

Study on Gender Ideology Evolution in the "Star Wars" Film Series

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Abstract: With the progression of time, female roles in science fiction movies have become increasingly significant, showcasing notable changes in both their quantity and character traits. Spanning 42 years, the "Star Wars" film series of 11 movies exhibits marked differences in female character portrayal. Over several years of development, female roles have gradually moved away from the singular identity of being "objects of gaze," no longer solely passive "desires of objects" or mere carriers for the flat representation of male characters in the audience's eyes and within the films. In the current narrative mechanism of Star Wars movies, the patriarchal center has been significantly challenged, and the "female discourse subject" with agency and independent will is gradually emerging. This study aims to explore the relevant connections between these female characters and the feminist trends of the time. By decoding the imagery of women in mainstream commercial films under the patriarchal framework, it analyzes the underlying gender ideologies and attempts to explore the future trajectory of constructing female discourse.

Keywords: Gender Ideology, "Star Wars" Film Series, Feminism

1. Introduction

"Star Wars" stands as one of Hollywood's most influential film series. From the release of the first Star Wars film in 1977 to the present day, encompassing nine main installments and two spin-offs, its tumultuous plots, intricate character relationships, and extraordinary audiovisual effects have constructed a dazzling visual world. Stemming from the original film, the "Star Wars" film series spans various narrative mediums, generating numerous novels, comics, and games, forming a prevalent Star Wars culture not only in the United States but throughout the Western world.

Spanning 42 years, each installment of the Star Wars series is imbued with different spiritual cores due to the varying eras it represents. The film texts are deeply rooted in the social reality of American culture, reflecting the historical and cultural processes of the real society during its continuous development and enrichment. It mirrors cultural concepts and values of different periods, becoming a significant medium reflecting the development and changes in modern American social culture. Within these eleven film texts, the few female representations underwent notable changes, aligning with the development process of the feminist trends in American society at the time.

2. Historical Tracing of Feminist Waves

The history of modern Western feminist movements can be divided into four "waves." The first wave occurred in the early 19th to 20th centuries, aiming to promote women's suffrage. The second wave, the women's liberation movement starting in the 1960s, sought legal and societal equality for women. The third wave emerged around 1992, emphasizing individuality and diversity [1]. The fourth wave began in 2012, utilizing social media to combat sexual harassment, violence against women, and rape culture, notably represented by the "Me Too" movement [2]. Overall, feminist movements have undergone a transition from political to economic, social, and cultural domains.

Corresponding to the historical process, the early "original trilogy" of "Star Wars" premiered in 1977, coinciding with the peak of the second wave of feminism. Subsequent releases in the '80s marked the decline of the second wave, emphasizing "family values" tied to a conservative revival, achieving comprehensive success in politics, economics, culture, and other aspects, not only in the United States but globally, initiating the lengthy period of "post-feminism." Although the second wave deeply embedded the idea of gender equality, many political ideals remained unrealized, such as the Equal Rights Amendment sought by feminists, which suffered a decisive failure in 1984, indicating, to some extent, the movement's lack of success. The decline of feminist movements led to the gender ideology background during the release of the "original trilogy" of Star Wars [3].

Coinciding with the "post-feminism" era, the third wave of feminism around the same time didn't form a unified theory but birthed various academic branches like "ecofeminism," each holding distinct views that were challenging to integrate, failing to provide a unified and effective action guideline for the women's movement. Therefore, the third wave mostly remained at the theoretical level, failing to generate a representative feminist social movement. There were even scholars questioning whether the third wave genuinely existed. The "prequel trilogy" of Star Wars, released from 1999 to 2005, arrived at a time when the third wave of feminism was already declining around 1992, leading to a prevalent mainstream gender culture characterized by the decline of feminism and the prevalence of male conservative dominance [4].

The fourth wave emerged in 2012, reaching its peak with numerous revelations on social media in 2017 exposing Hollywood mogul Weinstein's sexual misconduct. It created a new surge in feminist movements globally, displaying robust activism. However, it has yet to form a theory with the same level of influence as the previous three waves. The latest trilogy and two spin-offs of Star Wars reflect the era of a radical feminist movement with unclear theoretical guidance.

3. Contradiction between Tradition and Progress: Princess Leia

Leia Organa, Princess of Alderaan, is the sole female protagonist in the "Original Trilogy" of Star Wars. Statistics reveal that other female characters in these three films collectively speak for less than 63 seconds. To a certain extent, Princess Leia epitomizes the prevailing societal imagination of an ideal woman of that era. Initially, Princess Leia was hailed for possessing a certain feminist progressive hue. In "Star Wars: A New Hope," she displayed exceptional decisiveness and resilience. However, as the story unfolded, this character gradually exposed the limitations of traditional femininity, where the theme of "hero rescuing the maiden" became predominant.

