

Unveiling the Veil of the Damsel in Distress in Movies: The Impact of Gender Stereotypes on Female Characters in a Patriarchal Society

Yan Chen

Abstract

Many movies and TV shows feature the trope of ‘the damsel in distress,’ contrasting the strong and resilient image of men with the fragile and emotional portrayal of women. In various big IP movies, especially Hollywood films, the manifestation of patriarchal ideologies is even more evident in these phenomena. Movies are carriers of individual consciousness and powerful vehicles for social philosophy. This paper explores the influences of marketing strategy in patriarchal ideology on the ‘Damsel in distress’ stereotype in films and Marketing strategy in a patriarchal society.

Keywords: Movie, TV, Patriarchal Society, Women, Resilient

Most films present a problem of physiological and psychological inequality between genders, as well as the neglect of female power. Many movies and TV shows feature the trope of ‘the damsel in distress,’ contrasting the strong and resilient image of men with the fragile and emotional portrayal of women. In various big IP movies, especially Hollywood films, the manifestation of patriarchal ideologies is even more evident in these phenomena. Movies are carriers of individual consciousness and powerful vehicles for social philosophy. They carry reflections of societal consciousness and amplify social concepts. In this artistic medium, why do we see such unequal power dynamics and stereotypes between genders? What does this reflect? This paper explores the influences of marketing strategy in patriarchal ideology on the ‘Damsel in distress’ stereotype in films and Marketing strategy in a patriarchal society. In this essay, the first and second paragraphs will address the origins and manifestations of female stereotypes in movies, the third and fourth paragraphs will discuss the influence of patriarchal ideologies on movie creation and how it works, and the fifth paragraph will examine whether the feminist movement and women’s awakening have weakened these phenomena. Finally, the conclusion will provide prospects for reducing such occurrences.

What does ‘Damsel in distress’ refer to, and where does this phrase come from? These ‘damsels in distress’ prototypes can be traced back to ancient stories and traditional culture, where women were depicted as weak and vulnerable, requiring strong men to protect and save them. (Michael A 2017) For instance, in Greek mythology, Princess Andromeda was trapped by a sea monster and needed the hero Perseus to rescue her (Apollodorus 1999, 72). Another example is the traditional fairy tale of ‘Sleeping Beauty,’ where an evil witch curses the princess

and sleeps in a castle until a prince rescues her (Charles 2009, 63). Past cultural trends and societal constructs formed these myths and stories, and the female characters were deprived of the complexities of human nature and power by the authors’ subjective consciousness. For a long time, young men and women defined their perceptions of gender based on the values conveyed in these stories. The notion of men being strong and women being weak became deeply ingrained in the subconscious minds of future generations, forming a fixed thought pattern.

Even after years of the feminist movement, the image of “the damsel in distress” still appears in movies frequently. These female characters are usually in a predicament, waiting passively or actively for rescue. For example, in the French movie “Leon: The Professional” (Besson 1994), the male lead Léon saves the protagonist Mathilda when debt collectors attack her at home. When recalling this film, the male protagonist’s character is often seen as more multidimensional and complex. In contrast, the female protagonist is remembered more for her appearance, naivety, fragility, and fashion style, which becomes a focus of attention. These labels more closely align with society’s expectations of women while lacking the qualities and inner conflicts of the female lead. These female characters have not gone through the same thought process and growth as their male counterparts; instead, their growth is facilitated by time or even by the guidance of male characters. Similar examples can be found in movies like “Twilight” (Hardwicke 2008), “Cinderella” (Branagh 2015), and “Beauty and the Beast” (Condon 2017), where a vulnerable female lead is rescued. Her life, or even her inner self, is changed through the involvement of a powerful male figure.

The patriarchal social system profoundly influences films, and such influence is often determined by market demand.

Under the ideology of patriarchy, men generally hold the dominant

position in society, while women are marginalized. It is undeniable that the patriarchal ideology has strengthened people's stereotypes of gender roles. The stereotypes associated with men are not singular but rather specific to certain groups of men described by adjectives. On the other hand, stereotypes associated with women seem to be consistent across appearance, occupation, and personality. Simone de Beauvoir mentioned in "The Second Sex" (Simon 1949) that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (283). In a social environment where men dominate the discourse, women are seen as the second sex, existing to assist and support men in achieving their goals. In such a societal system, a magical closed loop is formed: women are compelled to accept patriarchal values, gradually losing their self-awareness and becoming more aligned with patriarchal values. Gradually, they lose their voice, are labeled as weak and dependent on men, and are pushed to the sidelines of mainstream society.

