

THE REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE INDEPENDENCE IN *CAPTAIN MARVEL* (2019)

Neysa Ayu Az Zahra¹

Universitas Stikubank (UNISBANK), Semarang, Indonesia
e-mail: neysaayua@gmail.com¹

Agnes Widyaningrum²

Universitas Stikubank (UNISBANK), Semarang, Indonesia
e-mail: agneswidyaningrum@edu.unisbank.ac.id²

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the representation of feminism through women's independence as portrayed by the character Carol Danvers in the film *Captain Marvel* (2019). The analysis focuses on how the main character is constructed as an empowered and independent woman. This is illustrated through her dialogues, visual presentation, personality traits, and both explicit and implied scenes in the film. The data source consists of selected scene clips and dialogues relevant to the theme. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach and uses Kate Millett's feminist theory, which highlights the dominance of patriarchal systems and how the portrayal of women in popular media is often shaped by male perspectives and standards. The findings reveal that Carol Danvers is portrayed as a woman who does not rely on male validation, resists manipulation and control, and maintains her identity without dependence on romantic relationships. Furthermore, her character is presented without sexualization, emphasizing instead her inner strength and solidarity with other women. These results indicate that *Captain Marvel* offers a fresh perspective on female superheroes—portraying them not as mere complements to male figures but as protagonists with depth, clear missions, and equal power. This study demonstrates that popular media plays a significant role in constructing more meaningful and empowering representations of women.

Keyword: *Feminism, Independent, Captain Marvel, Kate Millett, Patriarchy*

1. INTRODUCTION

Film is a form of storytelling through images and sounds, wrapped in camera movements, editing styles, and structured narratives. Its visual strength lies in rapid and alternating images that capture mood and soundtrack to support the storyline. According to Wibowo (Rizal, 2014), film is not only a medium of artistic expression but also a platform through which creators convey messages to society, influencing perceptions, behavior, and social values.

In recent years, superhero films have attracted significant audiences by blending genres such as action, science fiction, and fantasy, supported by

compelling characters and epic narratives. Marvel Studios, under The Walt Disney Company, plays a significant role in popularizing this genre. Since *Iron Man* (2008), the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has grown rapidly. However, female superheroes were, for a long time, underrepresented and often portrayed in passive, dependent, and sexualized roles—serving merely as companions to male heroes.

Feminism is a political, social, and ideological movement that advocates for equality between men and women. One key aspect of feminism is the empowerment and independence of

women—emotionally, socially, and economically. In the context of cinema, feminist critique has long addressed how women are portrayed in ways that reinforce traditional norms and stereotypes. Irawan (2014) notes that women are often reduced to their appearance or sexual appeal rather than being shown for their capabilities.

Several studies have examined the representation of women in superhero films. For instance, Kent (2016) discusses how postfeminist portrayals of female heroes tend to mask underlying gender biases by promoting "empowered" images that still cater to male-centric views. Similarly, Tavares (2022) analyzes how *Black Widow*'s character is situated between empowerment and objectification. These studies highlight the ongoing struggle for balanced female representation in mainstream superhero narratives. However, the depiction of Carol Danvers in *Captain Marvel* (2019) offers a potential shift in this portrayal.

Captain Marvel introduces Carol Danvers as the first female lead in the MCU's solo superhero narrative. Unlike previous portrayals, she is not defined by her relationship to male characters, nor is she sexualized. Instead, she is shown as a strong, autonomous leader who makes decisions for herself and resists external control. This makes the film significant in the discussion of feminist representation in mainstream media.

This study applies Kate Millett's feminist theory, which emphasizes how patriarchy dominates cultural narratives and limits women's roles in society. According to Millett (1970), "The struggle for women's liberation is about challenging and changing the cultural narratives that have long served to oppress women." By analyzing scenes

and dialogues from the film, this research explores how Carol Danvers embodies feminist ideals of independence and resistance to patriarchy.

