An exploration of the sexualization of Black Widow in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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**How does Black Widow’s character in the Marvel Cinematic Universe serve to further the patriarchal agenda?**

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# I. INTRODUCTION

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is a media franchise illustrating the lives and adventures of numerous comic book characters initially published by Marvel Studios. Since their inception in the 1930s, superheroes have played a pivotal role in popular culture. This sphere of influence has only strengthened since the release of the first Marvel movie, *Iron Man* (Favreau)*,* in 2008, quickly becoming a multi-billion-dollar industry (Smart). With nearly annual high-budget movie releases, corporate America, specifically Disney, capitalized on consumer familiarity, drastically expanding media reach and increasing the universe’s cultural and commercial influence. As the MCU flourished, the breadth of the audience and the reach of subliminal and conscious messaging have likewise grown.

The character of Black Widow in the Marvel Cinematic Universe is a former Soviet Spy turned superhero for the American Government. Although the audience interacts with Natasha’s story throughout roughly a half dozen MCU films, relevant aspects of her backstory only come to light in the title film *Black Widow* (Shortland)*.* The movie chronicles her abduction and recruitment by the KGB into a female spy program. Taken from her birth mother, she is trained and then slotted into the role of a pre-teen child in Ohio living the typical American life. We learn that this middle-class American existence is a cover for a team of four professional spies embedded by the KGB. Even the Christmas pictures were stylized photo shoots. Ultimately, upon extraction, Natasha grapples with the details of her upbringing, struggling to reconcile her role as a prop with the deep emotional bonds she formed with her adult guardians. The common thread across her appearances in the various films is her carefully cultivated persona of sexuality.

Superhuman characters exploit the subconscious desire to be the hero of the story and the “good guy.” As the characters face challenges of morality, loyalty, and conviction of belief, ultimately overcoming all self-doubt, the audience simultaneously parallels this experience. “The sagas of superheroes bring us out of ourselves and connect us with something larger than ourselves, something more universal. Moreover, in our superheroes’ foibles, struggles, and triumphs, we can see elements of our own foibles and struggles and hope for our triumphs” (Rosenberg and Canzoneri 1). Rather than advancing notions of superheroes, and despite the overlay of science and advanced technology, which is interwoven in the various narratives, the MCU series doubles down on traditional and even regressive norms by gender.

While Black Widow evolves in her character arc, gaining the title of ‘Avenger,’ a term equivalent to superhero, the audience comes to idolize and rever Natasha Romanoff. Genre theory operates under the “foundational assumption that members of a mass-mediated society develop and participate in complex systems of relatively unexamined beliefs” (Kociemba 2). As such, as Natasha’s power is obtained through self-sexualization, audience members might come to perceive that the way in which women can gain power is through a similar manner. “The elements of Natasha’s characterization present several problematic features that are worthy of feminist critique. Natasha’s role in the MCU is significant as she is the most prominent female character in the franchise and because the representation of women in these films both reflects and impacts cultural attitudes towards women” (Barranco 13). Franchise structures, such as the MCU, exist to maximize monetary gain. Action movies are generally regarded as a more simplistic and shallow form of media and thus lack significant analysis of how creators exploit the collective unconscious and empirical expectations. Given the wide-reaching implications of Natasha Romanoff’s character, her role in the MCU merits critical analysis, specifically how she serves to further the patriarchal agenda.

# II. BODY

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## i. WHO IS BLACK WIDOW?

Natasha Romanoff is a superheroine within the Marvel Cinematic who operates under the alias of Black Widow. Her character is deliberately crafted, fulfilling a hypermasculine fantasy through caricatures of sexual dimorphism. Natasha is single-faceted in that her identity highlights “emphasized femininity,” acting as an agent of patriarchal authority. Emphasized femininity is defined as “a conceptualization of the female, which endeavors to preserve hegemonic masculinity through conformity with gender structures” (Hechavarria, Ingram 246). In fulfilling this agenda, the patriarchal unconscious is valorized and reasserted.

