's body esteem, and prioritize physical competence over appearance, serving as an antidote to the hopeless fair maiden stereotype. These new findings contribute to the growing body of literature that elucidates the influence of popular media on personal perceptions and cultural norms related to gender (May, 2015).

The portrayal of gender in various forms of entertainment media, including superhero movies, G-rated children's films, music videos, and video games has been shown to shape expectations and attitudes toward gender roles. For instance, a recent study revealed that regular viewers of a reality television show featuring pregnant teenagers exhibited more favorable attitudes towards teen pregnancy and perceived its benefits to outweigh the risks. These findings underscore the significant impact of media consumption on beliefs, even when the content may be fantastical or sensationalized. It implies that ostensibly escapist entertainment,

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such as superhero movies, may play a role in shaping realities in ways that are potentially detrimental to gender perceptions, rather than promoting positive social change (May, 2015).

1.2.2.1 Movies as a Mass Communication Tool

Wiryanto (2000) noted that Mass Communication holds a significant position in shaping social transformations within society. Broadly speaking, Mass Communication involves the creation and dissemination of messages to a vast audience by Media organizations. Such messages wield the power to impact and mirror the cultural fabric of a given society, subsequently reaching a diverse and expansive populace concurrently (Cited in Demanty, 2019, p.05).

According to Vera (2016), the concept of Mass Communication is intrinsically linked to the role of Mass Media in disseminating information and messages to a vast audience. Within this context, Movies serve as a significant tool for Mass Communication, as they function as a medium for transmitting messages to a broad, diverse and anonymous audience, eliciting specific effects. Through their audio-visual capabilities, movies enable viewers to experience a sense of temporality and spatiality, thereby narrating life and influencing mindset based on the conveyed message content. The majority of movie content is deliberately constructed by the stakeholders, imbued with messages that subtly influence audiences.

Vera (2016) notes that movies are a representation of the reality of society by transferring that reality to the big screen. Movies are not only telling about a culture but also construct the culture itself. It clearly explains that movies play a role in spreading the culture in society (Cited in Demanty, 2019, p.05).

1.2.2.2 Intertextuality and the Power of Transmedia Storytelling

Storytelling in the 21st century has changed, with boundaries between different mediums becoming less defined, and stories becoming more interconnected. This

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is due to the convergence of different forms of media, and the emergence of transmedia storytelling. As a result, the relationship between creators and consumers of these stories evolve, with greater levels of interaction and engagement giving consumers more power in the process(Marazi, 2020, p.83).

Contemporary entertainment in popular culture is composed of various forms and methods of storytelling. These include adaptations, transmedia storytelling, media franchises, reboots, and original TV series on platforms such as Netflix and Hulu. Additionally, this type of entertainment includes promotional marketing, merchandise, ancillary market products, cross-media distribution, and fan communities. The common thread connecting all of these forms of popular culture entertainment is storytelling. Fiske (2001) explains that achieving a complete entertainment experience requires intertextuality to be present in both horizontal and vertical dimensions, and Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of chronotope (1981) can be used to blend the lines between storytelling and marketing by either pushing or blurring their boundaries (Marazi, 2020, p.83)

Mikhail Bakhtin first introduced the concept of intertextuality in the early 1900s, but it was not until the late 1960s that the term gained widespread popularity due to Julia Kristeva (McCullum, 2016). Intertextuality, a term that was popularized by Julia Kristeva in her analysis of Bakhtin's concepts of Dialogism and Carnival, is a fundamental concept in both structuralist and poststructuralist literary theories. It suggests that individual texts are inevitably connected to other texts, creating a network of multiple and provisional meanings. The term is used to describe the various ways in which a literary text is composed of other texts, through its implicit or explicit references, quotations, repetitions, and adaptations of formal and substantive elements of earlier texts. The use of text in comic books helps to enhance the comprehension of the story conveyed through the illustrations.

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Additionally, comic books are an essential aspect of contemporary culture, and as such, they serve as a basis for other types of media to reference, and in turn, can be influenced by those media. *Wonder Woman's* creation is rooted in Greek Mythology, resulting in numerous allusions to Greek legends. By constructing the character's storyline around this mythology, many of her tales draw on classic Greek gods, goddesses, and monsters, as evidenced by the data gathered from *Wonder Woman* (2012) and *Wonder Woman* (2019), which makes mention of the Minotaur. This use of Greek Mythology in *Wonder Woman* may stray from the customary definition of intertextuality, which typically pertains to explicit texts rather than entire storylines and characters. *Captain Marvel* incorporates various texts to enhance the storyline. These texts serve as a central idea for a specific problem, and Marvel's 20th figure is an example of this, as it alludes to a renowned song and catchphrase. While *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel* do not physically resemble Rosie the Riveter, some of their creators and experts believe that the characters drew inspiration from her. This connection is more evident in Marvel's sixth figure, where Carol Danvers, as *Captain Marvel*, references Rosie's well-known slogan, "We can do it!" By referencing this iconic image, the creators conveyed a message about the societal role of women (McCullum, 2016).

According to Werner (2004), the meaning of these images is shaped by both internal and external factors outside of the image itself. Nonetheless, this particular cover is straightforward in its allusion to Rosie the Riveter (Cited in McCullum, 2016, p75).

Captain Marvel has made allusions to previous characters who have held the same title. In a specific instance, the ninth issue of *Captain Marvel* in 2014 made a reference to David Bowie's iconic 1973 album cover "Aladdin Sane", as *Captain Marvel* befriended an inter-galactic musician. This adds a playful and imaginative element to Marvel comics, connecting to popular culture through Bowie's famous lightning bolt makeup on his left eye. The cover art of *Captain Marvel* complements the story's narrative. Marvel also uses its platform to draw

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attention to previous Captain Marvel issues. For example, issue #1 in 1994 highlighted Monica's struggles with racism and discrimination in the midst of South Africa's political transition. This cover incorporated the popular song "Free Your Mind" by En Vogue from 1992 and the "No Hate" banner. The use of imagery and text is a means of referencing and building on societal images (McCullum, 2016).

1.2.2.3 Gender Role Orientation Represented in Media

Achieving a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted impacts of media necessitates a thorough comprehension of the intricate interplay between gender and media. Callister et al. (2011) say, "The media can influence both behavior and attitudes, and yet the choice of engagement with certain types of media is also driven by existing attitudes and behavior" (Umansky, 2022).

Media, as a pervasive and powerful influence, shape our understanding of gender by transmitting messages that permeate our consciousness. These messages, conveyed through various forms of media, perpetuate unrealistic, stereotypical, and constraining perceptions of gender. Specifically, there are three themes that describe how media represent gender. First, women are frequently underrepresented, creating a false impression that men are the cultural standard and that women are unimportant or invisible. Second, both men and women are portrayed in stereotypical ways that reflect and sustain socially endorsed views of gender. Lastly, media's depictions of relationships between men and women tend to emphasize traditional gender roles and normalize violence against women. Consequently, the media tends to present men as active, adventurous, powerful and sexually aggressive, while portraying women as passive, dependent and preoccupied with their appearance and domestic responsibilities. The pervasiveness of media in our lives means that these representations of gender can distort our self-image and shape our perceptions of what is normal and desirable for men and women (Wood, 1994).

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This notion that female characters exist solely for the purpose of entertaining male audiences is not a new concept (Umansky, 2022).

The representation of women in media has long been a topic of concern in our society, with many films featuring female protagonists failing to move beyond a male love interest for a conventionally attractive and overly sexualized female character. This phenomenon has been the subject of academic discussion and analysis, reflecting a broader cultural issue regarding the portrayal of women in media and their perceived value and role in society (Volantine, 2016).

According to Ruble et al (2006), analysis investigating the representation of social groups within mainstream media has commonly centered on the issues of recognition and respect. Recognition pertains to the quantity of representation afforded to different groups, with a particular focus on the underrepresentation of women and girls within gender-biased discussions. It has been contended that a dearth of recognition reflects the devaluation of women in society. Analyses examining various genres of Television programs aimed at young audiences have consistently revealed a gender imbalance, wherein male characters are predominant and comprise approximately 60% or more of the characters depicted (Ward,2022). This finding is supported by research conducted by Baker and Raney (2007), Gerding and Signorielli (2014), Hentges and Case (2013), Martin (2017), Sink and Mastro (2017), and Walsh and Leaper (2020).

The second issue is Respect. According to analyses, respect in gender portrayal involves depicting each gender in a way that reflects their complexity and humanity, rather than reducing them to one-dimensional stereotypes. Researchers have consistently found that members of both genders, especially women, are often portrayed in stereotypical ways that limit their personalities and roles. Specifically, women are frequently depicted as being solely defined by their appearance and their behaviours in relationships, with few other traits and functions. Scholars such as Baker and Raney (2007) and Hentges and Case (2013) have shown that girls are more likely to focus on their appearance and be

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judged for it, and are more likely to be sexualized than boys, as documented by Rousseau et al(2018) and McDade-Montez et al(2017). For example, Gerding and Signoriello (2014) found in a study of tween programs on various Television networks that female characters were portrayed as more attractive, more preoccupied with their appearance, and more likely to receive comments about their looks than male characters. These patterns are even more salient in music videos as noted by Aubrey and Frisby (2011)¹, Wallis (2011) and Ward et al (2013), which are known to perpetuate messages that objectify women's bodies as a normative cultural practice. (Ward,2022)

The increasing prevalence of these characters in popular culture highlights salience of their representation, especially given the underrepresentation of female characters in the broader landscape (Shendruk, 2017).

1.2.3 Gender Gap in MCU

Marvel Cinematic Universe has become a cultural phenomenon, grossing billions of dollars at the Box Office and becoming a significant influence in popular culture. However, as with any media franchise, MCU has been subject to scrutiny regarding its representation of gender. The gender gap in Marvel movies is still quite wide even though there has been incremental progress. According to Ameter and other scholars the representation of gender in superhero films, particularly those produced by Marvel, can have far-reaching effects on society. Despite the immense popularity and cultural influence of the superhero genre and Marvel franchise, gender inequality remains. One of the key issues is the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in the portrayal of male and female characters (Cited in Tavares, 2022, pp 3).

Gender portrayal in MCU has been a topic of discussion among scholars and fans alike. While there have been some positive steps towards greater gender representation in MCU, there have also been criticisms of stereotypical gender

¹ cited in [Annual Review of Developmental Psychology](#). Volume 2,2020. Ward, pp 177-199

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roles and underrepresentation of female characters. According to Dill & Thill (2007), England et al (2011), Gilpatric (2010) and Miller et al (2016), several prevalent Media stereotypes portray women as sexual objects who are submissive, emotional and nurturing. Conversely, men are commonly stereotyped as aggressive, powerful, strong and assertive (Cited in Ray, 2020, pp 11).

Male characters like Thor and Captain America are depicted as muscular and powerful, with an emphasis on their physical strength and combat abilities. This reinforces the stereotype that men are primarily valued for their physical prowess and reinforces the toxic masculinity that permeates society. Additionally, male characters are often depicted as emotionally detached, with little emphasis on their emotional experiences or vulnerabilities. This perpetuates the stereotype that men should suppress their emotions and be stoic and unemotional. On the other hand, female characters in MCU are often sexualized and objectified, perpetuating the stereotype that women are primarily valued for their physical attractiveness. Characters like Black Widow and Gamora are portrayed as sexy and seductive, with an emphasis on their physical appearance rather than their abilities and personalities. Furthermore, female characters are often relegated to supporting roles, reinforcing the stereotype that women are subordinate to men and exist primarily to serve as love interests or sidekicks. However, it should be noted that recent MCU films have attempted to challenge these gender stereotypes. The introduction of female-led films like *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow* has given female characters more significant roles and depth, showcasing their abilities and personalities beyond their physical appearance. Similarly, male characters like Tony Stark and Peter Quill have been depicted as emotionally vulnerable and expressive, challenging the stereotype of male stoicism (Li, 2022).

Hence, gender stereotypes are prevalent in MCU, perpetuating harmful and limiting narratives about gender roles. While recent MCU films have attempted to challenge these stereotypes, there is still much work to be done to ensure responsible and inclusive representation in popular culture. It is essential to recognize the impact that media has on societal attitudes and beliefs about gender,

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and strive to create media that reflects the diversity and complexity of human experiences.

Marvel industry has achieved remarkable success in constructing male superhero characters, yet has encountered obstacles in creating female characters that are as equally complex and fully-realized. With the introduction of *Captain Marvel* in 2019, the industry made a significant leap in Feminist progress. The film deviated from the traditional and limited representations of female characters in superhero movies, thus, signifying a considerable advancement in the representation of women on screen. From the period of 2008 to 2019, the portrayal of female characters in Marvel movies underwent substantial change, with women no longer being relegated to peripheral roles but rather being endowed with equitable rights and opportunities as male characters. Nevertheless, despite the groundbreaking success of *Captain Marvel*, female characters within MCU continue to be restricted by a stereotypical and narrow representation of femininity (Li, 2022, pp 434).

During the nascent years of Marvel Cinematic Universe, it became apparent that the preponderance of the leading protagonists were male, while female characters were consigned to ancillary roles that predominantly served as foils to their male counterparts. With the exception of Black Widow, who possessed combat proficiency, the other female characters were typified as feeble and attractive, primarily waiting to be rescued by their male counterparts. In addition, their roles were frequently relegated to serving as an accolade for the male characters who saved the world. These female characters were objectified for a male gaze, with an emphasis on their physical appearance rather than their contributions to the plot. This form of portrayal was geared towards a male-dominated film market, wherein female characters were often attired in revealing clothing and portrayed in provocative ways. Ultimately, these female characters conveyed a simplistic set of ideologies that served to reinforce the hegemony of male protagonists in the narrative (Li, 2022, pp 435).

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The male characters in Marvel Cinematic Universe consistently come to the rescue, often appearing to have multiple chances at survival. On the other hand, the female characters in MCU are portrayed as relying on traditionally feminine qualities, such as self-sacrifice, as their greatest strength (Lenker, 2022).

MCU movies exhibit a clear depiction of gender power dynamics, where men are portrayed as the stronger gender. Despite some female characters being portrayed as strong and independent, they cannot refute the evident gender power hierarchy. Several scenes reinforce the gender ideology that women must be submissive and reliant on men (Alzahrani, 2016).

Female characters are often objectified and subjected to violence without any justifiable reason. These portrayals perpetuate gender stereotypes and trivialize the importance of female characters. Furthermore, the underrepresentation of women in the film industry is a significant concern, indicating a systemic bias in the industry towards male characters. Only 6.7 percent of all DC and Marvel characters are females. The lack of female protagonists in mainstream superhero films is a concerning trend, which may contribute to the marginalization of women in the genre (Shendruk, 2017).

1.2.4 History of Marvel Superheroines

Marvel Cinematic Universe has been subject to criticism regarding its portrayal of female superheroes, which has been characterized as less than favorable. However, the franchise is undergoing a transformation and the prospects for Marvel's female characters are promising (Bacon, 2021).

Superman made his debut in Action Comics in 1938, and since then, superheroes have become a popular subject in comic books and movies. While male superheroes have been great examples for men of all ages to follow and aspire to, the lack of female-led stories from the vast array of comic book characters makes it difficult for women to relate to these portrayals (Sherick, 2021).

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Historically, female superheroes have been inadequately represented, mistreated or objectified and many popular superhero teams have predominantly featured men with fewer women. This lack of representation may not be a concern for everyone, but it can have significant implications. The representation of women through the male gaze in comic books refers to how female characters are often portrayed to fulfill the fantasies of male authors and readers. This has been a persistent problem, with heroines being depicted from a male perspective in terms of their physical attributes, clothing, and situations, all aimed at pleasing the male audience (Sánchez, 2018).