- 1) This study addresses the following research questions:
- 2) How is feminism represented in the film *Captain Marvel*?
- 3) How does the character of Carol Danvers in *Captain Marvel* face her struggle as an independent woman?
- 4) To what extent does the film *Captain Marvel* succeed in challenging traditional gender stereotypes in the superhero movie industry?

By examining Carol Danvers' character through the lens of feminist theory, this research aims to highlight how *Captain Marvel* contributes to broader gender discourse in contemporary popular culture and emphasizes the need for empowering female representation in the media.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review explores the evolving representation of female superheroes in modern media through a critical examination of relevant studies. By reviewing works that analyze characters such as Black Widow, Scarlet Witch, and Ms. Marvel, this section aims to identify how previous research has addressed feminist narratives, what gaps remain, and how this current study positions itself within those discussions.

The portrayal of female superheroes in mainstream media has gained attention in various academic studies. Previous research has explored how female characters are represented in superhero films, particularly in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), which has often been criticized for its male-centered narratives. However,

despite increasing representation, critical evaluations show that female superheroes are still often portrayed within patriarchal frameworks or reduced to symbolic figures rather than fully developed protagonists.

One of the key studies in this field is “*Marvel-oust Women: Black Widow, Scarlet Witch, and the Representation of Female Superheroes*” by Alexis Lee Tavares (2022). Tavares analyzes how Black Widow and Scarlet Witch are portrayed in a genre dominated by male superheroes. The study highlights the significant shift in female superhero representation through their evolving roles and increasing agency. Tavares uses content analysis with a feminist framework to show how these characters begin to challenge traditional gender norms. However, a limitation of this study is that while it captures the transition of female characters, it still focuses on characters whose origins and arcs are deeply intertwined with male counterparts, potentially limiting the independence of their representation.

In comparison, Erika Chung’s (2019) study titled “*Ms. Marvel: Genre, Medium, and an Intersectional Superhero*” presents a unique approach by applying intersectional feminist theory to analyze Kamala Khan, a Muslim-Pakistani American teenage girl. The study explores how Kamala’s identity, cultural background, and gender interact to create a more nuanced depiction of a female superhero. The strength of this research lies in its intersectional lens, providing fresh insight into diversity in superhero narratives. However, its primary focus on television series rather than cinematic releases may limit its applicability to broader superhero film analysis.

Both studies provide valuable perspectives on the shifting

representations of women in superhero genres. They also expose the limitations in earlier portrayals of women in media and show how female characters are gradually being given more narrative space and agency. However, neither Tavares nor Chung examine *Captain Marvel* or Carol Danvers specifically—one of the most pivotal characters in the MCU who fully embraces her power and independence.

Thus, this research fills a gap by critically analyzing *Carol Danvers* in *Captain Marvel* (2019) using *Kate Millett’s feminist theory*, focusing on how the character is portrayed as a fully independent figure who resists patriarchal control, defies gendered expectations, and reclaims her identity without the need for male validation, romantic entanglements, or sexualized representation. Unlike earlier female superheroes whose narratives often revolve around external affirmation or relational roles, Carol’s journey is driven by internal conviction, personal growth, and resistance to imposed limitations. This study, therefore, positions *Captain Marvel* as a pivotal text in the evolution of feminist representation in superhero cinema—emphasizing self-recognition, empowerment, and the subversion of traditional gender norms.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to examine how feminist values and women’s empowerment are depicted in the *Captain Marvel* film. The analysis focuses on selected scenes and dialogues that are relevant to the representation of feminism and supported by feminist theory.

The theoretical framework used in this study is Kate Millett’s feminist theory, especially her ideas presented in

Sexual Politics (1970), which emphasises the dominance of patriarchal structures in narratives and media. This theory helps in interpreting how Carol Danvers successfully challenges traditional gender norms with independence, strength and resistance to emotional manipulation control and finds her own identity.