The way that patriarchal ideology influences the direction of the film industry can be roughly divided into two points: the Personal willingness of the director and the collective identity of gender. Firstly, movies are composed of individual consciousness. In traditional films, men have always occupied the main positions. This art form has gradually become mainstream since the transition from silent films to sound films. Consequently, women who already lacked a voice were excluded from the mainstream. In the depiction of women by male directors or screenwriters, women are often portrayed as tools to drive the plot or to enhance the male protagonist. For example, in Jon Favreau's "Iron Man" (Favreau 2008), the female lead, Pepper Potts, is consistently portrayed as Tony Stark's secretary, assisting Iron Man in his missions and taking care of his daily life. Another example is Christopher Nolan's "Interstellar" (Nolan 2014). Amelia's erroneous decision evokes strong dissatisfaction in Cooper, and Amelia guides the audience to have a negative perception of her through highly emotional speeches and tearful expressions of grievance. However, when Cooper makes similar mistakes, his errors are not emphasized; instead, the focus is on Cooper's brave and selfless sacrifice to save Amelia in the face of two disastrous decisions. In these movies, without exception, the story and all the characters are portrayed from a male perspective through the eyes of the male protagonist. Secondly, movies serve as carriers of collective consciousness. The depiction of a willful and vulnerable girl alongside a mature and powerful man partially satisfies men's desire for male dominance. When male viewers watch movies, they place themselves

in the shoes of the male protagonist, regarding women as inherently weak and irrational creatures in need of male protection. However, this portrayal is not solely to satisfy male viewers' experiences. In such a social system, the stereotypes of women are comprehensive and deeply ingrained in every group. Female viewers also experience this when they place themselves in the female protagonist's perspective, feeling the satisfaction and protection of their vulnerability. In simple terms, industry tends to align with the societal tendencies. Therefore, the influence of the patriarchal ideology on the film industry can be observed in the limited and stereotypical roles given to women, the male-centric perspective in storytelling, and the reinforcement of gender stereotypes that satisfy the desires of both male and female viewers within the patriarchal social system.

From the first wave of feminism to the present day, there has been over two hundred years of history, during which women's political rights, laws, and gender-cultural characteristics have undergone significant changes. Unfortunately, the image of "the damsel in distress" continues to appear on the screen. For example, in recent years, the popular movie "365 Days" (Białowas, Mandes, 2020) depicted Laura being illegally imprisoned and forced into a sexual relationship by Massimo. But as Laura experienced prolonged gender power inequality, she discovered Massimo's various virtues and the reasons behind her abduction, and eventually fell in love with him. The director forcedly rationalized Massimo's unreasonable behavior through the audience's perspective, as the male lead rescued Laura after experiencing one dangerous event after another. This made the audience perceive Massimo as a strong, wealthy, and affectionate. On the other hand, from Massimo's perspective, the focus was solely on portraying Laura's body and contrasting it with Massimo's weakness and subservience. Although it is evident that Laura in the movie is shaped as "the damsel in distress" and a Madonna-like figure, the film still attracts many fans. We still need to consider this phenomenon from a market perspective. Despite the feminist movement promoting more diverse and powerful female characters, some audiences still want to see traditional plots and character settings. As mentioned earlier, ancient myths have implanted stereotypical impressions of women and patriarchal ideologies into the subconscious of every group. While men are more willing to be portrayed as strong, women prefer to be depicted as the protected side. In this type of movie, each group has its own "position," which is traditional and does not deconstruct the audience's understanding of socio-cultural norms. This is why such characters continue to appear nowadays.

However, in the fourth wave of feminism, women are increasingly pursuing liberation of their thinking and deconstruction of traditional patriarchal ideologies. As the feminist movement transforms from political and legal revolutions to cultural and ideological ones, the rise of such consciousness has led to a more diverse evaluation of the “damsel in distress” image. For example, in the recent popular Chinese TV drama “Fireworks of My Heart” (Li, 2023), the male lead redeems the female lead from her perceived oppressive wealthy life. Still, when the female lead realizes she does not want a beautiful future but rather a home with the male lead, some viewers began to resist this storyline. Some people believe that such characters depict a qualified wife image from the male gaze, objectifying women and forcibly diminishing their intelligence. In recent years, more and more women have become dissatisfied with the lack of strong female lead roles in movies; filmmakers and storytellers have become increasingly conscious of these issues, leading to a more thoughtful approach and the inclusion of nuanced and diverse female characters in contemporary cinema. The powerful female characters frequently appear on the screen, especially in action and science fiction films. Movies like “Captain Marvel” (Boden and Fleck, 2019), “Wonder Woman” (Jenkins, 2017), and “The Hunger Games” (Ross, 2012) have broken the traditional notion of “the damsel in distress” image. When a group of people’s consciousness begins to awaken, the market starts to make corresponding changes. As the market changes, it impacts millions upon millions of people.

In conclusion, from the information above, the long-existing patriarchal ideology has turned stereotypical impressions of both sexes into a norm. This norm suggests that boys and men find happiness in being sought after by weak women, while women are told that being protected due to their weakness brings them happiness. Under this norm, the market creates films that seemingly bring pleasure to both sexes and unknowingly perpetuates this norm in the gender consciousness of men and women. Why do these films, formed with outdated thinking, still exist today? It’s because an audience still finds joy in stories of rescue and being rescued. The right or wrong of this phenomenon cannot be judged, but what can be determined is that the awakening of female consciousness is quietly changing this market. Since the second wave of feminism, there have been many feminist films, such as “Daisies” (Chytilová 1966), directed by Věra Chytilová, which aim to break free from the stereotypical impressions imposed by patriarchal ideologies and empower women to do whatever they want. Now, amid the fourth wave of feminism, many films take a female perspective, portraying women as multidimensional and powerful

characters. The awakening of female consciousness is like a fiery ball that will one day become the sun that illuminates everyone. The on-screen image of the “damsel in distress” will gradually diminish, making way for the rise of powerful female characters.

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