

Constructing Good and Evil: Analysis of Women Protagonists and Antagonists in High Fantasy Films

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Abstract

The role of films in constructing and reinforcing reality has been in discussion for decades. Films feed information regarding everything, from basic understanding of the world to social institutions. The gender roles as specified by the society has been reinforced by films. Studies also state that films aid in the construction of stereotypes of gender (Steinke, 2005).

One of the most popular genres, fantasy films, have created huge fan base globally. They have driven box office collections to a pinnacle which the movies of other genres have not achieved (Thompson, 2003). Though created in a fantasy world, these films cohere with the existing gender constructions. This paper tries to analyse the physical features and behavioural traits of primary women characters in high fantasy films. The paper attempts to analyse, interpret and compare the physical features, tone of voice and behavioural traits of both protagonists and antagonists.

Keywords: Fantasy Films, BSRI, Gender, Femininity.

From the pre-industrial eras to the contemporary period, the society and culture has prescribed norms for men and women in the form of gender roles which are often preserved and strengthened continually by prevailing institutions and socializing agents. The past two centuries saw paradigms and theories emerge, some to explain the need in maintaining the patriarchal society and some to challenge the existing male dominated order. The division of roles on the basis of gender is increasingly becoming dysfunctional in the twentieth and twenty first centuries when women have become an important part of the paid labour force (Lindsey, 1997; Dunn & Skaggs, 2006). Yet, the current norm is to appreciate the “superwoman” who achieves accolades in career without diminishing her attention in the household work (Diekmann & Goodfriend, 2006).

The concept of gender is largely associated with the terms, masculinity and femininity. These terms express the expectations a particular culture has in the

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behaviour of men and women (Morawski, 1985; Maccoby, 1998; Basu, 2010; Wharton, 2012). Researchers have tried to formulate characteristics ascribed by the society to define masculinity and femininity through several studies (Bem, 1974; Basu, 2010). Butler (1990) considers gender as a “performance” and not a fact. The society punishes its members who do not adhere to the performance of their gender. Thus gender is constructed and the construction convinces the “necessity” and “naturalness” of gender (Butler, 1990).

Gender and Film

Media images provide young women and adolescent girls the assumption that acceptance, recognition and popularity can be only achieved through “acting feminine” (Brown & Gilligan, 1993). This makes them choose the gender roles which are culturally and traditionally accepted (Steinke, 2005). Researches show that the endorsement of thin and skinny body figure has resulted in unhealthy eating disorders in girls and women since they get discontented with their body (Smith & Cook, 2008).

Movies have a certain set of accepted codes and conventions to narrate a story and to promote ideologies and perspectives of the society. The film makers of genre films employ a formula tried and tested over time without changing the overall pattern of the narrative and characterisations, the genre carried over time (Dutt, 2013).

One of the most popular genre films is fantasy films. In spite of the mixed responses of the researchers regarding the seriousness of the genre, fantasy movies have always attracted audience to the theatres pushing the box office records to a height not much attained by the movies of other genres (Thompson, 2003). The repeated portrayal of femininity and masculinity in the traditional roles and behavioural pattern is present in fantasy genre as in any other genre and is made to look natural.

The “natural” aspects of femininity and masculinity are derived from history when industrialization necessitated women to be at home taking care of the nuclear family which was a spinoff of industrial revolution (Fiske, 2010). Thus, the typical qualities ascribed by the society to women and men became “natural” and media as a socializing agent reinforce this myth through its codes and conventions. The process of naturalization is so subtle and subliminal that the controlling and the controlled groups do not challenge the existing order.

The movie images naturalize the myth of femininity as romantic, emotional and committed, shy, modest and innocent and masculinity in terms of strength, power, intelligence, ambition, assertiveness, and competitiveness (Connell, 2009; Milestone & Meyer, 2012).

Most of the strong-willed women are portrayed as wicked and evil. Creed (1993) called them monstrous feminine and indicated that the possibility of the fear

generated by these strong women on the male dominance would have provoked the male dominated society to depict them as wicked villains (Creed, 1993) and creating a need to destruct them (Lopez, 2010; (Fowkes, 2010). An analysis of 25 fantasy films of 1990 to 2010 revealed that many characters portrayed in animus roles are being punished for their roles (Lopez, 2010).