In fact, the central theme of "Star Wars: A New Hope" is the American-styled hero rescuing the maiden: initially, the protagonist Luke Skywalker and mentor Obi-Wan witnessed Leia's distress message concealed within the droid R2-D2, prompting them to traverse the galaxy, rescue the Princess from the antagonist Darth Vader, and assist Leia in leading the Rebel Alliance to destroy the Empire's malevolent weapon, the "Death Star." This forms the primary plotline of the entire Star Wars series. In the movie, Princess Leia initiates the mission by concealing the plans for the "Death Star" within the droid R2-D2, thwarting the antagonist's plan, and leads the Rebel Alliance and Luke to

destroy the Death Star. However, despite her immense strength, she fails to save herself. When captured by the antagonist, Leia resists staunchly but is easily deceived, pleading and witnessing the antagonist's destruction of her homeworld, eventually ending up imprisoned. In the final part of the "Original Trilogy," Leia's feminist image is further dissolved, as she infiltrates Jabba's lair to rescue Han Solo but is captured and enslaved. During her captivity, she is dressed in a golden bikini, chained around the neck, submissive at Jabba's feet, with her hair styled into alluring long braids, nearly exposing her entire body, heavily laden with sexual implications. This portrayal starkly contrasts her initial appearance in the first film, where she was clad in a covering white outfit, displaying a dignified appearance as a young political leader. The tremendous dramatic tension of "princess turned slave" coupled with the impact of her appearance even made her an object of sexual fantasies for a generation of American males. When Leia, clad in the bikini, seizes the opportunity during Luke's rescue to strangle Jabba with her chain, subsequently engages in battle, and is rescued, she completely changes into pants, courageously riding motorcycles alongside others, embodying action.

Thus, in the film texts of the "Original Trilogy," Leia's character embodies contradictory traits. She is both an assertive female leader initiating tasks, setting goals, and organizing actions, yet frequently requires male rescues, depicting her as a passive woman unable to protect herself.

In the traditional male-dominated narrative mechanism, female characters frequently fall into the clutches of antagonists due to the presumed "innate ignorance" of women, providing opportunities for male characters to showcase heroism and tender sentiments. Women are inherently placed in a completely passive position, serving as objects of male action and desires [5].

Although the female imagery in the "Original Trilogy" of Star Wars displays some progressiveness, the entire story's values remain firmly entrenched in the male perspective. The shaping of female characters isn't solely to reflect their personalities and depth but rather to strongly emphasize male characters. Leia's "princess" status signifies nobility and elegance, with the male protagonists protecting the princess representing the emblem of "knightly spirit," underlying the power structure of a male-dominated society. Leia, intelligent yet naive, courageous yet fragile, innocent yet sensual, noble yet erotic, is crafted from these conflicting elements, reflecting the mainstream male-dominated society's desire for these contradictions in an ideal, perfect woman of that era.

4. Conservative Backlash: Queen Padmé Amidala

Similar to Leia, Padmé initially shows no interest in men in the first part of her trilogy because her future lover is currently a 9-year-old boy. Initially, she exhibits some admirable behavior. She proves herself as an upright politician, capable of fostering peace between her people and the Gungans. Like Leia, two men (Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan) come to her aid in "Star Wars: The Phantom Menace." Padmé faces a test from the Trade Federation: they cut off essential supplies to Naboo, attempting to coerce Amidala into signing a treaty to legalize their shameless occupation. However, Padmé refuses to concede, rejecting the Federal treaty.

Initially, Padmé's attire is formal, featuring bound hair and a strong sense of coverage. Even after recognizing Anakin, in public, her attire remains conservative with no exposure until they are alone. Afterward, Padmé becomes more seductive. She wears a black sleeveless dress designed as a tight bodice, with decorations from the dress's top wrapping around her neck. Her waist is accentuated, shoulders exposed, and by the roaring fireplace, the camera focuses on Padmé's face, highlighting her sensuality. She is subtly objectified as Anakin gazes at her, presenting the male audience's viewpoint.

Consequently, in the second part, "Attack of the Clones," her female empowerment spirals down rapidly. In every scene, she is saved by male characters, consistently expressing gratitude for their rescues. Starting from her wedding, Padmé becomes enslaved by her emotions, and her entire fate depends on her relationship with Anakin.

After Padmé becomes pregnant, she desires seclusion, to retreat to the safest place. In this scene,

the ideal image of a woman in Christian family ethics is depicted. Eventually, Padmé loses all political judgment, wisdom, consistently believing in her husband, as her sole connection to the world is Anakin. Even after being physically assaulted by Anakin, she still believes in his inherent goodness.

In the third part, "Revenge of the Sith," Padmé is absent from any combat, almost exclusively discussing Anakin. Worst of all, the film's ending explicitly indicates that her entire life's purpose is to be in love with a man. When Anakin joins the dark side, becoming Darth Vader, Padmé confronts him on the planet Mustafar, just before his final lightsaber duel with Obi-Wan. There, she explicitly states that, to this point, he has been the most important thing in her life. Later, Padmé is forced into emergency childbirth. After giving birth, she suddenly dies, leaving doctors puzzled, unaware of the reason for her death. The only explanation they can think of is that she lost the will to live. This is a crucial implication, indicating that, for Padmé, her child's life is not reason enough to survive. This selfish point is incredibly astonishing, imparting to female Star Wars viewers the idea that men are the most important aspect of a woman's life.