The data collected was by watching the film and also identifying scenes and dialogues that were in line with feminist elements. Furthermore, the data will be transcribed and analysed through content analysis. This is supported by Kate Millett's feminist theory, which helps researchers to convey feminist narratives through visual and verbal storytelling in the Captain Marvel film.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and interprets the findings from the analysis of *Captain Marvel* (2019), focusing on the representation of feminism through the character of Carol Danvers. The data are derived from selected scenes and dialogues that were analyzed using descriptive qualitative methods with Kate Millett's feminist theory as the theoretical framework. The analysis is divided into thematic sub-sections that highlight how the film reflects feminist values and challenges patriarchal norms.

4.1. Feminism as Represented in Captain Marvel

The film *Captain Marvel* presents feminist values through Carol Danvers' transformation from a restrained soldier into an empowered woman. Based on Kate Millett's feminist theory—particularly her concept of patriarchy as a political institution that maintains power over women through both ideology and force—the film shows how Carol gradually reclaims her agency.

In Millett's (1970) view, cultural productions like film often reproduce patriarchal narratives that subordinate women, limiting their autonomy and reinforcing traditional gender roles. *Captain Marvel*, however, actively resists this pattern. The data analyzed includes dialogue, visual cues, and scene contexts where Carol resists control, asserts her identity, and navigates a male-dominated environment.

The findings suggest that *Captain Marvel* redefines the female superhero archetype—not through sexualization or male approval—but through internal strength, emotional independence, and personal conviction. In doing so, the film embodies Millett's call to challenge the cultural mechanisms that uphold female subjugation.

4.1.1 Carol Danvers as a Symbol of Feminism

Carol Danvers is portrayed as a resilient, ambitious, and emotionally autonomous character—traits frequently marginalized in traditional female representations. The film presents flashbacks of Carol's life—falling from a go-kart, struggling through military training, and facing male derision—all of which she overcomes with persistence. These scenes visually embody her resistance to internalized oppression and reflect the feminist ideal of self-determination.

Using Kate Millett's feminist theory, which critiques the cultural construction of female subordination through patriarchal institutions, Carol's journey challenges systems that attempt to diminish women's roles and capabilities. Her defiance against sexist comments and her perseverance in male-dominated spheres like the military align with Millett's assertion that patriarchy operates not only

through power but through the internalization of cultural expectations (Millett, 1970).

Rather than seeking external validation, Carol defines her worth through her actions, convictions, and personal growth. This aligns with Millett's call to dismantle the patriarchal narrative that casts women as dependent, passive, or emotional liabilities. Through Carol, *Captain Marvel* affirms that strength, identity, and self-worth do not require approval from a male gaze or narrative.

4.1.2 Rejecting Male Validation: Carol Danvers' Path to Self-Recognition

A core message in *Captain Marvel* is Carol's rejection of male validation, particularly from Yon-Rogg, who repeatedly demands that she suppress her emotions and prove herself under his terms. Her ultimate refusal to engage with him on those terms—choosing instead to walk away—illustrates the liberation Millett describes: the refusal to operate within patriarchal definitions of worth.

The film critiques how women are often socialized to please, accommodate, or respond positively to unwanted male attention. Carol's firm response to cat calling and her decision not to smile or comply with those expectations represent symbolic resistance to such normative control. In Millett's framework, this reflects a rejection of the ideological apparatuses that reinforce gender roles through conditioning and behavioral expectations.

Carol's journey toward self-definition is not reactive but initiative-taking. She acts not in defiance of men, but in affirmation of her own values. In this way, the film aligns with feminist theory by centering a woman who

neither seeks romantic validation nor conforms to conventional gender expectations.

4.2. Carol Danvers' Journey as an Independent Woman

Carol Danvers' character journey in *Captain Marvel* represents a deeper exploration of how a woman reclaims her autonomy within a patriarchal system that seeks to suppress it. After establishing the presence of feminist values in the film, this section analyzes Carol's transformation more specifically through subjective experiences that reflect her fight against manipulation, identity suppression, and societal expectations.