The signs and symbols encompass costume and fashion thereby creating meanings and values for them (Calefato, 2004). The costumes have a huge role in depicting stereotypical men and women (Dam, 2014). The characters reflect their identities through the physical body, dress, cosmetics and hairstyles. The body being a semiotic system, meanings and connotations are assigned to each character through the “signs on the body” (Calefato, 2004)

This paper tries to analyse the physical features and behavioural characteristics of primary women characters in high fantasy films. The paper compares these features of both protagonists and antagonists considering the characteristics specified in Bem’s Sex Role Inventory (BSRI). Bem (1974) has identified and indexed characteristics which society considers as masculine, feminine and androgynous.

Methodology

The research utilizes descriptive content analysis to find the depiction of women characters. The high fantasy films released worldwide from 2000 to 2014 were considered for the study. The films which carried rating more than six in IMDB was selected as the sample. Twelve characters were selected for study including seven protagonists and five antagonists. The characters selected were Eowyn, Arwen, Tauriel, Hermione Granger, Ginny Weasley, Bellatrix Lestrange, Lady Galadriel, Yvaine, Lamia, Ditchwater Sal, Empusa and Mormo.

Physical traits including the physical structure, height, complexion, colour, length and style of hair, clothing and accessories, colour and texture of the clothes, facial features including the shape of the eyebrow, shape and colour of the eyes, shape of the nose and forehead, makeup were considered in the descriptive content analysis.

Some of the typical masculine and feminine characteristics specified in Bem’s Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) were used as variables to code the personality traits (Bem, 1974; Basu, 2010; Basu, Dasgupta, Chakraborty, & Basu, 2012). Affectionate, cheerful, childlike, gentle, gullible, being loyal, soft spoken, sympathetic, being flatterable, understanding, tender, being shy, warm, yielding and sensitive to others’ needs were considered as qualities associated with femininity while leadership ability, aggressiveness, forcefulness, dominance, independency, being individualistic, assertiveness, competitiveness, ability to make decisions easily, willingness to take a

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stand, willingness to take risks, being a strong personality and athletic were related to masculinity. Androgynous character traits according to Bem like being friendly, helpful, jealous, conscientious, tactful, unsystematic were also taken.

Analysis and Interpretation

The protagonists under study have similar physical features. They are lean, fair and tall. Most of them have narrow eyebrows. Arwen and Galadriel have almond shaped eyes. Arwen, being the lover of the hero, like all heroines of the fantasy film genre, is given an unnatural physical beauty. Her elven ears are not displayed except in the last scene since they are different from normal human ears and could affect her beauty. She has long neck. Her deep red lips draw attention due to the contrast it makes with her fair complexion. All these qualify her as a very beautiful woman.

All protagonists have long flowing hair. This adds to their beauty. Except Tauriel, all protagonists have blonde hair. The red flaming hair of Tauriel resonates with her character traits. The hair is given significant place in all the shots in which Galadriel is depicted. Hair is a mark of beauty and attractiveness. Yvaine is shown with flowing silvery hair which resonates with her silvery dress.

The facial features of the protagonists are stressed in the movies. All of them have red lips and fair skin. These features are enhanced if the protagonists are the love interests of the hero.

Nude makeup is also associated with goodness which contrasts with the heavy makeup worn by evil female characters (Dam, 2014). Evil and ugly characters are often depicted with broad and curved eyebrows.

In contrast with the protagonists, the antagonists are shown as either bald headed or with untidy hairstyle. All of them are shown with large yellow teeth and reddish-brown tongue. They are all shabbily dressed in dark colours, mostly in black.

Bellatrix is tall and has curly black hair. She is thin and apparently beautiful in her early years. She displays quite an immense and latent sexual desire towards Voldemort by staying close to him. She is depicted wearing black gown. She has long sleeves detached from the gown but tied to the top with strings. The strings also attach the two sides of the sleeves together revealing the inside of her arms and armpits. The black colour associated with her connotes the wickedness in her.

Empusa wears a black colour dress with shades of dark red and Mormo wears a black dress with shades of blue. They both are bald headed and cover it with wigs. Empusa's wig is dark red in colour and Mormo's wig is in dark orange colour. Dark red stands for vigour and anger. It could also be representing the special magic power of Empusa which is generating fire. Dark orange stands for deceit.

Ditchwater Sal also shown as fat, old and ugly. She has yellow teeth and a large forehead. She is mostly shown in a ragged and shabby red long woollen gown. Her hair is also dark orange in colour. She wears three beaded chains resembling a nomad. She looks shabby and ugly with her dishevelled hair and dress.