Natasha’s superhero name, Black Widow, is sexual in connotation. Female black widow spiders kill the males after mating in what is called sexual cannibalism (Yong). The symbolism and the merging of sex, danger, and a predatory female character are deliberate. Natasha’s red hair is also a highly intentional and symbolic choice. Black widow spiders are identified by red hourglass marking the underside of their abdomens. This marking is bright, in contrast to the rest of their bodies, and is meant to signal danger. The combination of Natasha’s red hair with her black leather combat suit is a visual reference to her spider identity and is intertwined with sex and death. Red is also a visual signal to women and menstruation, which becomes a theme when the audience understands that the final stage of the program is the forced sterilization of the girls.

Furthermore, her Eastern European ethnicity is another component of her exoticism and “sexual tagging.” Eastern European women are increasingly becoming the dominant profile for illicit sexuality through internet pornography (Beecher). As such, they have become sex symbols. According to Freudian psychology, scopophilia, or the act of deriving pleasure through voyeurism, is an instinctive component driving sexuality. “This instinct exists as the erotic base for the pleasure derived from viewing another person as an object” (Hein 806). The effect of Black Widow’s ethnicity is compounded by her physical stature. Although a sexuality-centric representation of Black Widow is not inherently harmful, it is important to consider that it often reflects a patriarchal mindset, unduly influencing the audience (Cragin 176).

For Black Widow to be an effective assassin and superhero, she must be a capable fighter and thereby possesses a level of aggression not considered “attractive” or “womanly.” Thus, to maintain support for this character, she needs to appeal to the audience. The over-sexualization of Black Widow arises as a mechanism to “balance” the gender stereotype equation. The portrayal of her character and emphasis on the physicality of her “womanly features” is used to compensate for her atypical behavior. “With the ‘feminine’ side represented, these characters are not viewed as severely violating expectations of the gender category woman, and thereby avoid denigration” (Rosenberg and Canzoneri 146). As the most prominent female character in the entirety of the MCU, Natasha’s singular representation of women encapsulates all superheroine womanhood.

## ii. COSTUME & SEDUCTION

Natasha’s over-sexualization heavily influences the costume choices made throughout MCU. Her character uniform is a black leather jumpsuit with her breasts highlighted by a deep V-neck. The skin-tight jumpsuit creates an illusion of modesty while simultaneously sexualizing her. Additionally, leather functions as a seduction tool and has increasingly become associated with eroticism.

The theme of using costume to diminish Black Widow’s power recurs in her non-superhero outfits. The cinematography deployed in Marvel underscores that Black Widow’s defining characteristic is her sexuality. The audience is introduced to Natasha in *Iron Man 2* (Favreau) as she interviews to be a legal officer at Stark Enterprises. In the “interview” scene, she wears a tight, cleavage-emphasizing blouse and skin-tight pants, despite the fact that her cover is intended to be a highly educated and trained corporate lawyer. In that field, professional and non-revealing clothes are the norm. As Tony assesses Natasha’s qualifications on his computer, he also comes across “modeling shots” which uniquely feature her in lingerie. Any claim Natasha might have to power and authority based on her education and intelligence is thus immediately undermined.

Additional examples of hypersexualized costume choices include Natasha’s outfit while being tortured and while changing in the car. In the opening scenes of *Avengers* (Whedon), she is seen wearing a short black dress that emphasizes her femininity, reasserting to the audience that while she is an assassin, this does not overshadow her inherent sexuality and ‘womanliness.’ Later in the movie, she changes out of a tightfitting body-con dress in the backseat of a car. Without her expressed consent, the driver attempts to watch through the rearview mirror, another instance of voyeurism and sexual objectification.

Moreover, in *Iron Man 2,* her “interview” and initial meeting with Tony Stark consists of Tony ordering her to take his place in the ring with his sparring partner, regardless of propriety, so that he can watch her as if she were an exotic dancer. He states, “if it pleases the court,” notionally deferring to Natasha. However, the comment is mocking, given the power imbalance. Tony is her employer, and he is effectively highlighting her subservience. The interaction creates the subtext that the power differential is not solely employer/employee but equally gender driven in origin. Natasha plays into the role by acquiescing, bending deeply to enter the ring while the camera lingers on her figure. The camera uses numerous cuts of the sexual gazes between Tony and Natasha, several of which feature Natasha with suggestively parted lips. That none of this employer/potential employee interaction is appropriate is again the subject of a joke with the audience with reference to the potential sexual harassment lawsuit that Natasha represents. As she leaves, Tony says to Ms. Potts, “I want one.” These interactions compound to objectify Natasha further.