Drawing on Kate Millett's feminist theory—which critiques the systemic control over women's bodies, emotions, and roles—this section interprets Carol's journey as a narrative of liberation: from a woman once conditioned and silenced by patriarchal authority to one who defines her own strength and purpose. Millett argues that the internalization of patriarchal ideology—often perpetuated through family, education, and media—is a key factor in women's subordination. Carol's resistance to the Kree's psychological manipulation and her rejection of male-defined worth (as seen through Yon-Rogg's condescending mentorship) directly reflect Millett's assertion that emancipation requires the deconstruction of those ideological chains.

Through key moments in the film, Carol's growth demonstrates how feminist resistance can emerge through internal realization, emotional resilience, and the power of female solidarity. Her transformation aligns with Millett's vision of feminism as both personal and political resisting not only institutional oppression but also

reclaiming the self as an act of empowerment.

4.2.1. Breaking Free from Psychological Manipulation and Control

Carol Danvers' transformation into an empowered woman begins with her struggle to break free from systemic psychological manipulation. Upon becoming a Kree soldier, she is subjected to memory suppression and behavioral conditioning by Yon-Rogg and the Supreme Intelligence. From the outset, she is trained to believe that emotional expression is a sign of weakness and that the Kree grants her abilities—thus binding her identity to an external power structure.

This manipulation reflects patriarchal thinking in which women's emotions are viewed as dangerous and irrational. Similar to what Dalimunte et al. (2025) stated in their study, female characters in film narratives can resist patriarchal control by reclaiming agency through intelligence, autonomy, and emotional strength—qualities that Carol chooses. Through repeated gaslighting, Carol is made to doubt her own instincts, origins, and even identity. Her mind is controlled through a neural device, and her memories are suppressed to prevent her from questioning the narrative imposed on her.

This condition aligns with Kate Millett's (1970) theory of patriarchy as a political and ideological structure that exerts power over women's bodies and consciousness. Millett emphasizes how cultural narratives serve to discipline female independence, particularly by redefining women's sense of agency and identity under male authority. In *Captain Marvel*, Carol's internal conflict is emblematic of this struggle, as she is repeatedly reminded that

control and obedience are the foundation of her strength—when, in fact, they are the very tools of her subjugation.

The narrative shift begins as Carol returns to Earth and reconnects with Maria Rambeau, whose presence helps Carol reassemble her fragmented past. With the truth revealed by Talos, Carol recognizes the artificiality of the identity imposed upon her. Her act of removing the neural inhibitor symbolizes not only her liberation from literal control but also her ideological resistance to patriarchal manipulation.

This emancipation culminates in her refusal to engage Yon-Rogg in a final test of validation—a direct subversion of patriarchal expectations that women must constantly prove their worth. By choosing not to conform, Carol exemplifies Millett's vision of feminist resistance: the refusal to accept systems of dominance as natural or necessary. Her reclamation of power, identity, and emotional truth positions her not only as a superhero, but as a symbol of modern feminist consciousness.

4.2.2. Sisterhood and Female Empowerment in Captain Marvel

Carol Danvers' journey toward self-empowerment is not portrayed as a solitary struggle, but rather one supported by meaningful female solidarity—most notably through her relationship with Maria Rambeau. Maria plays a crucial role in reaffirming Carol's sense of identity when she is lost in uncertainty. Their friendship functions as a narrative tool to underscore the emotional strength and healing power found in sisterhood, aligning with feminist values of mutual support and collective empowerment.

This portrayal reflects the feminist principle that empowerment is not

solely an individual endeavor, but can be strengthened through relationships built on trust, affirmation, and emotional safety. Maria provides Carol with emotional validation, encourages her to reclaim her memory, and serves as a grounding presence that enables Carol to rebuild her sense of agency. As women who both serve as military pilots—a field often dominated by men—their bond also challenges gendered limitations placed on women's roles in professional and heroic spaces.