In the prequel trilogy, what we see is a character devoid of Leia's strengths; this character's sole purpose is to provide a love story for our protagonist, the Skywalker Anakin. Padmé becomes a plot device for Anakin; her entire reason for living is her relationship with a man.

5. The "Mary Sue" Rey Under Radical Feminism

The third installment of the Star Wars series reopened a decade after the conclusion of the prequel trilogy. From 2015's "The Force Awakens" to last year's "The Rise of Skywalker," comprising three sequels and two spin-off films, it is termed the Sequel Era. During these five years of new series production and release, the United States experienced the fourth wave of feminism, a gender political movement catalyzed by advancements in social media technology. Its focus: advocating for women's rights and challenging male, particularly entrenched male authority's, sexual oppression and misogyny towards women. Issues encompassed street and workplace sexual harassment, campus assaults, and rape culture. Unlike earlier waves, the fourth one hasn't seen significant theoretical developments but has actively surged ahead in action, leveraging hashtag activism extensively on the internet, profoundly impacting online public opinion climate [6].

In this fourth wave, opposing "sexual violence" becomes a central topic. Unlike previous waves focusing on women's political, economic, and social rights, this phase highlights women's concerns about their own bodily safety and life, to some extent reflecting women's anxieties and insecurities. These sentiments, in the new Star Wars films, manifest in the enhanced strength of female characters and the attenuation of aggressive and dominant traits in male characters.

The character of Rey, a female core character, was designed to conceal her feminine features. Her costume avoids accentuating body curves and largely covers skin, prioritizing practicality over aesthetics for combat readiness. Her hairstyle is a pragmatic three-bun updo, less extravagant than previous female character styles. Moreover, the British actress portraying Rey has fair skin and required heavy tanning sprays during filming to create a coarser appearance.

This approach echoes Laura Mulvey's theory that the film's visual pleasure derives from viewing characters as objects of desire, often objectifying women as targets of desire. Rey's introduction in a neutralized appearance signals a rejection of male gazes, refusing to be admired or objectified [7]. Though Rey's appearance discards femininity, it's also not entirely masculine, representing a form of "gender-neutral" expression. This "gender-neutral" concept opposes entrenched gender impressions [8]. Previous feminist waves amplified differences between male and female groups, reinforcing a binary gender structure. Postmodern feminists proposed the concept of "androgyny," primarily psychological, emphasizing the ambiguity and uncertainty of social gender, allowing everyone to identify with both sexes. This concept dissolves the binary gender opposition and liberates women from gender stereotypes. Some films started adopting "gender-neutral" portrayals to appeal to a

broader sense of "human" representation.

Upon the film's release, Rey faced controversies. A frequently used term in IMDB reviews was "Mary Sue." Here, "Mary Sue" doesn't imply Rey being idolized by men but rather being portrayed as an all-powerful individual lacking believable reasons. She's an orphan raised in the desert, never experienced war, yet remarkably shows genius in repairs, fighting, exceptional piloting skills, and an extraordinary connection to the Force. Throughout the series, she undergoes minimal hardship, no injuries, bloodshed, or emotional setbacks, without any personal or external challenges. However, everyone reveres her as the only and final hope. Such a character, with minimal room for growth in abilities and no visible emotional development, struggles to establish a believable romantic storyline due to the difficulty of portraying romance in a "gender-neutral" character.

Rey's character, despite its progressive ideological attempts, sparked audience discontent. This can be attributed to the creators' attempts to shape her as a feminist icon, avoiding showing her vulnerable side, resulting in Rey becoming a stereotyped character, an emblematic figure intended solely to subvert male-dominated cinematic norms and soothe collective societal anxieties.

6. Conclusion

The three stages of the Star Wars series correspond highly with the developmental trajectory of American feminist gender ideologies, demonstrating that popular entertainment art promptly reflects societal ideologies. Judging from the commercial performance of the works, commercially successful pieces are somewhat reflective of the zeitgeist.

Overall, the trend for women's status in films has improved, especially in movies produced during the fourth wave of feminism, where creators emphasized the progressiveness of female images, particularly focusing on portraying the "strength" of women to alleviate concerns about bodily safety and exhibit resilience. The manifestation of patriarchal consciousness on screen has somewhat diminished.

The controversy surrounding the character of Rey illustrates that the depiction of female characters in popular films is currently undergoing an exploratory phase of dismantling stereotypes without establishing new ones. The awkwardness lies in emphasizing the "strength" of female characters while inadvertently erasing some gender-specific traits from the characters, implicitly defining feminine qualities as derogatory.

The motivation behind recent creations is relatively progressive, even radical, but the discreteness required for ideological output impedes the conveyance of progressive ideas when the creative intent becomes overly explicit.

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