All antagonists are depicted as old. In the movie, Stardust the whole narrative swirls around the attempts by the antagonists to become young again.

Tone of Voice and Voice Volume

The depiction of women characters also depends on the tone of the voice they use in rendering the dialogues and the voice volume they use. These two variables were coded for each character.

The primary women protagonists and the percentage of shots in which various tones of voice used shown below

Name of the Character	Eowyn	Arwen	Tauriel	Hermione	Ginny	Galadriel	Yvaine
Tone of Voice							
Assertive	5.56	5.88	24.39	8.62	0	0	0
Cold	0	0	9.76	0	0	0	0
Submissive	13.89	5.89	2.44	6.9	0	0	1.19
Accusing	2.78	5.89	4.88	8.62	0	0	23.81
Authoritative	0	0	24.39	0	0	0	0
Calm	0	0	7.32	6.9	0	17.39	14.29
Quavering	16.67	0	4.88	50	60	17.39	3.57
Toneless	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tight	0	0	0	0	0	4.35	0
Thick	8.33	29.41	0	8.62	20	0	0
Silvery	38.89	11.76	9.76	0	0	30.43	52.38
Husky	2.78	35.29	12.2	0	0	0	0
Brittle	11.11	5.89	0	10.35	20	0	4.76
Appealing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

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The primary women antagonists and the percentage of shots in which various tones of voice used shown below

Name of the Character	Bellatrix	Lamia	Ditchwater Sal	Empusa	Mormo
Tone of Voice					
Assertive	0	19.78	4054	40	33.33
Cold	0	12.09	5.41	30	5.56
Submissive	50	0	8.11	0	0
Accusing	0	4.4	10.81	30	16.67
Authoritative	0	63.74	24.32	0	44.44
Calm	0	0	5.41	0	0
Quavering	50	0	0	0	0
Toneless	0	0	0	0	0
Tight	0	0	0	0	0
Thick	0	0	0	0	0
Silvery	0	0	0	0	0
Husky	0	0	0	0	0
Brittle	0	0	5.41	0	0
Appealing	0	0	0	0	0

The protagonists are seldom portrayed with assertive and authoritative tones of voice. The exception here is Tauriel who is a warrior elf. The love interests of the heroes mostly possess husky or silvery tones. At the same time, antagonists are portrayed with assertive and authoritative tones of voice. The exception here is Bellatrix. But she is shown talking only to Voldemort whom she adores.

The stereotypical ascription of society on the tones of voice of women is reflected in these characters. The protagonists, especially heroines are depicted to have the tones which society adores and expect in women. The tones which society ascribes to men are often found in the antagonists. This again follows many previous studies which states that the characters who deviate from the societal prescription either suffer death or punishment in the end or are monstrous feminine who should be eliminated for the betterment of society.

Voice Volume

The primary women protagonists and the percentage of shots in which voice volume used is shown below

Name of the Character	Eowyn	Arwen	Tauriel	Hermione	Ginny	Galadriel	Yvaine
Voice Volume							
Whispering	38.89	76.47	19.51	18.64	0	43.48	7.41
Soft	36.11	5.88	24.39	27.12	80	39.13	55.56
Normal	11.11	17.65	51.22	35.59	0	17.39	16.67
Loud	13.89	0	2.43	18.64	20		16.67
Shouting	0	0	2.43	0	0	0	0

The primary women antagonists and the percentage of shots in which voice volume used is shown below

Name of the Character	Bellatrix	Lamia	Ditchwater Sal	Empusa	Mormo
Voice Volume					
Whispering	50	3.3	0	0	0
Soft	50	60.44	5.88	20	0
Normal	0	14.29	32.35	60	33.33
Loud	0	21.98	47.06	20	66.67
Shouting	0	0	14.71	0	0

The voice volume of the heroines is mostly soft and whispering. The other protagonists show all variations in the voice volume. The volume of the voice of antagonists is similar to the protagonists.

Personality Traits

The personality traits of each character were coded with reference to BSRI. The traits in each shot were noted and number of shots in which these traits appeared were counted. The appearance of these behavioural traits even in a single shot shows that the character possesses the particular trait. So, the regularity or inconsistency in the appearance of the traits was not be considered. The number of shots were noted to find the appearance of the traits in the characters.

The primary women protagonists and the percentage of shots in which behavioural traits are depicted is shown below.