Kate Millett's theory highlights how patriarchal structures isolate women and often pits them against one another. In contrast, *Captain Marvel* offers a counter-narrative in which collaboration and sisterhood become sources of power that dismantle the isolating effects of patriarchy. Rather than reinforcing competition between women, the film presents female relationships as integral to personal liberation and collective strength.

By framing Carol's empowerment through the lens of sisterhood, the film suggests that solidarity among women is not only restorative but also revolutionary. Their shared experiences, mutual respect, and unwavering support exemplify a feminist model of empowerment—one that resists the male gaze, defies traditional gender roles, and centers emotional connection as a powerful force for transformation.

4.3. Challenging Gender Stereotypes in the Superhero Genre

The superhero genre has long been dominated by male-centric narratives that frame female characters as subordinate, hyper-sexualized, or emotionally dependent on male leads. *Captain Marvel* (2019) disrupts this pattern by positioning Carol Danvers not only as a central protagonist but also as a fully independent hero who

redefines what it means to be a woman in a superhero film.

This shift reflects Kate Millett's (1970) criticism of patriarchal culture, where media and literature historically position women as passive, decorative, or secondary to male protagonists. In contrast, *Captain Marvel* constructs Carol's identity through agency, resilience, and personal choice—resisting gendered limitations that typically define female characters in the genre. The rejection of sexualized costuming, the absence of romantic subplots, and Carol's emotional independence are cinematic choices that align with Millett's demand for alternative representations of women that dismantle the structures of dominance.

The following sections examine specific aspects of how *Captain Marvel* reconstructs the image of the female superhero—particularly in terms of how Carol Danvers transcends gendered limitations, becomes a role model for younger heroes, and asserts independence free from romantic entanglements.

4.3.1. The Rise of a New Female Hero: Strength Over Appearance

In many mainstream superhero films, female characters are often portrayed through the lens of the male gaze, with emphasis on physical attractiveness, tight-fitting costumes, and supportive rather than central roles. This representation reinforces patriarchal standards that value women more for their appearance than their abilities. However, *Captain Marvel* (2019) challenges this narrative by presenting Carol Danvers as a protagonist whose strength and identity are not defined by visual sexualization, but by functional design and internal power.

Carol's costume, unlike those of earlier female superheroes, is full-body and utilitarian, designed for battle rather than visual appeal. This design shift signifies a rejection of traditional female superhero aesthetics. Moreover, her powers—ranging from energy projection and flight to her binary form—establish her as one of the most powerful figures in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Her decision to change her suit's color from the Kree military scheme to red and blue inspired by the U.S. Air Force symbolizes a reclamation of her identity, autonomy, and Earth-based origins.

Carol's personality—marked by ambition, courage, and resilience—reflects a deeper feminist construction of heroism, where agency and principle outweigh aesthetics. According to Millett's feminist theory, such portrayals subvert patriarchal narratives that traditionally restrict female characters to passive roles. Carol's influence also extends beyond her own story. In *Ms. Marvel*, Kamala Khan is portrayed as deeply inspired by Carol, not for her beauty or romance, but for her strength and independence. This intergenerational admiration reaffirms Carol's status as a role model who redefines what it means to be a female superhero. This portrayal is in line with Chung's (2019) observation on the emergence of intersectional and independent female superheroes, although *Captain Marvel* represents this transition on a cinematic scale rather than in serialized television.

4.3.2. Becoming an Independent Hero Without Romantic Involvement

In contrast to traditional superhero narratives that often define female characters through romantic subplots,

Captain Marvel subverts this convention by presenting Carol Danvers as a protagonist whose development is independent of romantic involvement. Her journey is centered on self-discovery, empowerment, and justice, emphasizing that a woman's strength and purpose need not be anchored in a relationship with a male counterpart.