## iii. FIGHTING STYLE

Fight scenes across the various Marvel titles underscore gender stereotypes. Natasha has been trained as a spy and assassin since childhood. In the myriad fight scenes where she is central, the fighting is highly stylized and choreographed to emphasize both her sexuality and delicacy. Natasha’s fighting technique extends beyond the gymnastic to the sexual. For example, in *The Avengers,* she disposes of two Chitauri soldiers by riding their shoulders. She overcomes the opponent by wrapping her thighs around their neck, playing into the trope of the femme fatale. A femme fatale is defined as “a hyper-sexualized product of the male gaze, from a fear of female sexuality, and a woman who uses destruction and seduction as her ultimate and only weapon” (Draycott).

Amongst her skills as a spy is that she has been trained by the KGB to leverage societal norms. She is trained to use the guise of a submissive, less intelligent woman on the correct assumption that men will underestimate her. She can and does take advantage of that dynamic to gather information as well as protect herself. Natasha’s power derives from being well-trained and disciplined, hallmarks of the obedience that women are expected to demonstrate. “The powers attributed to female superhero bodies are linked to traditional notions of female power, including manipulation, sexuality, and masquerade (rather than brute physical or muscular strength)” (Lebel 65). The nonlethal tactics Natasha uses to disarm the enemy play on caricatures of what it means to be a woman. As her source of power plays into hegemonic masculinity standards, Natasha Romanoff’s relevance and credibility as an Avenger are undermined.

Fight scenes between Black Widow and enemy combatants are devoid of typical signs of exertion on Natasha’s part. There is little grunting or sound of labored breathing. Despite the extreme focus on Natasha’s body, there are few indications of the consequences of any blows she receives; Natasha’s makeup is never mussed, and her hair is only tousled after fight scenes. In contrast, the male characters often show physical exertion, sweat, bruised and swollen faces, and grimaces of pain. The male fighter engagement is much more rugged. Tony Stark’s post-fight appearance is a striking contrast. Tony, who has never been trained to fight, is somehow a capable warrior with clanking armor, grimacing with effort as he consistently overcomes various villains. This aspect of the films’ texts highlights the hypersexualized culture of women “as actresses must not only be active subjects in fight sequences but also sexualized objects with perfectly made-up faces” (Purse 81).

Female Hollywood leads often fall into the role of either love interest or damsel in distress. Black Widow is neither. She defies these narrow labels, cast as a heroine, and yet her breakthrough from the stereotype is a facade as her co-heroes continually undermine her strength as a “worthy opponent.” In *The Avengers*, Captain America asks if Natasha will “be ok if she falls.” His question is presented as a joke with the audience as if he is a gentleman because he is expressing concern for her welfare. The dialogue is injected in a scene where Black Widow is saving the Avengers through the combination of her intelligence and her strength; she has identified a vulnerability in the opponent's weaponry and is turning it to the Avenger’s advantage. She is both the brains and the brawn behind the strategy. His question presents the man as being in control of the situation and re-relegates Natasha to the “damsel in distress” role at the moment, which should be the peak of the audience’s understanding of her power. In the construct of the interaction between the Avengers, it is telling that he chose to ask this question of her rather than any of his male co-heroes. This scene underscores the gender-based power hierarchies that exist both within the Marvel Cinematic Universe and society as a whole.

## iv. BLACK WIDOW VS OTHER AVENGERS

The Marvel Comic Universe deploys the construct of the intersection of animal and human species in multiple storylines, ranging from Spiderman to Ant-Man, Falcon, and Black Panther. Black Widow is not unique in this respect. However, as noted above, the overtly sexual dimension of this crossover in Natasha Romanoff’s case *is* unique and sets the tone of Natasha’s character development. Her gender consistently sets her apart.

Fundamental to the word “superhero” is some aspect of power that transcends typical human capabilities. MCU male superheroes are equipped with unique superpowers, such as Captain America’s supercharged strength and speed, Falcon’s incredible vision and flight, or Iron Man’s extraordinary intelligence and fighting expertise. In contrast, Black Widow has no amplified attribute. Her incredible fighting skill is still bound by the limits of the human species. Accordingly, although she is an Avenger, she is “lesser” as she lacks this essential facet of being a superhero: compensating through ‘emphasized femininity.’