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Name of the Character	Eowyn	Arwen	Tauriel	Hermione	Ginny	Galadriel	Yvaine
Traits							
Affectionate	17.71	28.57	10.37	21.39	27.27	14.63	28.43
Gentle	7.43	10.71	1.83	5.20	21.82	2.44	15.31
Loyal	3.43	3.57		4.05			
Sensitive to others' needs	5.14	5.36	4.88	8.09	10.91	24.39	2.39
Soft Spoken	5.14	16.07		10.41		12.20	4.58
Sympathetic	6.29		1.83	6.36	10.91	4.88	1.59
Understanding				9.25	9.09	2.44	
Tender	9.14	12.5			7.27		1.99
Warm	4	8.93		5.78	3.64	7.32	3.78
Yielding	5.14	3.57	3.05	1.16	3.64	2.44	3.18
Acts as a leader	0	0	3.05	0	0	0	0
Aggressive	0	0	29.27	0	0	0	0
Assertive	0	0	6.71	0	0	0	0
Athletic	0	0	6.10	0	0	0	0
Dominant	0	0	4.88	0	0	4.88	0
Independent	0	0	4.27	0	0	0	0
Self sufficient	0	0	1.83	0	0	0	0
Strong Personality	0	0	4.88	3.18	0	4.88	0
Defends own beliefs	4	7.14	5.49	2.31	0	0	0
Willing to take a stand	5.14	0	5.49	2.60	0	12.20	0
Willing to take risks	8	0	5.49	13.58	0	0	0
Friendly	4	0	0	4.046	0	0	0
Happy	6.29	3.57	0	1.45	0	2.44	0
Helpful	9.14	0	2.44	0	5.46	4.88	2.38

Eowyn is depicted as an affectionate character. Nine of the feminine traits defined by Bem could be found in the personality of Eowyn. Three masculine traits and three androgynous traits as defined by Bem also find a place in the personality of this character. Thus Eowyn is more or less constructed according to the feminine qualities defined by the society. She is pictured in the movie as lonely and disappointed, the latent meanings indicate her as terrified and dependent. This is also different from her depiction in the book where she is described by Tolkien as courageous.

Arwen is more feminine according to BSRI. She has eight feminine traits as described by Bem, only one masculine trait and one androgynous trait. Thus, most of her personality is skewed towards the feminine side. Arwen is the love interest of the hero while Eowyn is rejected by him. This also adheres to the previous findings regarding the association between society prescribed femininity and the achievement of one's heart's desire.

The character trait of Tauriel is skewed towards masculinity with six feminine character attributes, eleven masculine attributes and one androgynous attribute within BSRI scale. Tauriel, being a warrior, is shown aggressive during the fights. She is also depicted as strong and does not possess the delicateness attributed usually to women. This character is a deviation from the conventional portrayal of women

The personality of Hermione as portrayed in the film reflect feminine attributes. Ten of the feminine traits listed in BSRI are found in the character features of Hermione. She also has four masculine traits and two androgynous traits as enlisted in BSRI. Hermione is quite different in the film than described in the book. An extremely intelligent and hard-working girl, Hermione is exceptionally brilliant and is highly academically inclined. Yet, the depiction of the character follows the traditional portrayal of women. She is not depicted as fighting at the battle which is in contrast with the book. In the book, she is good at combat and aids Harry in challenging situations. She is often a silent observer in the movie providing help to Harry and Ron. In most of the shots depicted, Hermione is positioned between Harry and Ron. This subliminally suggest that how much ever talented the girls are, society expects them to be protected by men.

Ginny Weasley exhibits feminine personality traits in almost all shots. She does not show any of the masculine traits as suggested in BSRI. One androgynous trait is depicted by her. Being the heroine of Harry, she is depicted as feminine. The absence of any of the masculine traits in her portrayal shows that the heroine is constructed in such a way that she adheres to the feminine traits prescribed by the society.

Lady Galadriel is also portrayed as feminine traits governing her character. She is shown to possess three masculine traits and two androgynous traits. The stress and reinforcement of feminine traits is done through the portrayal of Galadriel.

Yvaine is the most feminine of all women characters under consideration, when coded using BSRI. There are no masculine traits found in this character. There are two androgynous traits as indexed in BSRI. Yvaine is also the only female character who is portrayed as gullible. She is also portrayed with other feminine characteristics indexed in BSRI as childlike, cheerful and shy.

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The primary women antagonists and the percentage of shots in which behavioural traits are depicted is shown below.