Marvel Cinematic Universe has a major influence on contemporary popular culture and has expanded to include numerous films, shows, and an Avengers Campus at Disneyland Resort, with a brand worth 10\$ billion as of 2022. Despite its humble beginnings with *Iron Man* in 2008, MCU has made progress in creating a diverse cast of heroes that includes women (Tavares, 2022).

Throughout history, female superheroes in media have not always been given the opportunity to shine but rather assigned predetermined roles to play, such as being a love interest for male characters or serving as the sole female member on a team of men, often acting as a supporter or a romantic partner for one of them. This is evident in superhero movie posters where female characters are portrayed as beautiful and anxious while clutching the arms of male characters. According to Alexander (2012), if you read an article or review about a recent comic-book action film, you will notice that critics and journalists often praise male actors who wear tight costumes for their character's motivations, whereas female co-stars are asked inane questions about their outfits (Tavares, 2022).

The depiction of female superheroes and supervillains in Hollywood has been a source of concern among scholars and researchers. The lack of satisfactory portrayal may stem from the primary source of inspiration for superhero films, which is the comic book medium. Comics, being a visual medium, historically

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have not been very diverse and have often relegated female characters to secondary roles. Moreover, female characters in comics have contributed to a pervasive trend of underrepresentation and misrepresentation of female characters in Hollywood superhero films (Bacon, 2021).

In 2008, Marvel Studios introduced Marvel Cinematic Universe, but it did not take long for people to realize that the films had inherited some of the problematic attitudes found in the comics. This issue was so significant that it resulted in conflicts during the production of *Iron Man 3*. Despite being cast as Maya Hansen, Rebecca Hall's character was reduced from a major character to a minor adversary. In an interview, Hall expressed disappointment as she had signed on to play a more substantial role. The reason for the change in plans was because Marvel executives believed that a female character's merchandise would not sell well. This argument was likely made by Ike Perlmutter, the then-CEO of Marvel Entertainment, who came from the toy industry and was later exposed in leaked Sony emails for saying that films featuring female superheroes to be "disasters" (Bacon, 2021).

The superhero genre has evolved significantly since its humble beginnings in inexpensive comic books to its current status as the highest-earning genre, enjoyed by people of all ages. According to Ameter (2019), the superhero genre demonstrates diversity by being equally appealing to both teenagers and adults in various aspects. Ameter and other researchers have discovered that the representation of gender in superhero movies, such as those produced by Marvel, holds significant influence and extends its impact on society. Despite the immense popularity and influence of the superhero genre and Marvel, gender inequality persists for women. According to Ameter, women are not adequately embraced within the superhero industry, as evidenced by the portrayal of female superheroes primarily catering to the male gaze and male-oriented enjoyment and viewership (Cited in Tavares, 2022, pp 3).

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Alexander (2012) observes the tangible impact of such representations and Alexander suggests that the actors and actresses who portray superheroes encounter similar treatment as the fictional characters they represent. Hence, the negative portrayal of female superheroes, especially if it promotes harmful and sexist ideals, can greatly impact women, leading to adverse outcomes (Cited in Tavares, 2022, pp 4).

Suppressing the voices of women and presenting them in limited, inauthentic ways can have a negative impact on how girls and women perceive themselves both as individuals and as superheroes. It may make them feel constrained and inadequate to pursue their dreams, as they are constantly treated as inferior to men. It is of utmost importance to thoroughly analyze the influential powerhouse that is Marvel in the superhero industry. Their unmatched influence will determine the standard that other companies should strive to achieve (Tavares, 2022).

By examining the way Marvel depicts female superheroes, we can determine whether the former reinforces or challenges gender bias, which is especially important because its influential position in the entertainment industry can impact other forms of media.

Female superheroes may be perceived as a recent phenomenon by some, but upon closer examination of Marvel's rich history, it becomes apparent that women have consistently held prominent positions in their narratives. Characters such as She-Hulk (Jennifer Walters), Black Widow (Natasha Romanoff), and Mighty Thor (Jane Foster) have been integral parts of Marvel Comics Universe since long before its advent and have portrayed strength and empowerment. These female superheroes have served as potent symbols of female agency and have been representative of women's voices even before the concept of "woke" culture emerged (Cruz, 2022).

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1.2.4.1 Black Widow

Scarlett Johansson made her debut in Marvel Cinematic Universe in the 2010 film *Iron Man 2*, portraying the character of Black Widow, who is recognized as the franchise's first female superhero. In the comic books, Black Widow has often been depicted in a sexualized manner, frequently portrayed wearing tight catsuits with a partially unzipped front. MCU followed this portrayal by introducing Natasha Romanoff as S.H.I.E.L.D agent who had infiltrated Stark Industries to monitor Iron Man. Tony Stark, the titular character of the film, was immediately infatuated with her, despite Pepper Potts, his secretary and soon-to-be lover, cautioning him about potential sexual harassment allegations. While Black Widow was depicted as a formidable and capable character, MCU initially embraced a "male gaze" approach to the super-spy, including a scene where she changed into her catsuit in the back of a car while Happy Hogan, a supporting character, stole glances at her through the rearview mirror. Victoria Alonso, who served as a producer for *Iron Man 2* and now holds the position of Executive Vice President of Production at Marvel, has acknowledged discomfort with the sexualization of Black Widow in the film, although she was unable to make changes at that time (Bacon, 2021).

Johansson reportedly stated to BBC News that there was a time when she was called a derogatory term (a piece of meat) and it may have been perceived as a compliment back then, indicating that her worth was reduced to being seen as an object. She acknowledges that this perception may have changed over time. She also stated to HelloBeautiful.com that Black Widow was often discussed in a way that objectified her, treating her like an object or possession. In the film, Stark frequently flirts with her. However, it is only later in the movie that her true heroism is revealed (Scribner, 2021).

1.2.4.2 Wonder Woman

According to Baer (2020), Diana Prince, more commonly known as Wonder

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Wonder Woman, has been recognized as one of the most influential and impactful superheroines in the history of DC Comics. Her character has represented justice, empowerment and equality for women for over seven decades, making her a symbol of inspiration for many. However, her origins are not entirely aligned with current progressive values, as her early stories were not as forward-thinking as one might expect in 2023. Her creator, William Moulton Marston, incorporated his BDSM² interests into her comics, resulting in her character being heavily sexualized. While Wonder Woman's strengths and intelligence as a formidable hero have been widely admired, it is crucial to acknowledge that her creation and purpose were influenced by the perspective and desires of a male audience (Cited in Tavares, 2020. pp 6.7).

Although many female superheroes have emerged in recent decades, the treatment of superheroines has not always been equitable compared to their male counterparts. While male heroes like Batman, Superman and Iron Man have been revered and celebrated for many years, female superheroes have often been marginalized and objectified. It is essential to acknowledge these disparities to promote more inclusive and equitable representation in the world of superheroes and beyond (Cited in Tavares, 2020. pp 6.7).

1.2.4.3 Scarlet Witch

Despite being the most powerful and highly regarded character in the entire Marvel Cinematic Universe, Scarlet Witch was historically mistreated by MCU. She is still a victim of a particular kind of sexual injustice due to her infantilization which undermines her superpowers of telekinesis and mind control. In Spite of her multifaceted powers, she has an orphaned and emotionally unstable identity that makes her vulnerable in inappropriate situations. In her debut in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, she is portrayed as young and enhanced, as described by Captain America. Marvel Studios emphasizes this kid-like image in all of her subsequent appearances. She is depicted as reliant on male, parental

² Bondage, Discipline, Dominance, Submission, Sadism, and Masochism

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figures and she is never allowed to take responsibility for her actions. The Russo Brothers' decision to portray Scarlet Witch as a damsel in distress in *Avengers: Infinity War* allows their audience to remain fixated on captivating stories of female fragility where a man can step in to save the day. Overall, Scarlet Witch's characterization perpetuates the idea that she lacks the confidence to control her abilities independently (Echezabal&Olufidipe 2021, pp7).

1.2.5 The Construction of The Female Gaze in MCU

Marvel Cinematic Universe has dominated the entertainment industry for several years, however, female filmmakers have not received much attention in this spotlight. Since the emergence of action superhero movies, the genre has been predominantly male-centric, both on screen and behind the scenes. Mulvey (2009) explains that the male gaze creates a gendered division, as the act of looking is divided between an active male observer who possesses the ability to gaze, and a passive female who is objectified and subjected to the gaze (Cited in Volantine, 2016, p20).

The underrepresentation of women in Marvel movies has been noticeable until recent years, where there have been efforts to increase female participation and representation in the franchise (Kormanis, 2022).

Recent trends suggest that the fanbase for superhero content is more diverse than the industry had initially thought. In response to this, Marvel has started to broaden its range of superheroes. While they have previously fallen short in terms of female representation, the latest MCU films have demonstrated notable progress in this regard, albeit highlighting a continued need for growth (Gupta and Tran, 2020).

Orwin (2002) noted that the limitations of Critical Mass Theory indicate that the necessity of women's involvement in Hollywood extends beyond mere inclusion. Having diverse filmmakers also results in a wider range of narratives being told. Generally, women tend to tell more introspective stories, which differ

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from the typically masculine and outward-focused hero's journey (Cited in Kunsey, 2018,p 30).

According to Kormanis (2022), MCU has recently taken steps to increase the representation of female filmmakers within its production teams. This step provides audiences with a fresh perspective that is often missing from the superhero genre -The Female Gaze-. During an interview with "Brut,"³Chloé Zhao, the acclaimed Oscar winner, highlighted the importance of the female gaze for directors, irrespective of their gender. According to her, female directors naturally possess a female gaze, but she also emphasized that male directors can effectively adopt a female gaze in their work. In essence, she stressed that the female gaze is a valuable lens through which stories can be told, offering unique and meaningful perspectives for both male and female directors (Zhao, 2021).

1.2.5.1 Cate Shortland: *Black Widow* and Real-World Issues

Cate Shortland made history as the first female solo director of a Marvel Cinematic Universe film with her work on *Black Widow*. Not only did she portray the female gaze through the character of Natasha Romanoff, played by Scarlett Johansson but she addressed real world issues in a straightforward manner, which was different from earlier Marvel movies (Kormanis, 2022).

The main theme tackled in *Black Widow* is human trafficking, which disproportionately affects women. Director Cate Shortland successfully conveyed a specific aspect of the female gaze by highlighting the suffering of women. Despite the challenging subject matter, Shortland courageously presented the opening credits in a way that was both difficult to watch yet necessary to bring attention to the issue. Her ability to address female-centric themes in a genre that is male-centered underscores her talent as a filmmaker and contributes to the ongoing discourse regarding representation and diversity in cinema (Kormanis, 2022).

³Is a French online media

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1.2.5.2 Chloe Zhao: *The Eternals* and Beyond

Chloe Zhao, after winning multiple Oscars for her feature film *Nonadland* in 2021, gained a notable presence in the film industry. In that same year, she directed Marvel's *Eternals*, which challenged the typical Marvel movie formula by presenting mature themes and emotions. More importantly, it showcased ideas through the female gaze and featured female leads, marking a significant shift in representation. Zhao's innovative storytelling is likely to be the subject of study in future film criticism (Kormanis, 2022).

1.2.5.3 Anna Boden: *Captain Marvel's* Co Director

Anna Boden made history by becoming the first female co-director of a Marvel film, as she worked alongside Ryan Fleck on *Captain Marvel*. This achievement opened doors for other female filmmakers who aspire to break into male-dominated genres. *Captain Marvel* brought attention to the topic of female empowerment by showcasing how the main character, Carol Danvers, comes to grips with her powers and uses them to the fullest extent. Although the film follows a standard Marvel superhero arc, the difference was that the protagonist was a woman. This uncomplicated approach proved to be successful in creating an impactful and well-received movie (Kormanis, 2022).

Indeed, the movie was a hit at the Box Office and broke records as the highest grossing female led film in history. The film's opening weekend earnings outperformed all previous Marvel Cinematic Universe movies except *Infinity War* (Kim, 2020).

1.2.6 Feminist Film Theory

Feminist Film Theory and criticism have made significant contributions to the field of film studies by offering new insights into sexual difference and gender identity. Through the development of innovative critical methodologies and theories, feminist scholars have produced fresh knowledge concerned with the

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deconstruction of representation and the creation of new frameworks that enable the recognition of women as both subjects and objects within cinema. In doing so, authors have challenged traditional theories and histories of film, resulting in a reconsideration of representational categories and a reclaiming of women's contributions to the history of filmmaking (McCabe, 2004).

Feminist Film research extended its cultural interests and influence in recent years by interrogating representations of race, ethnicity and class in relation to gender. Feminist scholars have broadened the scope of feminist analysis in film, which has allowed for a deeper understanding of the intersections between gender and other aspects of identity, leading to a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to the study of cinema (McCabe, 2004, p2).

According to Smelik (2016), this theory serves two functions. Firstly, it criticizes the portrayal of women in films as stereotyped. Secondly, it provides a subjective depiction of the female figure (Kostadinova, 2022, p25.26).

Tonny Krijnen (2017) provides a more detailed explanation of feminist theory in relation to media. He delves into the concept of the portrayal of women in movies, which is influenced by two key concepts in cinema: scopophilia, which refers to the enjoyment derived from objectifying others erotically, and narcissism, which involves films presenting idealized egos for viewers to identify with and derive pleasure from (Kostadinova, 2022, p27).

The Hollywood film industry, with its long-standing record of propagating sexual stereotypes of women and portraying violence against them, necessitated a more profound comprehension of its detrimental systems. Theoretical constructs that draw on ideological criticism, semiotics, psychoanalysis and deconstruction have been found to be more effective in scrutinizing the means by which sexual disparity is embedded within the cinematic visual and narrative structure (Smelik, 2016).

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Feminist Film Theory has incorporated insights from semiotics, which reveal that Hollywood cinema employs strategies to obscure its ideological underpinnings by masking its methods of production. Specifically, the cinematic medium presents the signifier “woman” as a natural and realistic entity, when in reality it is a symbolic system, a set of conventions or codes that conveys ideological implications. Within patriarchal ideology, the depiction of women can only function in relation to men. Hence, the sign ‘woman’ is portrayed in a negative manner as “not-man”, leading to the absence of the “woman as woman” in cinema. Feminist Film Theory shifted its focus from simplistic female stereotypes to the complex structures of gendered representation in visual culture due to the influence of semiotics. Nonetheless, it was through psychoanalysis that the well-known concept of the male gaze was introduced (Smelik, 2016).

According to Hankin (2007), Feminist Films aim to challenge the prevailing portrayal of female identity in mainstream movies, instead of conforming to it. This sets them apart from traditionally masculine films. Although it is important for women to be able to shape a diverse range of stories, Feminist Films have a distinctive objective (Cited in Kunsey, 2018, pp 30).

In MCU, there have been notable examples of females who challenge the male gaze, such as *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel*. These characters are portrayed as strong, independent women who are not defined by their relationships with male characters. They are shown to have agency and take charge of their own destinies.

Another important aspect of Feminist Film Theory is the way in which women are visually represented. In many films, women are depicted in a sexualized manner to cater to the male gaze. However, MCU introduced complex and multidimensional female characters such as Valkyrie in *Thor: Ragnarok*. This subversion of traditional gender roles is a positive step forward in feminist representation.

1.3 The Representation of Women in Marvel Cinematic Universe

The Marvel Avengers Movies revolve around male characters who are portrayed as larger-than-life figures, and the female characters in the movies are not given enough room to be fully fleshed-out characters. Instead, they rely on female stereotypes, clichés and societal structures that present a narrow, one dimensional view of women, without any critical examination or diversity of representation. The portrayal of the female physique in a sexual manner has been fully incorporated into our societal comprehension and is linked to the notion of Scopophilia⁴. Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" links the act of watching films with scopophilia, and highlights the traditional understanding of the camera's gaze as male. Mulvey also notes that the male figure captured by the camera cannot be sexualized by the audience since men are not inclined to look at themselves in an exhibitionist manner. The male character takes on an active role in the story and serves as the audience's main point of identification. This causes the female character to be portrayed as a passive object of the camera's gaze, intended to provide visual pleasure for the audience (Sherick, 2021).