Carol's interactions with key characters such as Nick Fury and Maria Rambeau are grounded in mutual respect and trust rather than emotional or romantic attachment. Her partnership with Fury, while emotionally significant, remains platonic and professional. The trust she places in him—evidenced by her decision to entrust the Tesseract and the emergency pager—illustrates a bond based on solidarity and shared purpose, not emotional dependency.

The deliberate absence of a romantic storyline in Carol's arc reflects a conscious rejection of patriarchal norms in mainstream media, where female characters are often positioned to support male leads emotionally. By focusing solely on her own growth, values, and mission, Carol reclaims narrative independence. This aligns with Kate Millett's feminist framework, which critiques the cultural subordination of women and calls for narratives that center women's agency without male validation.

Carol Danvers exemplifies a modern female hero who challenges genre expectations. Her independence reinforces the notion that female characters can carry a powerful narrative without relying on traditional romantic tropes—marking a progressive shift in how female empowerment is represented in superhero cinema. Unlike the findings in Tavares' (2022) analysis of *Black Widow*—whose character arc is partially dependent on romantic and

male-associated contexts—Carol Danvers presents a narrative of complete independence.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, *Captain Marvel* (2019) presents Carol Danvers as a powerful embodiment of feminist values in popular media. Her character is not only portrayed as physically strong, but also mentally and emotionally resilient—challenging patriarchal norms that have traditionally shaped female representation in superhero narratives. Through her rejection of manipulation, refusal of male validation, and Complete independence from romantic subplots, Carol Danvers redefines the female superhero archetype.

Her transformation—from a woman subjected to psychological control into an assertive, independent hero—symbolizes the feminist struggle for identity, agency, and liberation. Carol's characterization aligns with Kate Millett's theory of patriarchy as a cultural structure that must be resisted, and her journey reflects this resistance at both individual and structural levels. The film emphasizes that female strength is not limited to physical capability, but also lies in emotional self-awareness, conviction, and self-determination.

Moreover, the film's deliberate avoidance of hypersexualized imagery, the emphasis on functionality over appearance, and its portrayal of female solidarity—especially through Carol's relationship with Maria Rambeau—represent a significant shift in the genre. These elements challenge dominant media narratives that have historically marginalized or objectified women, and instead promote inclusive storytelling centered on empowerment and equality.

This study contributes to the discourse on gender and media by demonstrating how *Captain Marvel* marks a critical evolution in the depiction of women in superhero films. It underscores the potential of popular cinema as a transformative cultural tool in promoting feminist ideals and reshaping societal perceptions of female identity. Future research may continue to examine how emerging superhero films respond to feminist critiques and how they impact audience perceptions of gender roles in broader socio-cultural contexts.

REFERENCES

- Chung, E. (2019). Ms. Marvel: Genre, medium, and an intersectional superhero. *Panic at the Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 1(2), 5–16. https://panicdiscourse.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/5-16_Ms.Marvel.pdf
- Dalimunte, I. W., Hasnida, A., & Ompusunggu, C. E. (2025). Feminism ideology in Harry Bradbeer's Enola Holmes movie script (2020): A critical discourse analysis. *BASIS: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra Inggris*, 4(1), 81–91. <https://ejournal.upbatam.ac.id/index.php/basis/article/view/9960/4338>
- Kent, M. (2016). *Marvel women: Femininity, representation and post feminism in films based on Marvel Comics* (Doctoral dissertation, University of East Anglia). University of East Anglia Research Repository. <https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/64255>
- Irawan, D. (2014). Perempuan dalam film: Perspektif feminisme. *Jurnal Media dan Gender*, 8(1), 1–10.

- Marvel Studios. (2019). *Captain Marvel* [Film]. Marvel Entertainment.
<https://www.marvel.com/movies/captain-marvel>
- Millett, K. (1970). *Sexual politics*. Anchor Books.
- Tavares, A. L. (2022). Marvel-oust women: Black Widow, Scarlet Witch, and the representation of female superheroes. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 55(4), 123–138.
https://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_projects/566/