Many male Avengers are further enabled by incredible additional equipment, whether shields or advanced armor, again drawing the audience to their physicality. Natasha’s accessory is her body. In *Iron Man 2*, Tony Stark becomes Iron Man when he is injured by the very weapons that he has built and which are the foundation of his financial empire. In order to escape his Afghan captors, he builds a suit of armor very similar to those protecting knights of the middle ages. Upon release, he modifies the design with modern, technology-based materials. That armor and the ARC energy source in his heart are the sources of his superpower. When he engages his superpowers, his body is obscured, wrapped in a sheath of Iron. In contrast, Natasha, “in role” as an agent and fighting, is scantily clad. Her human, physical body is more exposed, not less. Typically, as Avengers become more powerful in their story arcs, their costumes become more advanced, and more armor and layers are added. The opposite is true for Black Widow.

In the opening scenes of *The Avengers*, the camera pans to Black Widow tied to a chair in an empty and ominous warehouse. There is a single light shining down on a woman with red hair. The camera moves in to show a closeup of Natasha being slapped in the face. The scene is composed such that Natasha is wearing a small black dress that emphasizes her cleavage, despite the circumstances. Additionally, after being slapped, she is panting, and her chest is heaving in a way that is inherently sexual. This architecture of torture towards women directly contrasts the torture scene that is typical of the action genre fulfilling the vulnerability required of women in a society ruled by hegemonic masculinity. Traditionally, the male takes the torture in silence, brooding, and embodies restrained aggression. Black Widow manipulates her femininity, using her ‘helplessness’ to dissimulate her ability, in contrast to the “action hero’s traditional transformation into greater physical power through their masochistic ability to take punishment like a man” (Kociemba 6). In this scene, the General says, “the famous Black Widow,” while the camera zooms in on his face as he smirks condescendingly, then, “And she turns out to be simply another pretty face” (Whedon), emphasizing the overriding importance of beauty. One of the goons grabs her face and opens her mouth in a suggestive manner while Natasha looks “uncomfortable” and in pain. Normally in torture scenes, the character has to overcome a significant physical challenge. In this scene, however, they make a mockery of a woman’s capacity to withstand and endure by simply holding her face.

In the simplistic gender stereotypes of Marvel, there is also very limited focus on the consequences of the violence and action that is central to the movies, both physical and emotional. The heroism that is portrayed is physical endurance of pain, not emotional resilience. That is certainly true of the male characters. That prioritization of the physical over the emotional is doubly impactful on a female character like Natasha. Her pain at the death of her mother, the loss of her childhood and her innocence, and the loss of her ability to have children based on the forced sterilization of the program are not surfaced. Natasha’s heroism in overcoming these severe emotional traumas is not lionized the way the physical feats are. She is effectively a heroine with a one-dimensional lens.

## v. MOTHERHOOD & MONSTROUS-FEMININE

The genre of superheroes objectively favors the patriarchy, deriding the concept of motherhood. Centered around a predominantly negative narrative, the depiction of maternal figures contradicts society’s parallel romanticization of motherhood. The contradictory “rejection of the maternal is tantamount to an acceptance of patriarchal authority” (Brown 83-84). Female superheroes typically fall into one of four tropes as a balance is struck between motherhood and the preservation of a fantasy that fulfills hegemonic masculinity. According to Jeffery Brown, in his article, *Supermoms? Maternity and the monstrous-feminine in superhero comics*, the four maternal narratives in the superhero genre are:

“(1) the superheroine chooses to give up her child to continue her career

(2) she has to give up her heroic calling to assume motherhood

(3) she repeatedly puts her child at risk because she continues her adventures,

(4) mothers are cast as purely monstrous because they are inherently evil, neglectful or absent.”

Black Widow’s role in the MCU substantiates Brown’s claim as she perpetuates the first trope of superhuman maternalism. Furthermore, her infertility undercuts both her position as an Avenger and a woman; she no longer embodies traditional femininity, and the audience may presume to take her moral high ground as well.