Widespread Social Contexts of sexism and postfeminism create representations of women that seem to empower them, but in reality, they actually disempower them, and people receive them subconsciously. This series strengthens sexist and false postfeminist beliefs by using power dynamics that preserve and normalize power imbalances between genders, visual techniques where the male perspective privileges the female image as an object, storylines that rely on stereotypes, clichés and binaries to create narrow-minded depictions of women, which unconsciously influence their gender roles and sexuality and language patterns that belittle and oversimplify females. The absence of women in the creation, production and distribution of movies, both historically and currently, as well as inherent difficulties in adapting superhero stories into films, are among the reasons for such underwhelming depictions of women. The

⁴ The Pleasure of Looking

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representation of female characters in this superhero franchise reinforces prevailing patriarchal ideology through the lens of postfeminism, as interpreted by Marvel's media. This approach limits the development of female narratives and story arcs and equates sexual empowerment and autonomy by promoting hyperfemininity, hypersexuality and the internalization of the male gaze as forms of empowerment (DeMarchi, 2014).

According to Aley and Hahn (2020), studies indicate that women continue to be underrepresented in comparison to men, and the media's emphasis on male roles can lead to the devaluation of women's roles in society (DeMarchi, 2014).

1.3.1 Sexism and Objectification

Sexism within the film industry has long been a topic of concern, with the marginalization and underrepresentation of women often overlooked or dismissed. However, the widespread success of Marvel Studios has drawn attention to the portrayal of gender roles in their films. A Feminist Film Theory approach was used to analyze 14 MCU movies, specifically focusing on female characters. Notes were taken on various aspects such as dialogue, costume, design and character relationships (Echezabal&Olufidipe 2021).

According to Mulvey (2009), the male gaze happens when men take pleasure in the image they are observing and the feeling of being in control, while actively engaging in the act of looking. The findings revealed that female characters in MCU are often sexualized by directors, costume designers, and even male co-stars, despite their portrayal as powerful. It was concluded that Marvel lacks inclusivity in its representation of female characters, even in upcoming productions that are supposed to be female-focused. This marginalization of superheroines raises concerns for the future of the film industry. This study highlights how Marvel's treatment of female characters reinforces patriarchal structures and harmful stereotypes, and calls for corrective measures in the film industry as a whole (Echezabal&Olufidipe 2021).

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Cohen (1997) argued that women often internalize sexism as a protective mechanism to maintain their “good girl” status and valued contributions to society, thereby participating in their own oppression. This internalization can lead to women policing other women by monitoring, controlling, or shaming them based on societal norms and evaluations that uphold the oppressive good girl stereotype. Cohen (1994), Herzog and Oreg (2008), and West and Zimmerman (1987) suggested that gender roles that deviate from traditional norms, such as a mother who neglects her caregiving responsibilities or a woman who is sexually available, would be considered unacceptable and stigmatized in contrast to societal norms for “good girls” (Cited in Echezabal&Olufidipe, 2021, pp 10).

In essence, women are socialized to conform to traditional gender roles as wives and caregivers, with the expectation that they will be praised by men for their purity and availability. As a result, women have internalized oppressive ideologies and conduct, such as conformity to social norms, assigning blame to victims, and stigmatizing women based on their sexual expression. These beliefs and behaviors serve to reinforce detrimental stereotypes like the categorization of women as either pure or promiscuous, or as nurturing mothers or unpleasant individuals (Echezabal&Olufidipe, 2021).

Recent research by Hillary Pennell and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz (2015) from the University of Missouri suggests that the influence of superheroes may not always have positive effects on women. Despite women playing diverse roles in the superhero genre, such as damsels in distress or powerful heroines, female characters tend to be hypersexualized with idealized, curvy bodies and revealing costumes. The study shows that exposure to such depictions can influence beliefs about gender roles, body image, and self-objectification. Take, for instance, superhero films such as *Spiderman* or *Superman*. These action-packed movies often depict a powerful, competent, and intelligent male protagonist battling a nefarious antagonist. While the ultimate goal is to save humanity, there is often an additional urgency to rescue a helpless female character in distress. The latter

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is usually portrayed as fragile, innocent, and vulnerable, yet simultaneously portrayed as attractive and alluring. Despite her lack of physical strength and strategic acumen, she is compensated by her kindness and curves. It is not surprising, and it is noteworthy, that she often becomes the object of the hero's romantic interest (May, 2015).

According to Mulvey, in a typical movie, the appearance of women is necessary for the spectacle, but it also tends to interrupt the plot's progress and cause a pause in the action for moments of erotic admiration. This means that the narrative pace decreases when female characters are shown (Sendrick, 2021).

The portrayal of women in promotional posters, trailers, and scenes often depicts them as supporting characters, love interests, or mere tools to advance the main character's story. Despite some progress towards inclusivity in the genre, there are still prevalent issues with the way female characters are developed (Eve, 2021).

The male characters in Marvel Cinematic Universe consistently come to the rescue, often appearing to have multiple chances at survival. On the other hand, the female characters in MCU are portrayed as relying on traditionally feminine qualities, such as self-sacrifice, as their greatest strength (Eve, 2021).

1.3.1.1 The M-She-U Controversy

Recently, there has been a significant amount of discussion regarding issues of racism and sexism in relation to Marvel Cinematic Universe productions. A new controversy, known as "M-She-U"⁵, has emerged, highlighting the ongoing debate about sexism at Marvel Studios. This term employs wordplay to critically interrogate the sufficiency of female representation in MCU. The third episode of *She-Hulk* has specifically alluded to this aspect, sparking renewed discussions and debates on the topic. The term "M-She-U" is a reference to the contentious issue of sexism within Marvel Studios, which has been criticized for its perceived

⁵ Marvel Superhero Extended Universe

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lack of adequate female representation in Marvel Cinematic Universe (Asensi, 2022).

Conversely, there are fans who argue that MCU already has an excessive number of female characters. In recent times, there has been considerable backlash against MCU, with detractors claiming that the franchise now suffers from an overabundance of heroines. Notably, the television series *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law*, in its third episode, satirizes this controversy. To that end, they published a series of fake tweets targeting Jennifer Walters, the protagonist of the series. These tweets were designed to hint at an ongoing controversy within the M-SHE-U and were featured in news articles about the series, alongside various videos and social media posts. Notably, each of these tweets contained derogatory and harmful content, yet were presented in a spoofed manner, feigning to be generated by fictional users to create the illusion of gaining viral traction (Asensi, 2022). One of them even said, "They took the Hulk's manhood away and gave it to a woman?" (Cruz, 2022).

It took Marvel Studios a decade and eighteen films to break the pattern of white male protagonists with the release of *Black Panther*. However, even after that breakthrough, it took another year before a female hero finally got her own solo movie with *Captain Marvel*, despite the presence of Black Widow since the first Avengers film. The idea that Marvel Cinematic Universe is becoming the "M-She-U" and shifting its focus solely to female heroes is absurd. In Phase 4, out of 14 projects, only six feature women as the main characters. While women are playing a more significant role in the overall narrative, they are not taking over the spotlight, but rather sharing it with other characters. Hence, and although it might be unsettling for some to see female characters take on the roles of established heroes like She-Hulk (Jennifer Walters), Mighty Thor (Jane Foster), and Black Panther (Shuri), it is important to understand that these characters have existed in the comic books long before the current era, and their inclusion is not solely a response to "woke" culture. Even if there was no prior comic book precedent, Marvel Studios should not shy away from highlighting diverse

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perspectives in their projects (Hargrave, 2022).

Despite being perceived as a recent trend by some, female superheroes have always been present in Marvel's stories. Long before Marvel Cinematic Universe gained popularity, characters like She-Hulk, Black Widow, and Mighty Thor, portrayed by Jennifer Walters, Natasha Romanoff, and Jane Foster respectively, were already established in Marvel comics universe. These fearless female heroes have been breaking barriers and amplifying the voices of women even before the term "woke" culture was coined, showcasing Marvel's long-standing commitment to diverse and empowering representation (Cruz, 2022).

1.3.1.2 MCU: Review Bombing and Misogyny

Misogyny is a culture of violence against women. It targets women regardless of their race, sexual orientation, gender identity, or appearance. This harmful phenomenon can be observed in various contexts, such as literature translations, social media platforms like Twitter, and film sites like IMDb and Rotten Tomatoes. Even actresses in Marvel Cinematic Universe, who have been trailblazers in portraying strong and empowered female characters, face the effects of misogyny in the form of review bombing on public access sites. Review bombing is a harmful trend where certain individuals, typically white males, intentionally leave negative reviews for a project even before its release. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in the context of female-led superhero productions. While MCU has made progress in terms of diversity and representation, there is still a long way to go in terms of supporting talent when they face xenophobic and misogynistic backlash. Often, these "fans" are angered by storylines that focus on the struggles of underrepresented groups, such as a Muslim teenager from New Jersey or a fully covered suit for Black Widow. It is noteworthy that the misogynistic comments and reviews are disproportionately directed towards female-centric progressive content (Parvanae, 2022).

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The *She-Hulk* TV show received criticism before its release due to concerns about the quality of its digital effects in the trailers. However, apart from that, the show is notable for its inclusion of women in important roles such as directing, writing, producing, and starring, which sets it apart as an MCU production. Regrettably, on its launch day, the show has been subjected to numerous one-star reviews, similar to what happened with *Ms. Marvel*, though not to the same extent as other MCU series. This suggests a potential pattern of review bombing (Tassi, 2022).

Similarly, when the first female-led film in Marvel Cinematic Universe, *Captain Marvel* was announced, it was met with coordinated attacks aimed at lowering its ratings even before its release. Some of the review-bombers also took issue with the outspoken support for socio-political causes like gender equality and sexual assault survivors by the film's lead actress, Brie Larson (Lye, 2022).

WandaVision, the first Marvel Cinematic Universe series on Disney + and the first MCU series led by a woman, Elizabeth Olsen, who portrays Wanda Maximoff, had the opportunity to showcase her comedic talents and display a wide range of emotions. Unlike typical portrayals of women in comedy, which often resort to derogatory or belittling humor, *Wanda Vision* did not follow that trend. This departure from harmful humor did not sit well with those who rely on bullying for comedic effect. Furthermore, *The Eternals*, as the first MCU film to embrace diversity in various ways, brought a breath of fresh air by being more representative of the real world. Those who engage in review bombing lack credibility as they criticize the alleged absence of substance in these projects (Parvanae, 2022). Lye (2022) stated, 'A film with a female protagonist can be bad, but it's not bad because its protagonist is female'.

1.3.2 The Projection of Masculine Ideals: Hegemonic Masculinity to Female Masculinity

The projection of masculine ideals on female superheroes is a phenomenon that

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has been prevalent in popular culture for many years. It involves the portrayal of female superheroes as possessing traditionally masculine traits, such as physical strength, aggression, and emotional detachment. This phenomenon is problematic because it reinforces gender stereotypes and can create unrealistic expectations for women. It also tends to sexualize female characters, often reducing them to objects of male desire rather than fully developed individuals. Furthermore, the projection of masculine ideals on female superheroes can lead to a lack of diversity in representation, as characters who do not conform to these ideals are often overlooked or dismissed. Hence, this can have a negative impact on the self-esteem and confidence of women and girls who do not see themselves reflected in these characters. For example, many female superheroes in MCU are depicted as being physically strong and capable fighters, often with a no-nonsense attitude and a lack of emotional vulnerability. While this can be empowering for some viewers, it can also perpetuate the idea that women must conform to masculine ideals in order to be strong and successful (Fleming, 2015).

Hegemonic Masculinity, a term introduced by sociologist R.W. Connell in 1982, refers to a concept of masculinity that sets itself apart from other forms of male identity. It is closely associated with patriarchal values that uphold the submission, exploitation, and objectification of both women and other masculinities that do not conform to the ideals of hegemony. In contemporary North American and Western societies, Hegemonic Masculinity is considered as the dominant and privileged form of masculinity, characterized by its rejection of anything feminine or perceived as "unmasculine." It is exclusive, strong, and associated with societal power and privilege (Fleming, 2015).

Marvel Cinematic Universe portrays the emotional journey of superheroes as they transition from boys to men, following the traditional hero's journey narrative. However, hypermasculinity serves as a barrier that prevents them from achieving true heroism, as it imposes societal expectations on their gender identity. As these heroes progress in their respective films, they must confront and overcome hyper masculine traits within themselves, such as the need to assert

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dominance, impulsive violence, and the desire to be seen as heroic, in order to undergo emotional growth and discover their true identity. This depiction highlights how cultural expectations and gender norms create unrealistic and idealized standards of masculinity that pressure men to conform to societal hierarchies. The characters of Iron Man, Thor, and Captain America, who are foundational heroes in MCU, exemplify how hypermasculinity acts as a barrier in their lives, inhibiting their character development and emotional growth, and hindering the formation of their personal identity (Walsh, p102).

In American culture, there is a belief that to be considered masculine, men should display dominant behaviour. Kimmel (2012) explores the function of manhood in American society by investigating the ways in which men perform gender, meaning how they express masculinity and form a masculine sense of self. According to Kimmel (2012), the pursuit of manhood - the endeavor to attain, showcase, and validate one's masculinity - has been a significant and ongoing aspect of men's experiences. American culture shapes men's identities by utilizing narratives and fiction (Volantine,2016).

Milestone and Meyer (2012) argue that male audiences may identify with the dominant male character's gaze in films, eagerly anticipating the arrival of an object that satisfies his desires. This consumption of sexualized images of women contributes to the construction of a masculine identity, particularly one that is heterosexual (Cited in Volantine, 2016, p20).

The Avengers are not inherently born as superheroes; rather, they acquire their superhero status through a process of transformation. This idea is not new, as it aligns with the belief that masculinity is earned rather than predetermined by one's identity. While already recognized as men, the Avengers' transformation into superheroes adds an extra dimension of masculinity that sets them apart from ordinary men. This added masculinity brings with it the expectation that superheroes are responsible for protecting and aiding others, which is one of the reasons they are viewed as role models. However, this transformation is not taken

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lightly. The Avengers, in particular, take four men who have some form of inadequacy and alleviate their weaknesses to create ideal men: superheroes. The weaknesses they display illustrate what society considers to be shortcomings, and the "solutions" to these weaknesses convey what society values.

Wonder Woman, a female superhero from DC Comics, starred in the first-ever feature-length movie with a female superhero as the lead character in 2017. The film takes place in the same fictional universe as Batman and Superman. Meanwhile, Marvel Studios had recently announced the production of its first female superhero movie, *Captain Marvel*. Given that both *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel* are the first of their kind in their cinematic universes, it is crucial to assess how audiences reacted to *Wonder Woman* to anticipate how *Captain Marvel* might be received. The data analysis aims to compare how audiences discuss female superheroes compared to male superheroes. This is particularly relevant due to criticism regarding female superheroes being portrayed with traditionally masculine traits, which is a concept explored in masculinity theory (Volantine, 2016).

1.3.3 The Evolution of Female Superheroes

Marvel Cinematic Universe is a popular franchise of movies and TV shows that adapts superhero comic book stories. The plotlines of these stories are interconnected, and one of the most well-known aspects of the franchise is the Avengers, a team of various superheroes and storylines. Historically, the superhero genre has been mostly focused on male audiences. However, recent evidence suggests that the audience for superhero content is more diverse than previously believed. Marvel is taking steps to adapt to these changing trends by introducing more diverse characters (Gupta & Tran, 2020).

In the past, female superheroes in MCU were not always given fair treatment, but there is a positive shift happening within the franchise and Marvel's female characters have a promising future. Marvel Cinematic Universe has made

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notable strides in their portrayal of female superheroes over the last decade. Unfortunately, the film industry has a track record of mishandling female superheroes and supervillains, which may be due to the fact that the source material, comic books, has historically lacked diversity and tended to prioritize male characters over female ones, often objectifying them in the process (Bacon, 2021).

Despite initial shortcomings in representing women effectively, recent MCU films have made great progress towards positive change, while also highlighting the need for continued growth. Marvel Cinematic Universe has adopted a phase-based system to manage the release dates and storylines of its movies. The first phase of MCU encompasses six films: *Iron Man* (2008), *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Thor* (2011), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), and culminating in *The Avengers* (2012). Despite the inclusion of strong female characters across these films, they are predominantly relegated to supporting roles, serving as love interests or plot devices to facilitate the growth of male protagonists. While characters like Pepper Potts, who becomes the CEO of Stark Industries, Jane Foster, a brilliant scientist, and Peggy Carter, a skilled S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, exhibit individuality and distinctive traits, their development and growth are secondary to that of male characters. Notwithstanding, MCU's deployment of female characters remains an important aspect of the franchise (Gupta & Tran, 2020).

During Phase I, female characters who were not solely defined by their romantic interests were scarce, with Maria Hill and Black Widow being the only notable exceptions. However, Maria's screen time was quite limited, and Black Widow's portrayal consistently catered to the male gaze. Despite being a highly skilled agent, her character was often reduced to misogynistic clichés, such as the "sexy agent" in *Iron Man 2*. Additionally, she was depicted as a romantic threat to Pepper Potts, the only other major female character in the film. Although Black Widow's character did evolve over time, the male gaze still objectified her with tight clothing and camera angles that accentuated her body in sexually suggestive

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poses (Gupta &Tran, 2020).

In Phase II of Marvel Cinematic Universe, there was a continuation of having strong female characters such as Black Widow in *Captain America: Winter Soldier* (2014), Gamora in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), and the introduction of Scarlet Witch in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015). However, these women were still in supporting roles and were vastly outnumbered by male leads, and their portrayals were problematic. For example, Gamora was a skilled fighter, but her primary purpose was to serve as a love interest for the film's protagonist, Peter Quill. The portrayal of Scarlet Witch in MCU has also received criticism because despite having immense power, she is portrayed as insecure and afraid of her abilities. Additionally, Vision is depicted as her protector and a romantic interest. Black Widow also faces the male gaze, particularly in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, where she becomes romantically involved with another Avenger (Gupta & Tran, 2020).

Pepper Potts in *Iron Man 3* exemplifies a woman who is still constrained by traditional gender norms and the clichéd “damsel in distress” stereotype. Despite being portrayed as a strong and independent character, Pepper is primarily used as a plot device and a love interest for Tony Stark throughout the Iron Man franchise, rather than being given her own storyline and character development. In *Iron Man 3*, Pepper is taken captive by the enemy and injected with the Extremis virus, forcing Tony to rescue her and find a cure. Despite early marketing materials indicating that Pepper would have a more substantial role in the film, her dependence on Tony to save and cure her perpetuates the “damsel in distress” trope. The movie industry often reinforces popular myths and gender hierarchies, as discussed in the article “Feminine Purity and Masculine Revenge-Seeking In Taken (2008)” by Kelly (2012), and *Iron Man 3* is a prime example of how Hollywood blockbuster films tend to portray women as helpless and in need of masculine rescue, thereby falling short in representing women effectively (Gupta & Tran, 2020).

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In recent years, Marvel has been taking deliberate steps towards positive change, as evidenced by their Phase III films. These movies feature a larger number of strong female characters and also showcase the first female leads that do not include a romantic subplot. Among these films are *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), *Black Panther* (2017), and *Captain Marvel* (2019), which also feature a more diverse group of directors in Marvel Cinematic Universe. This represents a rejection of traditional femininity and a move away from the male perspective, with women being given more screen time. Although some of the other films in this phase may have some shortcomings, examining these three specifically can indicate a more inclusive future for MCU (Gupta & Tran, 2020).

Captain Marvel (2019) is the best example of women's liberation within Marvel Cinematic Universe, as it is the first movie to feature a female lead and co-director. Despite sparking a lot of discussion among fans, with some criticizing it for being too feminist or not feminist enough, the film promotes empowerment and capitalizes on popular feminism. The marketing emphasizes Carol Danvers as "a HERO," emphasizing her femininity, while the movie itself portrays a message of individual empowerment through scenes such as "I'm Only Human," where Danvers taps into her full potential. However, the film does not address any structural changes or push a specific feminist agenda, instead representing the white, gender, female experience. The movie also challenges misogynistic tropes, such as when Danvers refuses to prove herself to her former mentor without using her powers. Despite criticisms, *Captain Marvel* represents a significant step forward for Marvel (Gupta & Tran, 2020).

Marvel keeps making positive changes in their upcoming Phase IV movies. There will be a shift from past films where Thor was the only main character, as seen in the rumored plot of *Thor: Love & Thunder* (2022). Marvel has expressed their commitment to exploring other female characters such as Valkyrie and Jane Foster. In *Eternals* (2021), which features a female director named Chloé Zhao, new female characters are introduced to MCU, and the film has an equal split of five male and five female Eternals. To ensure more female

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representation in MCU films, the creators of *Eternals* gender-swapped three characters from the original comics, namely Sprite, Makkari, and Ajak, who were originally males (Gupta &Tran, 2020).

As part of Phase IV, Marvel's second film featuring a solo female lead is *Black Widow* (2021). Despite appearing in 8 MCU movies since *Iron Man 2* (2010), it took 11 years for Black Widow to have her own solo film. The trailer has set the stage for the movie, and unlike most action films with male leads that perpetuate gender inequalities, Black Widow appears to reject these norms. This is evident in Black Widow's appearance, as she no longer wears low cut clothing to accentuate her bust and her hair is tied up in a more practical manner. The film also features Marvel's first female director, Cate Shortland, who is dedicated to showcasing Black Widow's character, grit, and determination(Gupta & Tran, 2020).

In the initial two phases of Marvel Cinematic Universe, women were not well-represented, but during Phase III and the upcoming Phase IV, Marvel has made significant progress towards addressing this issue. They have added more powerful female characters, increased their screen time, rejected traditional feminine stereotypes, and even released movies with a female lead. Although these are positive developments, there is still a long way to go for Marvel to improve. Fans are excited to see how MCU will evolve in the future (Gupta & Tran, 2020.)

Hence, the female characters in Marvel Cinematic Universe can be given more depth, intricacy, and agency which can empower women and enhance the viewing experience for everyone. It is high time for MCU to move forward and provide female characters with the representation they are worthy of(Chaudhry, 2023).

1.3.4 Female Empowerment

Over time, Marvel Cinematic Universe has presented a number of formidable women who possess the capability to confront and defeat dangerous antagonists to safeguard the planet. A hero is someone who courageously confronts wickedness and strives to accomplish good, even in the face of daunting odds, even when it is not mandatory (Kim, 2019).

Empowerment goes beyond mere physical strength. It involves taking into account one's personality, doing what is morally correct, and possessing a strong determination. Character growth and intelligence play a crucial role, as does unwavering adherence to one's beliefs (Ingham, 2019).

When MCU premiered in 2008, it might have been effortless for the female characters to conform to societal expectations and allow the male characters to tackle the major challenges. However, they refused to do so. Similar to women in the actual world, these females had to exert more effort, employ better strategies, and put in more time to attain the same level of achievement as their male counterparts. Through this process, they were able to establish their own unique identities instead of just conforming to the male-dominated norm. The most significant impact of their hard work is that they have shared their stories through cinema, which has established a model of empowerment for women globally(Kim, 2019).

MCU's Phase 4 brought a significant change by featuring more women in the lead roles than ever before. From *Black Widow* to *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, the spotlight is now on women who play the roles of heroes, villains, and even fourth-wall-breaking lawyers, marking the end of the male-dominated era in MCU (Post, 2022).

Marvel's choice to include more female-led projects in their lineup is a response to the evolving entertainment industry. The demand for inclusivity and

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representation is growing, and the studio is making sure that their stories showcase a diverse range of voices and perspectives. (Chaudhry, 2023)

Phase Four of MCU has not always focused on romantic storylines, when it does, it tends to enhance the overall impact of the project. Recently, romance has even become somewhat of a "secret weapon" for MCU. Love has been portrayed in various ways in Phase Four of MCU. Closure has been given to longstanding couples like Thor and Jane, as well as Clint and Laura Barton. In *WandaVision*, The Scarlet Witch's mourning for Vision led to an alternate reality where their love was showcased. These romantic subplots have been a highlight of Phase Four (Vaux, 2022).

New relationships have also emerged, including Peter Parker and MJ making their relationship official before losing each other, and the comedic dynamic between She-Hulk and Daredevil. Unlikely pairings have also emerged, such as Loki and Sylvie in Loki's first season, and the "love triangle" involving two personalities sharing the same body in Moon Knight. Along with these romantic depictions, MCU also focuses on platonic love, like the bond between Shang-Chi and Katy. Additionally, romantic relationships that have ended are explored where the characters still care for each other as friends, as seen with Stephen Strange and Christine Palmer in *Doctor Strange and the Multiverse of Madness* (Vaux, 2022).

1.3.5 The Bechdel Test

Alison Bechdel created the Bechdel Test in 1985 as a means of assessing the representation of women in movies. It is not meant to measure feminist themes, but rather to determine if women are present in the movie. The test consists of three criteria: the movie must have at least two named female characters, these characters must engage in a conversation with each other, and the conversation must revolve around a topic unrelated to men (Ambrose, 2021).

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If a work meets all three of these criteria, it is considered to have passed the Bechdel Test. However, passing the Bechdel Test does not necessarily mean that a work has perfect gender representation or is free from gender biases. It simply indicates that the work includes at least some basic level of female representation and female characters who have conversations about topics other than men.

The Bechdel Test is not a definitive measure of gender representation, but it has been widely used as a starting point for discussions on gender representation in media and as a way to highlight the underrepresentation of women in many fictional works. It has also been criticized for its simplicity and for not capturing more nuanced aspects of gender representation, such as intersectionality and depth of female characters. Nevertheless, the Bechdel Test continues to be a useful tool for raising awareness about gender representation in media and promoting discussions about diversity and inclusion in storytelling.

The Bechdel Test is not exact, but it is a useful measure to assess the representation and treatment of women in a movie even in MCU. It may seem simple, but you would be amazed at the number of movies that fail this test. Marvel, on the other hand, is ahead of the game, with numerous films in their franchise that pass. While not all of them achieve a perfect score, it is worth mentioning that the ratings have been improving progressively in more recent films. (Ambrose, 2021).

***Avengers: Age of Ultron*(2015)**

Avengers: Age of Ultron boasts a strong representation of female characters, including Natasha Romanoff, Wanda Maximoff, Maria Hill, Laura Barton, and Dr. Helen Cho. Natasha and Laura engage in a discussion about Laura's pregnancy and baby name, while Natasha also encounters her former Red Room teacher in a dream sequence, albeit without a name and in a fictional setting. Despite featuring a larger number of female characters compared to The

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Avengers, the film falls short in terms of meaningful interactions among them, which could be seen as a missed opportunity. (Ambrose, 2021)

Captain Marvel (2019)

Captain Marvel breaks new ground in Marvel Cinematic Universe as the first film to have a female lead. The movie features a notable female cast, including Maria Rambeau, Monica Rambeau, Soren (Talos' wife), and Minerva (Carol's ex-teammate). Although Carol, also known as Vers, and Minerva clash at times, their disagreements do not revolve around men. In contrast, Carol and Maria share meaningful conversations about their past friendship and the unfolding alien events, showcasing a strong bond that transcends gender. It is worth mentioning that *Captain Marvel* is also Marvel's first film to be directed by a woman, which likely contributes to the positive representation of female characters in the movie. (Ambrose, 2021)

Black Widow (2021)

Black Widow (2021) fairly easily passed the Bechdel Test, as three out of the four main characters are women: Natasha Romanoff, her "sister" Yelena Belova, and mother-figure Melina Vostokoff. Even the secondary villain of the film is a woman, making it simpler for the movie to meet the test's criteria. Natasha and Yelena share significant screen time discussing their pasts and making plans, with minimal conversations about men unless it is related to Alexei or Dreykov, and usually in a negative light. They also have interactions with Melina throughout the majority of the film, further contributing to its easy passage of the Bechdel Test compared to other films. (Ambrose, 2021)

1.3.6 Feminism Waves in MCU

The comic book genre had not often showcased a feminist viewpoint, but with the triumph of Wonder Woman in both critical and commercial terms, audiences were exposed to such a perspective (Sherick, 2021).

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According to Carol Zitzer-Comfort and José I. In Rodríguez's article "Riding the Waves of Feminism in Wonder Woman: A Shock Heard' Round the World," the movie represents the principles of third and fourth wave feminism. Hence, it encourages the audience to comprehend and relate to the feminist perspectives presented. As more movies are directed by women and feature female protagonists, there is a movement to incorporate modern feminist concepts into these popular film series that have broad appeal. Aamir Aziz and Farwa Javed discuss in their article "Sci-Fi/Fantasy Movies for Identity Politics in Fourth Wave Feminism" (2019) the notion that hypersexualization of women in media creates stereotypes and objectification issues, as a way to address these beliefs. They argue that such films can be used to challenge these stereotypes in Fourth Wave Feminism (p55), challenging male aggressors by demonstrating that women are just as independent as men and do not require men as much as men require women (p56), rejecting the notion of women disliking one another and instead encourages valuing and prioritizing the relationships between strong women (p57) (Sherick, 2021).

Marvel Cinematic Universe has featured a number of female characters over the years, and the portrayal of these characters has evolved alongside feminist movements outside of the films. However, it is worth noting that the feminist movement is not a monolith, and different perspectives on feminism may have different interpretations of MCU's portrayal of female characters.

First Wave Feminism (Late 19th-Early 20th Century): This wave of feminism was focused on women's suffrage and the right to vote. While MCU is set in a contemporary context, there are some elements that touch on issues of women's political rights. For example, the character of Peggy Carter is a World War II-era spy who fights for her country and ultimately becomes a founding member of S.H.I.E.L.D., a global peacekeeping organization. Second Wave Feminism (1960s-1980s): This wave of feminism was focused on issues of gender equality, reproductive rights, and sexual liberation. In MCU, this is reflected in the portrayal of characters like Black Widow, who is a skilled fighter

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and spy who takes charge of her own sexuality. Additionally, the relationship between Pepper Potts and Tony Stark evolves over the course of the films, with Pepper ultimately becoming CEO of Stark Industries. Third Wave Feminism (1990s-Present): This wave of feminism is characterized by a focus on intersectionality and the idea that gender is just one of many factors that shape a person's identity. MCU has attempted to reflect this in a number of ways, including the inclusion of diverse female characters like Okoye and Shuri from Wakanda, and the exploration of the relationship between Wanda Maximoff and Vision, which touches on issues of grief, trauma, and mental health.

The fourth wave of feminism is a relatively new concept that emerged in the early 2010s and is still evolving. This wave is characterized by a focus on intersectionality, inclusivity, and online activism. While MCU has not explicitly addressed this wave of feminism, some of its recent films and TV shows have included themes and messages that align with fourth wave feminist ideas. Burkett and Brunell note that in 2012, the fourth wave of feminism surfaced, and presently, a fresh cohort of feminists employ social media channels to tackle issues like sexual harassment and workplace bias. For instance, the TV show "Jessica Jones" deals with issues of sexual assault and trauma in a nuanced and complex way, and the character of Kamala Khan, who will be the protagonist of the upcoming Disney+ series "Ms. Marvel," is a Pakistani-American Muslim teenager who becomes a superhero. Both of these examples highlight the importance of diversity and representation in media, which is a key aspect of fourth wave feminism (Cited in Echezabal&Olufidipe, 2021).