A facet of Natasha Romanoff’s training by the KBG is a forced hysterectomy. It is revealed in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon) that she was sterilized to prevent unwanted distractions and to maximize her assassin capabilities. This sterilization functions in a plethora of ways. Firstly, Natasha’s costume emphasizes her sexualization, and pregnancy would disrupt the cultivated fantasy. There is also commercial consideration as pregnant, Natasha loses her sex appeal, becoming less profitable. Secondly, the contradictory aspects of her feminine identity (cultural appreciation of motherhood and emphasized femininity) are ridiculed, acting as a vehicle to disseminate the patriarchal unconscious. Black Widows are trained within an academy called the “Red Room.” This historical allusion to a menstruation hut disparages the Widows’ inability to have a period. Although Natasha’s narrative claims that maternity is deplorable, the movie simultaneously castigates her sterility. The genre’s ridicule of motherhood only exists as a standard for heroines. The mundane female is celebrated, as shown when presenting Clint’s wife, whose pregnancy falls within the socially acceptable definition of motherhood.

Black Widow’s struggle with her identity reaches its climax in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. She reveals her forced sterilization by confessing, “You know what my final test was in the Red Room? They sterilized me, said it was one less thing to worry about. You think you’re the only monster on the team?” In calling herself a monster, Natasha dehumanizes herself, correlating her inability to have children as the defining characteristic of womanhood and, thereby, her own humanity. Her only worth to society is being a mother. This presents a reductionist definition of what it means to be a woman to the audience.

The superhero genre valorizes parenthood differently in accordance with gender. While motherhood is denounced, there is a favorable perspective pertaining to paternity and its pietistic nature. Clint Barton, who operates under the alias of Hawkeye, is able to overcome every obstacle to parenthood that arises as a superhero. This highlights the genre’s elevation of paternity and preference for hegemonic masculinity. Clint provides his family with a home in the countryside, is not an absentee father (as assumed by warm interactions with his family), and protects them from the consequences of his job through a deal made with Nick Fury. In contrast to the disparagement of the maternal, male heroes, whether they are literal or symbolic fathers, often provide mentorship in the form of an infallible patriarch and serve as an identifying symbol for younger viewers. The audience is indoctrinated with a subconscious preference toward the hegemonic masculine realm.

The ascribed value of paternal parenthood is reinforced by the events surrounding the death of Black Widow. In *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo and Russo)*,* Natasha and Hawkeye fight to self-sacrifice and save the world. As they argue, Hawkeye says, “Tell my family I love them,” to which Natasha replies, “You tell them yourself.” She follows this up with an impressive flip over his head to prevent him from moving forward toward the cliff, protecting both Hawkeye and his family. This scene demonstrates the prioritization and hierarchy that exists between parental figures.

vi. COUNTERARGUMENT

There is an argument that the MCU serves an important societal purpose—escapism. This is a purpose that stories, whether written or filmed, have served for eons. The reasoning would further elaborate that no one actually believes another person is transformed into Ant-Man or Hawkeye, so what harm is there in an equally outlandish transformation of Natasha Romanoff into Black Widow? The logic continues that the MCU narrative is a fantasy from start to finish, and if that fantasy is tinged with a bit of over-the-top sexuality, what is the harm? While this logic, like most compelling arguments, has elements of truth, the flaw is in the pervasive nature of this stereotyping, its broad reach given modern film distribution, and the imitation of the stereotype that further amplifies the impact. If a few scenes were sexy, or if Natasha’s character’s power were allowed to emerge and then be equivalent to the male characters, this argument would be more persuasive. If other films did not see the commercial success of MCU and co-opt the mechanisms of reductive sexuality, one could rationalize that the impact of the stereotype is contained and not damaging to girls and women en mass. Unfortunately, it is the very success of MCU that renders this counterargument flimsy.

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# III. CONCLUSION

Superheroes are, by definition, aspirational. We often are first exposed to them as children, where archetypes are formed in our impressionable minds. To wit, the association is so strong that many children regularly “dress up” as their favorite character in their day-to-day lives. As MCU’s highest profile female character, Natasha Romanoff, sets a precedent in terms of constructing the ideal and exemplary woman. Black Widow is inextricably associated with a reductionist definition of femininity, imbuing audience members with the patriarchal unconscious. While it might be tempting to say a single character’s impact is limited, that belies the pervasiveness of Natasha’s sexualization and the omnipresence of the MCU commercial empire, which has a reach of billions. How many girls and women have now internalized that their looks take primacy to their intelligence and creativity, that their principal value is in playing a supporting cast role to men, and that motherhood is their ultimate contribution to society?

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