Additionally, the portrayal of female characters in recent MCU films like *Captain Marvel* and *Avengers: Endgame* has been more explicitly feminist, with characters like Carol Danvers (Captain Marvel) and Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow) being shown as strong, capable, and independent women who are equal to their male counterparts. Given the rise of the Fourth Wave feminist movement on social media, it is apt that Marvel is finally stepping up to the plate to potentially depict women more accurately in their movies.

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Overall, MCU is not immune to the influence of feminist movements and ideas, and it will be interesting to see how the franchise continues to evolve and respond to the changing cultural and political landscape (Echezabal&Olufidipe, 2021).

1.4 Conclusion

Marvel Studios has not given enough attention to the representation of their female characters in the science-fiction film genre, including their superpowers and costume designs. This lack of representation has gone unnoticed in Phases One through Three. Instead of integrating female power with male power, Marvel Studios ended the storylines of two significant female characters, implying that males and females cannot have equal capabilities in the same universe. The inclusion of all-female fight scenes seemed like a superficial attempt to address female marginalization, which was overdramatized and insufficient to make up for years of underrepresentation.

Regarding the broad field of film studies and its impact on society, the findings of this research suggest that female characters in MCU and in films in general are often portrayed as sexual objects and their power is greatly minimized. This portrayal upholds a patriarchal structure and reinforces societal norms that objectify women not only in the workplace but also in other aspects of life. As the highest-grossing film franchise in history and one of the most popular, MCU has a significant influence on its competitors and its female audience. Despite being fictional, these portrayals shape cultural standards of female identity and have an impact on people's behavior (Echezabal&Olufidipe, 2021).

Despite facing criticism for its limited representation of women, Marvel Studios has been providing opportunities for female characters to showcase their abilities. Both on-screen heroines who are adored by fans and real-life female professionals working behind the scenes have been overcoming barriers that hinder the progression of women in the superhero movie industry (Kim, 2020).

Chapter Two:
A Feminist Study of
Black Widow and
Captain Marvel in
MCU

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2.1 Introduction

The hyper-sexualization of female characters in superhero action films, particularly in the Marvel franchise, has become increasingly prevalent. This can be observed through the use of revealing costumes worn by characters such as Mystique, as well as instances of nudity featuring characters like Elektra and Sue Storm-Richards. Historically, female characters in superhero films have been viewed as mere sex symbols, with their intelligence, fighting skills, or superpowers often being overlooked. However, recent social and political movements, such as Times Up and #MeToo, have sparked a critical discourse surrounding women's portrayal in blockbuster films and the workplace. Consequently, there has been a shift in the conversation surrounding the representation of women in superhero movies, as these issues have come under greater scrutiny (Martinez, 2021).

Marvel Cinematic Universe has brought about a significant change in the way audiences engage with cinematic characters and consume movie franchises. The conventional approach of introducing a protagonist in their own film and limiting their involvement in subsequent films has been challenged by the MCU's shared universe concept. A notable exemplar of this novel storytelling technique is the character of Natasha Romanoff, alias Black Widow, who began as a Russian spy and evolved into an Avenger. Black Widow is the foremost female character in MCU, featuring in more films than any other female superhero. Nevertheless, Marvel has refrained from producing a film with a solo female lead until the release of *Captain Marvel* in 2019. Despite prolonged requests from fans and a motion picture featuring Jennifer Lawrence that appeared to borrow Black Widow's original story, Marvel had not prioritized a female-led film (Siede, 2018).

Female characters in male-centric superhero movies have historically played subservient roles, serving as either eye candy for the male audience, a secondary character with little agency or importance, or a love interest for the

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male protagonist. The focus of these movies has always been on the male superheroes, with the female characters taking a backseat in terms of importance and development (Saptiadi& et al, 2022).

After producing 21 movies in the franchise, Marvel Cinematic Universe finally introduced its first female-led film, *Captain Marvel*, starring Brie Larson as the protagonist. Set in 1995, the story follows Carol Danvers as she embraces her transformation into the iconic comic book character. Despite being a highly anticipated moment for female empowerment and representation, the film did not quite deliver on those fronts and fell short of expectations (Caister, 2021).

In 2021, after a two-year wait, *Black Widow* is eventually unveiled to the public. Despite facing setbacks and closures of movie theaters, it manages to generate significant buzz. While opinions on the film remain somewhat divided for different reasons, it receives a more positive reception compared to *Captain Marvel*. This is particularly evident in the way the main characters are perceived and their ability to serve as empowering figures for women who were previously lacking such representation within this franchise (Caister, 2021).

Hence, this chapter aims to delve into the profound significance of Black Widow and Captain Marvel, two iconic superheroes within Marvel Cinematic Universe and how these two contribute to the broader discourse surrounding gender representation and empowerment in superhero films. By closely examining the individual journeys and collective impact of these characters, we seek to understand their unique roles in shaping the overarching narrative and cultural representation within MCU. This study seeks to shed light on the complexities and nuances of female superhero representation in a predominantly male-dominated genre, highlighting the potential impact of these characters on audience perceptions and societal attitudes towards women in positions of power and heroism.

2.2 Black Widow: The Evolution of a Complex Female Character in MCU

The way superheroines are portrayed in comic books and movies often follows the patriarchal belief that men are the viewers and women are sexualized objects and visual spectacles. However, the recent Marvel Cinematic Universe film, *Black Widow*, is seen as a notable departure from this traditional representation. The film features young women who resist a powerful, wealthy, and older white male villain and fight against his malevolent design to control the world. From a feminist textual analysis of the depiction of superheroines in comics and cinema, *Black Widow* represents a refreshing shift in the portrayal of women as active agents in their own narratives, rather than as passive objects of the male gaze (Killian, 2022).

Natasha Romanoff, known by her alter ego as Black Widow, was born in 1984 and was trained from a young age to become a Russian spy under the Red Room Facility's Black Widow Program. This program was led by Dreykov and aimed to turn young girls into highly skilled and lethal assassins. Initially, Natasha was introduced to the Avengers as an adversary. Hawkeye was assigned to eliminate her, but instead, he saved her and they became friends. This friendship was a key factor in Natasha's decision to defect and work alongside the Avengers. In both Civil War and Infinity War, Black Widow is shown building relationships with Captain America and the rest of the Avengers (Peterson, 2021).

Black Widow is a prominent member of Marvel's Avengers, an esteemed assembly of superheroes dedicated to safeguarding the universe from various malevolent forces. Her exploits have been chronicled in highly successful films where she has fought alongside deities, chrononauts, and archers. Although the movies have not exclusively focused on her character, Black Widow has garnered a substantial following. Her popularity is attributed not only to her physical appearance but also to her portrayal as a progressive and feminist figure in the comic book genre. Despite recent controversies, Black Widow remains a highly

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regarded and influential character within the Marvel franchise (Jo, 2015).

Black Widow has established herself as a preeminent female superhero within Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Her on-screen physical prowess and martial arts skills have demonstrated her formidable capabilities, often surpassing those of her male counterparts. Furthermore, Black Widow's distinctive aesthetic appearance, characterized by her sleek red hair and signature black jumpsuit, has garnered her significant recognition and identification among audiences. Consequently, her representation in MCU serves as a compelling illustration of the multifaceted nature of modern-day superheroes, transcending both gender and stylistic conventions (Rezwan, 2021).

The character development of Natasha Romanoff in Marvel Cinematic Universe has been a topic of discussion among scholars and fans alike. While some have noted her gradual evolution from a two-dimensional, supporting character to a more well-rounded and realistic one, others have argued that her development falls short when compared to her male counterparts. Several instances of dialogue throughout MCU drop hints about Natasha's past, but her character's trajectory is largely shaped by her relationships with male characters. Instead, she seems to exist primarily to support the story arcs of the men around her. For instance, in *Iron Man 2*, she is introduced into MCU as a potential legal liability for Tony Stark due to sexual harassment, and in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, she is portrayed as Bruce Banner's forced love interest. In *Avengers: Endgame*, she sacrifices herself, allowing Clint Barton to reunite with his lost family.

However, *Black Widow (2021)* provides a retrospective perspective that suggests Natasha's limited character development was not solely due to the male-centric narratives of previous films but was intentional. In the film, Natasha tells Yelena that she has never allowed herself to be alone long enough to think about her story, implying that her past is something she has kept hidden from others and herself. This may suggest that her lack of character development is not solely the result of negligence but rather her desire to avoid processing her trauma and grief

(John, 2022).

2.2.1. Black Widow's Portrayal as a Typical Femme Fatale

Black Widow made her debut in *Iron Man 2* in 2010, the third installment in Marvel Cinematic Universe, which established the concept of a shared cinematic universe introduced in the first *Iron Man's* post-credits scene. She was initially introduced as Natalie Rushman, a Stark Industries employee with remarkable martial arts skills who becomes Tony Stark's personal assistant. However, she is later revealed to be an undercover S.H.I.E.L.D. agent assigned to keep an eye on Tony. Although Black Widow has a notable hallway fight in the film's climax, her introduction follows a typical femme fatale trope, and director Jon Favreau's focus on Scarlett Johansson's appearance detracts from her character's development (Siede, 2018)

The film's messaging tries to portray Black Widow as tougher than her male counterparts, but this does not fully compensate for the lack of depth in her characterization. Ultimately, *Iron Man 2* positions Black Widow as more of a male fantasy than a fully realized superhero in her own right (Siede, 2018).

Natasha's introduction to Marvel Cinematic Universe portrays her as an object of desire that is crafted through the male gaze. This is evident in her first appearance in *Iron Man 2*, where the film's text, cinematography, and costuming all frame her as an object of lust. During her introduction scene, Tony Stark is infatuated with Natasha, and she is dressed in a professional outfit that accentuates her breasts. While conversing with Happy, Tony searches for her on the internet and finds a picture of her modeling in lingerie. Although Natasha showcases her advanced fighting skills by quickly taking down Happy, her fight choreography contains sexual undertones through the use of her thighs. Despite her obvious competence and independence, Tony comments, "I want one," referring to Natasha as if she were a mere object. Although presented as inappropriate yet comedic, this scene firmly establishes Natasha as a sexual

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object (Barranco, 2021).

The sexualization of Natasha is a prominent feature in Marvel Cinematic Universe, with *Iron Man 2* being the most overt example. This objectification is perpetuated through various elements in subsequent MCU films, including cinematography, textual references, and aesthetic features. One key factor contributing to her sexualization is her costume, specifically her skin-tight black catsuit that is consistently worn during fight sequences and other scenes. Despite minor modifications in each film, the catsuit always emphasizes her curves and is designed to display her breasts. Additionally, her fighting style is often suggestive, involving wrapping her thighs around her opponents' necks and heads.

This approach aligns with Sabine Lebel's feminist analysis of female superheroes' bodies, which emphasizes traditional notions of female power, such as manipulation, sexuality, and masquerade. As a highly skilled assassin and spy, Natasha's occupation reinforces the objectification of her body. While these characteristics are evident throughout MCU, her introductory scene in *Iron Man 2* exemplifies the interplay of manipulation, masquerade, and sexuality that contribute to her sexualization (Barranco, 2021).

The sexualization of female characters in the superhero genre has been a long-standing issue, and Natasha's portrayal as an object of desire in MCU is a reflection of this broader trend. As Lebel notes, hypersexualized bodies have been an integral part of the superhero and comic book legacy. This trend is evident in Natasha's portrayal throughout Marvel Cinematic Universe as an object of desire. However, since she has yet to appear in a standalone movie, she has only been seen as a supporting character in *Captain America* and *Iron Man* films or as part of an ensemble cast in *Avengers* films. Consequently, her character lacks the depth and attention given to her male counterparts in the *Avengers*.

Media critic Emily VanDerWerff notes that Marvel's treatment of Black Widow, being the most significant female character in MCU, is often inadequate,

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leaving her to represent nearly all women in a male-heavy story, which is impossible. Additionally, considering her introduction as a sex object and the minimal backstory provided, her character reinforces the monstrous femininity introduced in *Age of Ultron*. Therefore, it is unreasonable to expect Natasha to represent all women, given her portrayal and introduction (Barranco, 2021).

According to Bateman, Black Widow is not equipped with any extraordinary powers or exceptionally advanced suits, but rather relies on her training as a fighter and strategically utilizes her gender as an advantage. This emphasizes the earlier message from *Iron Man 3* that women are unsuitable as superheroes. Some might argue that her lack of powers disqualifies her from being considered a true superheroine (Echezabal, 2021).

Black Widow's storyline in *Avengers: Endgame* abruptly ended when she and her longtime male companion Hawkeye travel to the planet Vormir to obtain the Soul Stone, one of the six Infinity Stones that can cause great harm to the universe when used together. They discover that in order to access the stone, one of them must make a sacrifice, which leads to a passionate struggle between Natasha and Hawkeye as they both try to prevent the other from sacrificing themselves. Ultimately, Black Widow overpowers Hawkeye and sacrifices herself by jumping off a cliff to her death. This decision by the movie's directors to kill off her character was a bold choice, particularly given her significance as the only female Avenger, and leaves the final fight scene primarily dominated by male characters. Unlike Tony, who received an elaborate funeral scene, Natasha's death is only briefly mourned before her character's importance across eight movies is largely forgotten. In summary, Black Widow remains an underdeveloped female character who was sacrificed to make way for Marvel's emphasis on hyper-masculinity and sexism (Echezabal, 2021).

According to Brinkman (434), the society depicted in superhero stories creates female heroes in a cookie-cutter manner, with predictable roles and purposes. It is common for these female characters to be portrayed as strong and

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independent, but at the same time, they are often sexualized and objectified, this portrayal of female heroes as sexual objects reinforces the notion that their power and influence is tied to their physical appearance and ability to allure others (Michalenko, 2016).

Black Widow performs a traditionally feminine role within The Avengers by serving as an emotional support for male characters, yet she derives motivation from the practical, brave, and witty characteristics embodied by her fellow Avengers. In contrast to her superpowered and technologically equipped peers, Romanoff lacks any extraordinary abilities or advanced weaponry, but her actions during the Chitauri invasion exhibit her heroic qualities as she valiantly defends the people of New York (Oh, 2019).

In *Black Widow* (2021), there is a scene where Yelena mocks Natasha's pose, which is a symbol of sexualization: "It's a fighting pose. You're a total poser...But it does look like everyone is looking at you." (*Black Widow*(2021), 46:17).

Director Cate Shortland aimed to emphasize a specific message, as she elucidated in a recent interview with TIME: "I decided to make a point of it. We were pointing at it, allowing the audience to be aware of what they had watched before and what they were watching now." (Wilding, 2021).

Shortland expressed that she and the Black Widow team made a deliberate and thoughtful attempt to avoid treating the female cast members as objects. She acknowledged that Natasha, as a character, was initially designed to cater to the male perspective, evident in her movements and attire. However, they aimed to move beyond that portrayal, recognizing that it did not define her true essence (Wilding, 2021).

2.2.2 Hysterectomy⁶: A Tragedy of a Forced Sterilization

In *Age of Ultron*, more revelations about Natasha's harrowing past are brought to light, specifically regarding her rigorous training as a merciless spy and assassin within the confines of the "Red Room" program. Natasha alludes to having committed heinous acts prior to her affiliation with S.H.I.E.L.D., though without elaborating on the specifics. Moreover, Natasha divulges that the graduation ceremony at the Red Room entails sterilization surgery, as motherhood would impede her ability to fully devote herself to her perilous, unscrupulous career. With a tearful demeanor, Natasha explains the necessity of this sterilization process, stating that it simplifies matters, and freeing her to perform her violent duties unencumbered. She further implies that motherhood would pose such an intense emotional strain that it would render her incapable of carrying out the violent acts required of her profession. This admission leads Natasha to refer to herself as a monster (Barranco, 2021).

Natasha was not sterile, she was forcibly sterilized against her will in order to strip away her humanity and transform her into a weapon. This act of mutilation was intended to exert control over her. As a result, she now grapples with an overwhelming sense of monstrosity, as the purpose of the sterilization was to reduce her to a mere instrument devoid of any other value. Any attributes or qualities unrelated to her capacity to kill were forcefully taken away from her. In a dialogue with Bruce Banner, alias The Hulk, while he was referring to himself as a monster due to his inability to establish a family and have kids, Natasha states:

In the Red Room where I was trained... where I was raised, they have a graduation ceremony. They sterilize you. It's efficient. One less thing to worry about. The one thing that might matter more than a mission. Makes everything easier. Even killing. You still

⁶ is a surgical procedure involving the removal of the uterus, either in part or in its entirety.

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think you're the only monster on the team?" (Avengers: Age of Ultron, 01:07:46).

She did not perceive herself as monstrous solely due to her inability to bear children. Her sense of monstrosity stemmed from her proficiency in causing harm and taking lives. She lacked the ability to bring forth life, even if she desired to do so. The Red Room had left permanent marks on her, both physically and emotionally, throughout her existence. Her sole purpose was to take lives. She was taught to kill, seduce, and deceive. She suffered from mistreatment and manipulation. Despite her earnest efforts, she could not escape the persistent belief that she was nothing more than a tool designed for destruction.

Although the film portrays maternity as something undesirable for Natasha, it also criticizes her inability to have children, suggesting that she is lacking in spirit and emotion due to her sterility. Brown (2015) points out that superhero comics often depict motherhood in a negative way, which goes against our society's idealized view of it as a loving and precious role. However, *Age of Ultron* manages to condemn Natasha for both her sterility and her rejection of motherhood. The film argues that Natasha cannot be a fearsome Black Widow if she embraces motherhood, while at the same time suggesting that her inability to have children makes her an incomplete woman, separated from society's adoration of motherhood. Natasha even considers herself a monster because of her sterility, which demonstrates that she sees herself as an abnormal version of femininity despite not being a mother. While the film depicts motherhood as repugnant for Natasha, it also portrays her sterility and the circumstances surrounding it as monstrous. Despite this, the film asserts that Natasha's life as a superheroine is incompatible with motherhood, further solidifying the idea that maternity is abject and feminine monstrosity (Cited in Barranco, 2021).

The Avengers films, especially *Age of Ultron*, depict a strong inclination towards paternal figures, which is exemplified through the character development of Clint Barton, aka Hawkeye, portrayed by Jeremy Renner. Although Clint

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makes appearances in *Thor* and *The Avengers* (2012), it is only in *Age of Ultron* that the audience learns about his family, including his wife and children who live in a peaceful farmhouse in the countryside. Clint reveals that he has kept his family hidden from the rest of the Avengers and the world at large to shield them from the dangers and potential repercussions of his life as a superhero. He had made a deal with Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson), the director of S.H.I.E.L.D., to ensure the safety of his family (Barranco, 2021).

The decision to reveal Natasha's sterilization surgery alongside her conversation with Clint about her inability to have a family is a deliberate and intentional move. It emphasizes the contrasting treatment of maternity and paternity in the superhero genre. While Natasha sees motherhood as undesirable and impossible for her, Clint's fatherhood is viewed positively and is seen as an attainable goal. This aligns with Brown's interpretation that in the superhero genre, maternity is seen as undesirable, while paternity is favored. To further complicate things, Clint's spouse, Laura, is expecting a baby during the events of *Age of Ultron*. When the Avengers arrive at Clint's farmhouse, they are welcomed by Laura and his two children, with Laura appearing to be quite far along in her pregnancy. Laura and Clint's children are completely disconnected from Clint's life as a superhero, and Laura's pregnancy serves as a reminder of the life and family that Natasha can never have. Laura's pregnancy is celebrated in the same way that society traditionally celebrates motherhood, as Brown has mentioned. However, as Brown points out, female superheroes are not given the same positive perception of motherhood. Laura's celebrated, traditional motherhood role emphasizes the contrast between this particular, socially accepted image of motherhood and Natasha's monstrous femininity (Barranco, 2021).

The references made in the scene about Natasha's troubled past and Clint's family indicate to the audience why Natasha is the one who must make the sacrifice. Her character development revolves around making amends for her past misdeeds, and her act of self-sacrifice represents a final act of redemption. It is worth noting that her specific past crimes are not elaborated on, and instead, her

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sterilization serves as the main representation of her guilt. Additionally, the mention of Clint's family reinforces why Natasha is the one who has to make the sacrifice, as it harks back to the contrast in *Age of Ultron* between Clint's cherished domestic life and Natasha's inability to form a family of her own. Natasha values Clint's life because he has a family and children of his own to return to once the Avengers triumph. This, along with her desire to make amends, links Natasha's sacrifice to her monstrous femininity. Clint's fatherhood is once again prioritized, and the only way for Natasha to redeem her monstrous femininity is through self-sacrifice (Barranco, 2021).

2.2.2.1 Cate Shortland Addresses Infertility in *Black Widow* (2021)

Marvel Cinematic Universe fans have been eagerly awaiting a pivotal moment in which the character Natasha Romanoff, following her self-identification as a monster in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* due to her infertility, would be given a retcon or revision to her storyline. Cate Shortland, the director of *Black Widow* (2021) and an adoptive mother herself, shared a similar perspective. Drawing from her personal experience and considering Natasha's tragic backstory, Shortland emphasized the significance of addressing the topic spy's coerced hysterectomy on-screen. In an interview with Time, she explains:

Black Widow executive producer Victoria Alonso and I, are both adoptive mothers. We wanted to talk about the idea that the fact that you do not bear children does not mean that you are less than. We wanted to empower her (Clarke, 2021).

Shortland addressed the issue of hysterectomy through Florence Pugh's character, Yelena, where the latter brings up a haunting memory from the Red Room to her adoptive father Alexei, portrayed by David Harbour. Their reunion quickly reverts to familiar dynamics, as Yelena punches Alexei in the face, prompting him to inquire: "Why the aggression?" he said, "Is it your time of the month", Yelena responds:

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I don't get my period... I don't have a uterus. That's what happens when the Red Room gives you an involuntary hysterectomy. They kinda just go in and rip out all your reproductive organs. They just get right in there and chop them all away. So you can't have babies (Black Widow, 2021, 01:02:20).

What she is describing is an absolute horror, but rather than exploiting it for emotional effect, the movie takes a different approach. It presents the moment as a grotesque comedy, with Yelena's main focus being her desire to make her (former, fake) father uncomfortable. Pugh deliberately draws out the word "rip" as if she's stretching dough, and when she speaks about the Red Room removing her internal organs, her hand gestures mimic swift chopping motions, reminiscent of dicing vegetables. Unlike Whedon, director of *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, who saw Natasha's infertility as a metaphorical element, Shortland chooses to address it in a more tangible manner. Instead of highlighting the loss of her humanity or womanhood, the film emphasizes the physical aspect—the flesh that was taken away from her.

During an interview with the Truth & Movies podcast, Shortland revealed that the particular scene was penned by Nicole Holofcener, who was not credited for her contribution. This scene was created as a direct response to a period joke made by Alexei in an earlier version of the script. Instead of removing the joke altogether, Shortland explained that Holofcener proposed a clever approach by turning it around and confronting the character with it. Shortland expressed that this decision added an enjoyable element to the film, making it more resilient and portraying the female characters as strong individuals. She emphasized the willingness to address the topic openly, inviting discussions about it if necessary (Adams, 2021).

2.2.3 *Black Widow* (2021); A New Era

A decade following her introduction as a femme fatale in *Iron Man 2*, Scarlett Johansson's portrayal of Natasha Romanoff takes center stage in her own Marvel film, *Black Widow*. The movie delves deeper into her backstory, which was briefly hinted at in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and *Captain America: Civil War*, where Natasha finds herself on the run and reconnects with her "sister" Yelena, played by Florence Pugh, as well as her state-sanctioned parents, Alexei (aka Red Guardian) portrayed by David Harbour and the elder spy, Melina, played by Rachel Weisz. While in Russia, Natasha discovers a sinister plot to keep brainwashed "Black Widow" assassins, who were trained in the same Red Room that transformed her into an elite Avenger fighter, active worldwide. With her experience in vigilante justice and the aid of her newfound family, Natasha and her comrades re-emerge into action after years of lying low (Patches, 2021).

The film represents a rejection of the character's outdated origin story. In previous films, Black Widow was often portrayed as a seductress, an object of male gaze, a love interest, and a "monster" due to her inability to have children. However, the new film focuses on the issues that previously oppressed her, such as sexism, objectification, and human trafficking. The movie puts Black Widow in the lead role and addresses the challenges she has faced head-on (Dockterman, 2021).

Cate Shortland, who is the first female director to solely lead a Marvel Cinematic Universe movie, helms *Black Widow*, which creates an innovative female-driven action genre that now appears feasible. The movie is also excellent, a gripping espionage thriller featuring mainly female protagonists and antagonists. When creating the *Black Widow* movie, director Cate Shortland faced the challenge of incorporating the character's past, present, and future into one thrilling spy story, considering her sacrifice in *Avengers: Endgame*. Shortland approached the task with enthusiasm and a determination to exceed fans' expectations. In a recent interview with Shortland, conducted years after the

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movie's completion (due to its delayed release), she discussed the process of crafting the film and how she managed to satisfy and entertain fans (Dockterman, 2021).

The character's evolution owes a great deal to the woman who originated the role. Johansson worked tirelessly to develop the character into a more well-rounded individual over the years, despite the absence of female screenwriters for the character until Jac Schaeffer's involvement with *Black Widow*. As an executive producer for the film, Johansson explained that conversations about sexism were not possible during the time the character was first introduced, which hindered the character's growth. People have asked why the film was not made sooner, but Johansson believes that the social climate at the time would not have allowed for the kind of progress and representation that the character has now (Dockterman, 2021).

Typically, in Marvel Cinematic Universe, characters are introduced in their own individual movie before they are incorporated into the larger Avengers team. However, *Black Widow*'s latest development occurs belatedly in her story arc and at an unusual time: the character died in *Avengers: Endgame*, and *Black Widow* is a prequel set before that film. Scarlett Johansson's first and likely final solo performance as Black Widow is a poignant tribute to the character who paved the way for the numerous women that Marvel currently features. This film also marks a new phase for one of the most successful movie studios, where women will finally redefine blockbuster films for millions across the globe. Still, female superheroes continue to be outfitted in impractical heels and body-hugging suits (Dockterman, 2021).

Shortland had not watched all of the Marvel movies prior to agreeing to direct *Black Widow*. Normally, she developed background stories for her characters, but she found the previous history of Black Widow to be inadequate. Shortland believed that Black Widow had been created for the male gaze and that her movements and clothing were designed with that in mind. However,

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Shortland did not think that this represented who Black Widow truly was. Therefore, Shortland created a backstory for the character that extended beyond the screenplay. She shared this story with Johansson, and they discussed what it would have been like for Natasha to grow up in Russia during the collapse of the Soviet Union (Dockterman, 2021).

Black Widow commences by showcasing Natasha's early years, which could easily fit into a TV show centered on Cold War espionage, such as "The Americans". Her parents are sleeper agents from Russia residing in Ohio, and in the riveting opening act, the viewers are introduced to a distinct version of Natasha, one who is vulnerable as a child, instead of the usual cold and calculating femme fatale. As an adult, she is often seen wearing combat boots and a leather jacket, rather than her iconic bodysuit, and engages in both dispensing and receiving brutal blows that are seldom depicted in fight scenes featuring women. These raw scenes serve as a powerful reminder that, in the spy genre, women have typically been relegated to the role of "arm candy", rather than being the main protagonists (Dockterman, 2021).

As the Marvel Cinematic Universe ventures further into the cosmic realm, Natasha has stayed down-to-earth. She lacks superhuman abilities, which is a relief for audiences tired of excessive visual effects. During a scene where Natasha and her sister Yelena tend to their injuries after a fight, Yelena comments that powerful Avengers such as Thor, who is like a deity from space, likely do not require painkillers like ibuprofen after combat (Dockterman, 2021).

The tense dynamic between two sisters is the driving force behind *Black Widow*. The movie takes place after the events of *Captain America: Civil War*, where Natasha is on the run from the US government. In her search for the truth about her past, she delves into her childhood memories of growing up with agents who posed as her family. Florence Pugh plays the role of her younger sister, while Rachel Weisz portrays the intelligent and sharp-witted matriarch. David Harbour plays the only male character, a father figure who becomes the target of

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jokes due to his chauvinistic behaviour. The women frequently talk about female body parts, which is both humorous and empowering (Dockterman, 2021).

The film takes an unexpected turn by exploring the character's infertility in a distinctive manner. Shortland, the director, along with Victoria Alonso, who is also an adoptive mother, wanted to convey the message that a person's value is not diminished by their inability to bear children. Their goal was to empower the character and create a narrative where Natasha and Yelena engage in frank discussions about parenthood, careers, and future plans, including humorous banter about their hysterectomies. These conversations, despite the sensitive subject matter, add depth to the film's storyline (Dockterman, 2021).

Johansson, who has spent her entire career working on action sets dominated by men, holds the belief that a female director can significantly alter the course of a film. She commands Shortland for thoroughly examining the vulnerabilities and motivations of her characters. Johansson states that these explorations, while not exclusively feminine, do possess an innate femininity (Dockterman, 2021).

Black Widow, portrayed by Scarlett Johansson, may be marketed as a superhero movie, but she does not fit the typical mold of a superhero. Unlike other female comic-book heroines such as Wonder Woman or Supergirl, Natasha Romanoff does not possess any extraordinary abilities. Her strength and empathy come from her personal experiences of surviving an oppressive program that aimed to turn her into a machine. Furthermore, she is not a character that is intended to be solely inspiring like Captain Marvel or Wonder Woman, nor is she a gender-flipped version of a popular male character, such as Batwoman or Supergirl. Despite her unique qualities, Black Widow has waited patiently for her own standalone film, and unfortunately, in the Marvel Cinematic Universe timeline, she is already dead (Li, 2021).

2.2.4 A Dual Perspective on Gender Objectification

The launch of *Black Widow* has allowed Marvel Studios to retrospectively examine its portrayal of women, particularly Scarlett Johansson's Black Widow, and identify any past mistakes while determining how to address them moving forward. Surprisingly, Marvel Studios executive producer Victoria Alonso reveals that the studio receives more complaints about objectifying men than about objectifying women. (Cronin, 2021). She said: "I think there is a conscientious effort to not objectify women."

In a recent Time article, Alonso discussed her dissatisfaction with how Marvel introduced Black Widow in the movie *Iron Man 2*, released in 2010. In that scene, Natasha Romanoff, disguised as a secretary in Stark's company, is offered boxing tips but instead demonstrates her skill by easily defeating Happy Hogan. Tony Stark then turns to Pepper Potts, his chief aide, and asks about the identity of this subordinate. Pepper responds with a remark about the potential for a costly sexual harassment lawsuit, to which Stark humorously responds by searching for pictures of Natasha in her underwear, saying, "I want one" (*Iron Man 2*). Victoria Alonso, Marvel Studios' executive vice president of production stated: "It bothered me then and it bothers me now. I remember thinking, 'She's not a thing.' But how apropos: the world sees a sexy woman and thinks that because she is beautiful, that's all she has to give." (Cronin, 2021).

Female superheroes still find themselves donning impractical heels and tight-fitting outfits. Alonso argues that Marvel faces more criticism for objectifying men through scenes featuring shirtless men rather than women. Although it seems implausible, it is reasonable to assume that any criticism in this regard stems from sexist double standards prevailing in society rather than the studio having a greater tendency to mistreat men compared to women (Dockterman, 2021).

The glorification of extremely muscular male bodies, particularly in

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Marvel Cinematic Universe , is prominent. In comic books, characters like Chris Rob Liefeld's creations possess exaggerated proportions similar to the unrealistic depictions of women, who often appear contorted and lacking anatomical plausibility. However, the key distinction lies in the portrayal of women: when they are depicted through a male perspective, they are reduced to mere objects within the narrative, devoid of autonomy or active participation. Male characters in comic books possess hyper-masculine and unattainable physiques, yet their independence and narratives remain unaffected by this portrayal. They continue to be portrayed as heroes rather than victims. Moreover, they are not reduced to mere conquests or objects, a trend that sometimes occurs even with female protagonists. In my view, this ability to balance sexuality and competence in male characters within comics has led to a positive and non-controversial approach to sexualizing characters in comic book movies (Sánchez, 2018).

Men have predominantly shaped the movies and comics industry, resulting in the portrayal of an ideal man as muscular and strong. This portrayal, however, has been established without consulting women. While Chris Hemsworth is undeniably attractive, his appeal primarily caters to a male audience. The numerous shirtless, muscle-baring scenes in Marvel Cinematic Universe, rather than being a female sexual fantasy, serve as a male power fantasy. These movies and comics are designed to offer something for men to aspire to, potentially perpetuating harmful standards, but they do not prioritize women. Consequently, if there is any sexualization of men in MCU, it is presented through the perspective of the male gaze, similar to the way women have historically been objectified (Hatch, 2021).

MCU offers a fascinating twist by flipping the gender dynamics commonly seen in other films. Throughout the franchise's 18 movies, male characters are often presented in a manner reminiscent of how women are typically portrayed. In fact, men frequently appear in ways that objectify their bodies. This includes unnecessary displays of bare chests, sudden wardrobe changes in public, and camera shots that focus on different parts of their bodies. It's intriguing to note

that in MCU movies, it is the male body that is being showcased (Sànches, 2018).

The intention here is not to downplay the significance of striving and advocating for proper representation of women, especially women of color, who are often objectified more than white women. Instead, it aims to broaden the discussion to acknowledge that women also objectify the male characters in Marvel movies. For instance, when we admire Steve Rogers with a beard or Erik Killmonger without his shirt, we engage in this objectification. The enthusiastic and relentless tweets expressing desire after the release of *Avengers: Infinity War* in 2018 exemplified this phenomenon. It is important to recognize how Marvel Cinematic Universe employs sex and sexuality to appeal to the female gaze, as it shapes the viewing experience for women. Knowing that companies are fully conscious of the fact that women account for 50% of ticket sales at the Box Office. It is important to acknowledge how MCU incorporates sexuality and understand the longstanding repercussions of this kind of objectification towards women in the world of comics, both on the pages and within fandom communities (Sànchez, 20218).

2.2.5 The Reflection of Time's Up and #MeToo Movements on Black Widow

The #MeToo⁷ and Time's Up⁸ movements were game changers in the fight against sexual assault and for women's empowerment. They completely transformed the public discourse on women's issues across the globe and brought attention to the various barriers that women encounter in their daily personal and professional lives. #The MeToo movement has reached a worldwide level of recognition, with people searching for it on Google from 196 different countries in the past year. This has resulted in a significant cultural transformation, as it has made it clear that women's movements are not to be overlooked any longer. This

⁷ A social movement and awareness campaign against sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and rape culture.

⁸ A non-profit organisation designed to support victims of sexual harassment as well as amplify the voices of female actors, writers and filmmakers across the industry.

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shift has led to people paying attention for the first time, and the movement's influence has grown (Langone, 2018).

In a recent interview with Empire, Scarlett Johansson revealed intriguing insights about the feminist themes present in the movie *Black Widow*. According to her, the film reflects the current state of the Time's Up and #MeToo movements. Johansson believes that it would have been a major mistake if the filmmakers did not address these issues and confront them head-on in the movie. She thinks that it was crucial for director Cate Shortland to create a film about women supporting and empowering other women, especially in challenging circumstances. When asked whether Natasha Romanoff is a feminist, Johansson finds the question absurd and believes that it is evident that the character is one (Khan, 2020). She stated :

I think this film in particular is very much reflective of what's going on in regards to the Time's Up movement and the #MeToo movement. It would be such a miss if we didn't address that stuff, if this film didn't take that head-on. I think, particularly for Cate, it was so important for her to make a movie about women who are helping other women, who lift other women up out of a very difficult situation. Someone asked me if Natasha was a feminist. Of course she is, it's obvious. It's kinda an asinine question. (Fuge, Sep 08, 2020)

In addition to being the second superhero film led by a female after *Captain Marvel* in 2019, Johansson's statements about *Black Widow* mirroring influential real-world movements may motivate numerous female admirers. It is noteworthy that this is not the first instance of Johansson discussing female representation in Marvel Cinematic Universe. In a prior interview, the actress stated that she was advocating for an all-female Marvel movie, even if her character Natasha Romanoff does not appear in it (Eclarinal, 2020).

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One of the central ideas presented in the movie is the bond between sisters, as the lead character, Black Widow, joins forces with her sisterly figure, Yelena Belova, who was also a product of the same training program. According to Johansson's statement to Yahoo! News, this relationship represents the solidarity and encouragement shared among women during a significant cultural period: the rise of the #MeToo movement, which coincided with the production of *Black Widow* in 2017 (Benchetrit, 2021).

2.2.6 Trauma and Violence in Black Widow's Persona

Black Widow, the first major female hero of Marvel Cinematic Universe, was brought to life by Scarlett Johansson's performance, which elevated the character in multiple ways. The upcoming film, *Black Widow*, promises to delve into Romanoff's past and provides answers to many questions about her history. Additionally, the movie will extensively explore the sisterly bond between Romanoff and Yelena Belova, played by Florence Pugh, and delve deeper into the lore of the Red Room program. With so many components at play, *Black Widow* has the potential to provide a fitting farewell to the character while also emphasizing the importance of female representation in the film (Eclarinal, 2020).

According to Cate Shortland, the initial objective was to blend the Marvel universe with real life. As the first female director to lead a Marvel movie on her own, Shortland wanted to address issues like trafficking and women's reproductive rights, which are important to her. However, instead of portraying the characters as victims, they use humor to cope with their experiences and rise above the trauma they have faced. Shortland hopes that this approach will inspire and uplift viewers. Rather than allowing their trauma to defeat them, the characters strive to overcome it (Truitt, 2021).

The Black Widow character played by Scarlett Johansson has a complex past that involves situations that are not clearly defined. In the upcoming Marvel

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film, the 36-year-old actress stars as Natasha Romanoff, and the story delves deeply into her background, revealing this grey area. Johansson revealed to Entertainment Tonight that Natasha is currently confronting the trauma she has previously avoided and is coming to terms with it. As per Johansson, Natasha has spent her entire life as a part of a prominent organization, which has created some ambiguities that she is now grappling with. Johansson continues by saying that the pursuit of a greater goal, regardless of its morality, is not driven by any personal ambition. This idea has been touched upon in the Marvel Universe many times before, particularly in the films *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame*, where the character of Thanos serves as the primary antagonist. Thanos presents the argument that this pursuit is necessary for the greater good, even if it involves sacrifices (Sussman, 2021).

Cate Shortland's *Black Widow* is a movie that is not an exception in terms of its flaws and inconsistencies. However, it is a significant contribution to cinema as it focuses on female trauma primarily caused by men. The film's depiction of the world is particularly relevant today as it explores ideas that are crucial to the feminist movement, particularly in the years following the #MeToo movement. *Black Widow* is only the second film in Marvel Cinematic Universe to be led by a female superhero and the second to be directed by a woman. Shortland is the first woman to direct a Marvel film on her own. It is clear that *Black Widow* was not intended to be just another action-packed movie with simplistic notions of good and evil (Tremblay, 2021).

When Cate Shortland initially spoke with Johansson about the movie, she was aware that it would focus on exploring the impact of traumatic experiences on a character's development. Shortland was intrigued by the project when the conversation shifted towards the themes of trauma and healing a broken heart. She was drawn to the idea of staying true to the character, rather than solely focusing on creating an impressive movie (Benchetrit, 2021).

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Johansson explained in a Glamour interview from July that the movie's theme revolves around the subjugation of women and the resulting trauma that they have to overcome. She emphasized that the film focuses on the importance of women supporting and uplifting each other to thrive and succeed. In essence, it is a story of women banding together to overcome their struggles and empower one another (Benchetrit, 2021).

Black Widow provides further context about Natasha and her sister Yelena's upbringing by Russian spies in the United States. When their cover is exposed, they are abandoned by their assumed parents and forced into the spy business. The opening credits sequence is a haunting portrayal of the girls' journey from childhood to adulthood in the Red Room, a place that functions as both a factory and a slaughterhouse, sustained by a continuous stream of trafficked victims. The younger Widows and Yelena have been programmed to the point of being organic robots, with a mysterious red mist being the only means of freeing them from their mind and body control. Eventually, the sisters defeat the villain, rescue the day, and liberate their fellow Widows from this enslavement (Butterworth, 2021).

Black Widow is obviously concerned with the subject of trauma. One of its co-writers, JacShaeffer, previously served as the head writer and show-runner for *WandaVision*. This show specifically examined and identified the trauma that Wanda Maximoff experienced during her own traumatic childhood. Therefore, it is worth examining how trauma affects both the mind and body. In the movie, Yelena is released from mental and physical control through the use of red mist. In a particular scene, we witness the full extent of this control when the Red Room mastermind, Dreykov, manipulates the movements of a Widow's arm from afar, causing her to take her own life rather than reveal any information (Butterworth, 2021).

Yelena expresses her sadness to Natasha that she cannot distinguish between her own choices and those influenced by her past mind control as a

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Widow. Although Natasha was not subject to mind control, she struggles with the events that occurred in her life. The Red Room was essentially a form of slavery and abuse towards children, forcing them to fight and relinquish control over their own bodies. In a particular scene, Natasha bears visible bruises from a fight, but the deeper wounds are not visible. The effects of trauma persist within the body. Natasha's journey shows that the pursuit of healing and hope is a lifelong process. Yelena takes over as the new Black Widow and is now able to make her own choices. However, reconnecting with herself mentally and physically will require significant effort. While the red mist freed Yelena from mind and body control, it cannot erase the trauma that remains (Butterworth, 2021).

Pugh, known by her alter ego as Yelena, expressed her admiration for Shortland's handling of the mistreatment endured by both her character, Yelena, and Natasha, highlighting her own sense of satisfaction in the director's approach. In September 2020, Pugh stated:

This film is about the abuse of women. It's about how they get involuntary hysterectomies by the age of eight. It's about girls who are stolen from around the world... For a Marvel film to be reaching all of those levels, it is so exciting. The best thing about that is, it's not layered with this color of grey. You'll see these women strive and be strong." (Clarke, 2021).

Black Widow fearlessly confronts the darker elements of Natasha Romanoff's history without hesitation. From her involuntary recruitment into the Red Room training program to being compelled to commit acts of violence in Russia's name, as well as her personal quest for retribution alongside Clint Barton during the well-known Budapest mission, it's undeniably a grim tale. That's precisely why director Cate Shortland aimed to transform Black Widow into one of the more comedic installments within Marvel Cinematic Universe. She declared:

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What we tried to do was use humor to talk about the trauma. Most people in this film who've been victimized, are actually making jokes about that because they're trying to overcome it (Patches, 2021).

Similar to any movie in Marvel Cinematic Universe, there are numerous action scenes in *Black Widow*, like the moment when the sisters make an attempt to free Alexi from a gulag, and witty remarks (mostly delivered by Pugh's character). Nevertheless, the crux of *Black Widow* centers around a narrative about family and the natural human longing to be part of a group of people who care for each other. Since she was taken away from her own family at a young age, and subsequently lived with a fabricated family, Natasha has always felt lost and disconnected. Her deepest wish was to be part of a family. As she clarifies to Yelena, she ultimately found that kind of family with the Avengers, a family that she would be willing to sacrifice her life for (Rupprecht, 2021).

2.4 Captain Marvel: Breaking the Glass Ceiling

Captain Marvel, the first female superhero from Marvel to receive her own standalone movie, is introduced in a remarkable tale set in the 1990s. This captivating narrative depicts the origins of the character, where Carol Danvers, a skilled fighter pilot, acquires extraordinary abilities from extraterrestrial sources. With the ability to soar through the skies, emit energy beams from her hands, and deliver devastating blows, she unquestionably emerges as the mightiest superhero in the entire Marvel Cinematic Universe (Dockterman, 2019).

Carol Danvers, also known as Captain Marvel, shatters numerous boundaries in the world of superhero movies by becoming Marvel's inaugural female superhero protagonist. Unlike traditional narratives, Danvers' backstory does not revolve around her being the romantic interest of the male protagonist or a woman seeking revenge after enduring male violence and experiencing

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disgrace. Her character breaks free from these stereotypes, marking a refreshing departure in superhero cinema (Wilson, 2019).

Marvel fans have long pleaded with the studio to create a female-led superhero film ever since Scarlett Johansson's portrayal of Black Widow in *Iron Man 2* in 2010. However, during that time, many executives in the industry perceived movies featuring female comic-book characters as a risky endeavor. Previous failures like Catwoman and Elektra reinforced the belief that the predominantly teenage male audience of superhero movies would not be interested in seeing a woman in the role of a world-saving hero. In 2014, leaked Sony emails revealed a Marvel executive referring to female superhero movies as a "disaster." As a result, for years, crime-fighting characters on-screen remained predominantly male. Although there were occasional deviations from this pattern with sidekick or villain characters, they were never given the opportunity to have their own standalone films (Dockterman, 2019).

From the outset of her debut film *Captain Marvel*, which is set in 1995, Carol Danvers experiences an emotionally-driven narrative dictated by the men in her life. In the film's opening scenes, she engages in combat with her mentor, Yon Rogg, as part of her training. Despite her attempts to utilize her powers, he advises her to suppress her emotions, asserting that they pose a great threat to a warrior "there is nothing more dangerous to a warrior than emotion" (*Captain Marvel* (2019), 00:03:14). As the story unfolds, flashbacks portray her time in the U.S. Air Force boot camp, where the men in her training class taunt her for being insufficiently strong and overly emotional. One individual goes so far as to sarcastically comment, "You do know why they call it a cockpit, don't you?" (*Captain Marvel* (2019),00:15:46), implying that her gender disqualifies her from being a pilot. Subsequently, Carol discovers that her powers have been manipulated and controlled by Yon Rogg, and he maintains the ability to strip them away from her at any moment. He justifies his actions by claiming to have molded her into the best version of herself, as he believes she lacks the strength to control her powers independently (Echezabal, 2021).

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The most critical moment in the film occurs when she finally liberates herself from Yon Rogg's manipulation and unleashes her complete potential. This particular scene represents the first instance where Captain Marvel is depicted as a superhero possessing genuine strength, rather than merely being a woman grappling with emotional challenges. Fueled by anger, Captain Marvel engages in a battle with Yon Rogg, while the song "I'm Just a Girl" by No Doubt plays in the background, not coincidentally. Towards the movie's conclusion, Yon Rogg is banished to Earth, yet not before launching a final attack on Danvers, questioning whether she can control her emotions or if they will overpower her. While Captain Marvel may be the initial MCU production centered on a female protagonist, the film's narrative continuously portrays both pilot Danvers and Captain Marvel as emotionally driven women who must conform to the authority of a man. According to Joho, Captain Marvel's portrayal in the Marvel Studios film is regressive in terms of female inclusivity. Instead of allowing the female-led narrative to shine independently, the movie implies that femininity is a disadvantage that needs to be overcome in order to match the capabilities of men (Echezabal, 2021).

Captain Marvel's second appearance in Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) occurs in *Avengers: Endgame*, but it is limited to a mere 6 minutes of screen time. As the Avengers prepare to battle against Thanos, Captain Marvel joins them on Earth, exuding independence, confidence, and sporting a new short, pixie-cut hairstyle. This hairstyle choice seems to align with Marvel's attempt to shape Captain Marvel into a more stereotypical male superhero archetype. Despite her absence for most of the movie, Captain Marvel reemerges during the final battle as a formidable ally, single handedly rescuing the Avengers army from defeat and arguably serving as the main reason they are able to overcome Thanos. The transformation of Captain Marvel from a submissive, identity-conflicted female character to a prominent superheroine who defies male objectification represents an effort towards female empowerment, but it only scratches the surface of what could be achieved (Echezabal, 2021).

2.3.1 *Captain Marvel* (2019):The Journey to Empowerment

The journey of female superheroes has undergone a lengthy and diverse evolution, progressing from mere sidekicks and love interests to fully developed, multidimensional, and formidable heroes in their own regard. Throughout the history of the superhero genre, female characters have assumed various roles, with their portrayal experiencing significant changes over time. Initially, female superheroes were often depicted as weaker or less capable than their male counterparts (Shashank, 2023).

However, in the present day, female superheroes have become integral to the genre, featuring numerous popular and well-known characters celebrated for their strength, bravery, and ability to stand toe-to-toe with male superheroes. This transformation not only reflects the evolving attitudes towards women in society but also signifies the growing acknowledgement of the significance of diversity and representation in the media (Shashank, 2023).

Brie Larson stars as Carol Danvers in the twenty-first installment of Marvel Cinematic Universe, which serves as a powerful representation of female empowerment on screen that extends beyond the experiences of white women. Right from the start of the film, we witness Danvers' formidable strength during a sparring session that displays her extraordinary powers. Notably, the absence of a romantic subplot and the lack of reliance on a male character to help her harness her abilities further emphasize her independence and self-sufficiency.

Taking place in the 1990s, *Captain Marvel* takes us on a profound journey of self-discovery and camaraderie as Danvers, a member of the Starforce space organization, embarks on a quest for answers about her mysterious past. A confrontation with the Skrulls, a group of shape-shifting alien beings, leads to a probe that unlocks memories of her forgotten life as a pilot in the U.S. Air Force.

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Throughout the film, we witness Danvers' transformation and the exploration of her identity, forming deep bonds of friendship along the way (Diaz, 2020).

Despite the initial scenes lacking charm and excitement, the story takes an exciting turn when the protagonist encounters Nick Fury, an agent of S.H.I.E.L.D., after crashing from space into Los Angeles. With Fury's assistance, Danvers is able to find her long-lost friend, Maria Rambeau, portrayed by Lashana Lynch. Maria, an Air Force pilot and a single mother to Monica, exudes a sense of empowerment and resilience, symbolizing the strength and magic of black women. She embarked on her journey with Danvers as a pilot during a time when women were not allowed such prestigious roles. Maria's commanding presence and the significance of her friendship with Danvers are evident throughout the story (Diaz, 2020).

Maria is not just a token character for diversity; she is a well-developed and a crucial character who plays a vital role in helping Danvers uncover her past and shape her future mission. From the moment Maria is introduced, she captivates the audience. However, another character, Monica, portrayed by Akira Akbar, steals the spotlight in the film. Monica, who viewers may recognize as young Beth from the current season of "This Is Us," shines as a brilliant and clever girl in Captain Marvel. Her presence reinforces the idea that Black girls have a keen interest in STEM education. Monica's character and personality bear similarities to Shuri from Black Panther. Just as Shuri's introduction inspired numerous initiatives to engage young Black men and women in STEM fields, Monica's character has a similar impact. In a pivotal moment, Danvers entrusts Monica with the task of selecting the colors for her Captain Marvel suit using advanced technological features. Ultimately, Monica chooses the final design with a combination of red, gold, and blue (Diaz, 2020).

According to Marvel Studios Director of Visual Development Andy Park, this particular moment in the film holds great significance as it symbolizes the emergence of Captain Marvel. He explained that the interaction with Maria marks

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the point at which Carol Danvers regains her true identity, while the moment with Monica signifies her transformation into Captain Marvel. Park emphasized the importance of portraying a young, intelligent, and confident Black character, as it ensures that young women of color are not left behind in the movement for female empowerment. Captain Marvel goes even further by involving Monica in the process of Carol Danvers' evolution into Captain Marvel. Although there are deeper aspects to explore within the stories of Maria and Monica Rambeau, this narrative represents a positive step forward. Ultimately, Captain Marvel is an empowering film that provides positive representations of strong women, contributing to the ongoing conversation about bridging the gap between Black and white women (Diaz, 2020).

Carol Danvers, a superhero, endures manipulation and oppression from individuals who aim to exploit and dominate her. Her narrative revolves around emancipation, harnessing her inherent strength, and ultimately realizing her utmost capabilities. This captivating message is effectively conveyed through an appealing and polished presentation. During her ultimate encounter with Yon-Rogg, he chooses to abandon his weaponry and expresses his admiration for her. However, he insists that she must genuinely establish her worth by subduing her abilities and defeating him in an equitable confrontation. In a defiant act, Carol blasts him away, firmly declaring, "I have nothing to prove to you". (*Captain Marvel*, 2019, 1:45:11) This pivotal moment in the film marks the point where she refuses to play by her abuser's rules or engage on his terms. Despite Yon-Rogg's persistent attempts to control her until the very end, Carol rises above his manipulative tactics. Originally intended as a conventional fight, the filmmakers wisely recognized the importance of a more empowering resolution. This scene significantly elevates the film, embodying the essence of female empowerment and contributing to one of the most impactful climaxes in Marvel Cinematic Universe (Curley, 2020).

The true strength of *Captain Marvel* lies in its central theme of female empowerment. This aspect not only enhances the entire movie but also sets it

apart from the rest of Marvel Cinematic Universe. It ensures that the film does not feel like a mere attempt at superficial diversity, but rather delivers a powerful statement by featuring a female superhero in her own story within MCU (Curley, 2020).

2.3.2 *Captain Marvel's* Feminism: An Essential Part of The Plot

Captain Marvel is not solely a feminist film due to its female protagonist wearing practical footwear while battling her foes. Its feminist nature stems from its exploration of military imperialism and the imposition of patriarchal systems for colonization and dominance. Women are typically the most impacted by war and imperialistic endeavors, enduring significant levels of male violence, particularly sexual assault, in times of armed conflict (Wilson, 2019).

In the movie *Captain Marvel*, Carol Danvers takes a stance against the Kree's agenda of conquering the Skrulls' planet, which plays a crucial role in the story and can be seen as having feminist undertones. When Danvers uncovers the Kree military's hidden motives, she decides to defy her superiors, abandon her allegiance to the military, and assist the displaced Skrulls in locating their fellow beings and providing them with the necessary support to defend themselves against the Kree's aggressive imperialistic plans (Wilson, 2019).

This particular scene in the movie stands out as one of the most impactful instances. It showcases Captain Marvel as more than just a self-centered superhero seeking revenge against those who have harmed her. Instead, she emerges as a powerful agent working for the betterment of society. It is a rare opportunity for viewers to witness a woman playing such a significant role on an intergalactic level. Importantly, she does not have to sacrifice herself or become a martyr to create a meaningful impact (Wilson, 2019).

Marvel Cinematic Universe has significantly enhanced female representation in superhero movies through the inclusion of characters like Captain Marvel. This has greatly elevated the standards for depicting women in

films. *Captain Marvel*, being the first female-led superhero movie to surpass \$1 billion in global box office earnings, has also claimed its place as the tenth highest-grossing superhero film ever. Given the immense global success of *Captain Marvel*, it is highly likely that we will witness more groundbreaking action blockbusters led by women in the near future (Wilson, 2019).

2.3.3 Captain Marvel:Fight against Toxic Masculinity

Captain Marvel brought about a significant change in Marvel Cinematic Universe that was highly appreciated. The film placed Brie Larson's character, Carol Danvers, at the center, representing a strong symbol of female empowerment. This was a notable departure from the predominantly male-focused narratives and the tendency to sideline characters like Black Widow. By doing so, the movie opened up new possibilities for MCU, allowing characters like Kamala Khan and Kate Bishop to thrive in this evolving landscape (Matadeen, 2022).

The boldness of Captain Marvel's portrayal was further highlighted by her subtle critique of toxic masculinity, particularly in her progression as a pilot within the military. This progression served as preparation for her future role as arguably the most powerful Avenger. Consequently, Brie Larson, the actress portraying Captain Marvel, faced and confronted criticism from individuals who objected to the idea of a female superhero possessing such immense power. While Carol's journey remains influential and impactful, Disney+ has taken the concept of challenging societal norms to a new level with the introduction of *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law* (Matadeen, 2022).

Marvel Studios recently unveiled an extended deleted scene from *Captain Marvel*, which reveals that Carol Danvers confronts toxic masculinity to a greater extent than previously anticipated. This scene builds upon a familiar moment from the movie, featuring Brie Larson's character on Earth wearing her Starforce uniform. Shortly after her arrival, a local biker mocks her and offers her a ride, demanding a smile in return. However, this version goes beyond mere motorcycle

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theft. Vers, played by Larson, takes the opportunity to introduce herself, firmly grasps the biker's hand, and painfully singses it until he relents and hands over the keys to his bike and her leather jacket. The scene effectively portrays the biker's agony as Larson's character uses the threat of burning his hand as a response to his masculine behaviour(Abell, 2019).

The extended scene provoked a sense of offense among certain viewers, leading them to express their disapproval on social media, highlighting their opposition to feminism. According to Indie Wire, numerous male viewers who were outraged commented on the scene via Twitter. Their comments conveyed sentiments such as:

It's truly empowering to witness a woman with extraordinary abilities inflict physical harm on a man, threaten to break his hand, and subsequently take possession of his motorcycle and jacket, all because he uttered something impolite to her. This is what empowerment looks like! (Abell, 2019).

Interestingly, some fans of *Captain Marvel* expressed their dissatisfaction with the extended version of the scene, arguing that it presents Captain Marvel in a negative light by depicting her willingly causing harm to a man's hand. Although it is bothersome that Captain Marvel could be perceived as a villain, we cannot deny the evidence presented in the video. Vers reacts to a man who persistently harassed her despite her clear disinterest, as indicated by her body language. While the majority of women on Earth do not possess the ability to physically harm men who display excessive aggression, Vers's response is empowering and serves as encouragement for women to stand their ground when they feel harassed or threatened in any manner (Abell, 2019).

In a previous discussion, Brie Larson and director Anna Boden explained the scene where someone asks, "What, no smile?" (*Captain Marvel*, 2019, 35:45) carries a deeper meaning related to the female perspective. Larson highlighted the

significance of artwork portraying the female experience, as it enables women and girls to identify with shared moments and say, "Oh, I've experienced that too." Additionally, it serves as an eye-opener for those who haven't lived through such situations, prompting them to recognize the need for improvement, as Larson expressed in an interview with Yahoo Entertainment (Abell, 2019).

2.5 Conclusion

Since the very beginning of MCU, we have witnessed Marvel Comics' incredible superheroes brought to life on the big screen. While there have been numerous strong and courageous women portrayed throughout the years, they have often been relegated to secondary roles or cast primarily as love interests, rather than being given prominent positions. In the past, Hollywood has often stated that the dominance of male characters in superhero movies is a result of catering to their target audience. However, The Hollywood Reporter presents a contrasting view supported by statistics. They reveal that around 40% of the audience who purchased tickets for Black Widow last year were women. This not only demonstrates that women have always enjoyed superhero movies, but it also indicates a viable market for producing female-led superhero films. It appears that Marvel is now acknowledging this fact(Pemberton, 2021).

This next phase in MCU is noteworthy because it places a greater emphasis on including and showcasing women. Female characters are now being given more opportunities to display their strengths and powerful abilities. Throughout 2021, numerous movies and TV shows celebrated Marvel's women, featuring both familiar faces like Black Widow, Agent Peggy Carter, Wanda Maximoff, and MJ, as well as introducing new characters like Kate Bishop, Yelena Belova, Sylvie Laufeydottir, Monica Rambeau, and the Eternals. Marvel has made significant strides in providing representation for female superheroes and villains, and their efforts have been well-received. However, fans are eager for even more female representation in future projects (Pemberton, 2021).

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Marvel's female characters are finally receiving the well-deserved spotlight with prominent roles. Numerous thrilling projects are currently in progress, generating anticipation among Marvel enthusiasts for increased female representation in MCU. Will the long-awaited all-female Marvel film, which has been the subject of persistent rumours, finally become a reality? Only time will tell, but considering the emergence of several new female superheroes, the possibility seems promising (Pemberton, 2021).

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Marvel Cinematic Universe has played a pivotal role in reshaping the portrayal of female superheroes, moving beyond traditional stereotypes and providing audiences with powerful, complex, and empowering characters. The inclusion of Black Widow and Captain Marvel has not only enriched the superhero genre but has also paved the way for further exploration and representation of diverse female characters. By continuing to prioritize the inclusion and development of female superheroes, MCU has the potential to inspire and empower audiences while pushing the boundaries of gender representation in popular culture.

The evolution of female superheroes, particularly Black Widow and Captain Marvel, has been a captivating journey that reflects the changing cultural landscape and social perceptions of women in the realm of superhero narratives. Throughout the chapters of this dissertation, we have explored the origins and early portrayals of female superheroes, the challenges they faced in achieving equal representation, and the transformative impact of these characters on the genre. By examining their respective character arcs, narratives, and reception, we have shed light on the ways in which these iconic heroines have contributed to the broader discourse surrounding gender, power, and agency. Giving credit to the women working behind the scenes: writers, directors, producers, and executives who have been a key factor in shaping the narratives, character development, and overall representation of female superheroes. Their perspectives and experiences have brought depth, authenticity, and nuance to these characters, allowing them to break free from traditional stereotypes and become more complex, relatable, and empowering. They played a vital role in reshaping the landscape of superhero films and expanding the range of stories and characters that audiences can relate to and be inspired by.

Through this analysis, a progression in the portrayal of female superheroes within MCU was observed. Initially, female characters were often relegated to supporting roles or love interests, lacking substantial agency and depth. However, as MCU expanded and matured, we witnessed a significant transformation in the representation of female superheroes. Characters like Black Widow and Captain

Marvel emerged with rich backstories, complex personalities, and storylines that highlighted their strength, resilience, and importance within the superhero narrative.

The representation of these female superheroes in MCU has had a profound impact on audiences, particularly women and young girls. By providing diverse and multi-dimensional characters, MCU has given audiences role models to look up to and characters with whom they can identify. The presence of strong and capable female superheroes has challenged traditional gender norms and inspired discussions about gender equality, representation, and female empowerment.

The findings revealed that women in Marvel Cinematic Universe are heavily sexualized by directors, costume designers, and even their male co-stars. However, recent years have witnessed a significant transformation in the portrayal of women in superhero narratives. With the introduction of characters like Captain Marvel and Black Widow, MCU has embraced a more progressive approach, providing multidimensional and complex female protagonists. These characters defy traditional expectations, showcasing strength, intelligence, and agency, while also delving into their emotional depth and personal growth. This evolution has not only resonated with audiences but has also paved the way for greater representation and diversity in the superhero genre, inspiring audiences of all genders and ages. Despite some of these female characters being powerful, it was determined that Marvel lacks inclusivity towards women and there is still room for improvement in how female characters are written and represented. On the other hand, the sexualization of male characters in MCU offers women the visual pleasure they may have missed in other film franchises that primarily cater to male viewers while also ensuring that these characters remain multi-dimensional and capable of being fierce heroes. The key takeaway is that MCU strikes a balance between sexual appeal and character depth, allowing these characters to control their own narratives and be portrayed as strong and empowered individuals.

Looking beyond the scope of this dissertation, there is ample room for further research on the evolution of female superheroes. Future studies could explore the portrayal of other female characters, examine the intersectionality of gender with race, sexuality, and other identities, and investigate the impact of female superheroes on the experiences and aspirations of young audiences. Additionally, exploring the expanding medium of streaming platforms and their influence on the representation of female superheroes would be a fruitful avenue for future investigation.

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