Name of the Character	Bellatrix	Lamia	Ditchwater Sal	Empusa	Mormo
Traits					
Acts as a leader	0	14.33	0	0	0
Aggressive	29.09	26.71	21.42	23.88	23.75
Ambitious	0	6.84	10.71	10.44	11.25
Assertive	5.46	5.53	10.71	7.46	5
Competitive	0	0	3.57	0	0
Athletic	0	0	0	0	2.5
Dominant	7.27	8.46	7.14	13.43	16.25
Forceful	0	5.86	13.09	23.88	18.75
Independent	7.27	9.44	4.76	0	0
Individualistic	0	3.90	8.33	0	0
Make decisions easily	0	2.60	0	0	0
Self sufficient	3.64		7.14	0	0
Strong Personality	0	1.30		0	0
Defends own beliefs	0		3.57	1.49	0
Willing to take a stand	0	5.86	4.76	5.97	7.5
Willing to take risks	5.46	9.12	2.38	13.43	12.5
Jealous	0	0	0	0	2.5
Tactful	0	0	2.38	0	0

None of the feminine traits suggested by the BSRI is present in the personality of Bellatrix. All traits exhibited by this character corresponds to the masculine attributes in the BSRI scale.

Lamia, the main antagonist in the film Stardust, has only the traits which indicate masculinity in BSRI. She does not show feminine or androgynous traits. Ditchwater Sal also has only masculine traits in her behavioural platter. She is not depicted as exhibiting any of the feminine traits. Like the other women antagonists in the films, she also suffers death in the end. She has one androgynous quality too. Yet, her character is mostly driven by the masculine traits as listed out in the BSRI.

The character Empusa is also constructed with masculine traits. The personality of Empusa does not reflect any of the feminine traits enlisted in BSRI. The femininity accepted and desired by the society is absent in her character. Mormo is stout and has some masculine characteristics in her physique too. She does not have any of the feminine traits in her behaviour. She shows only the traits which define masculinity as prescribed by the society.

This is a subtle method of reinforcing the femininity in good characters. Those who deny the character attributes prescribed by the society are depicted as antagonist. In other words when women antagonists are constructed, they are ascribed masculine qualities so that the spectators unconsciously learn that deviations from the accepted behavioural pattern is not accepted. These 'masculine' antagonists are at the end punished by death. Thus, the movies reinforce that, to be accepted by the society a woman should possess the feminine qualities and limit the masculine traits in her character.

None of the women characters possess the qualities of being analytical or self-reliant. These are two masculine traits indexed in the BSRI. The character traits follow a particular pattern. The woman protagonists show feminine traits and a few masculine attributes, mainly defending one's beliefs and willingness to take risks. Some of them also has a strong personality to their credit. A good mixture of feminine and masculine traits is seen in Tauriel.

The women antagonists possess masculine characteristics and do not own feminine traits. Interestingly, the behavioural characteristics of the heroines of the films skew more towards femininity than any other character. They are constructed as the epitome of female qualities and somehow the masculine traits are absent from their behaviour. This sends a message especially to the girls that to win the heart of the heroes one needs to fit into the character traits as prescribed by the society. The stress given on being gentle, tender, soft spoken, warm, understanding and yielding are to be noted. Thus the society and its institutions ascribe certain characteristic features to women and men which should be obeyed. This is reinforced by these films.

Discussion and Conclusion

The portrayal of femininity in fantasy films still adheres to the usual representation of gender roles. Various aspects are set out in order to emphasise the beauty in the women protagonists. The portrayal of the love interests of the heroes does not account for anything other than projecting the facial beauty. Thus, a deliberate attempt using the various elements of film is made to depict the women characters as desirable to men. Beauty is equated with goodness of character. The female antagonists are shown as ugly and old emphasising the importance of beauty.

Protagonist women are subliminally structured as passive. The women who adhere to the feminine traits defined by the society are portrayed as protagonists and life is shown to be happy for them ever after. The deviance from the desirable feminine characteristics of women antagonists is worth noting. The women who venture out alone and take decisions with their will are projected as antagonists. The women antagonists also have those personality traits which are being projected as masculine

by the society. Thus, it could be construed that women who possess the qualities subscribed for men are treated as antagonists.

Women antagonists are also shown to be threatening to men. The concept of monstrous feminine is stressed through the portrayal of these antagonists. They venture out and is ready to destroy and harm men. These women are shown more powerful than men. In short, the message conveyed by these films is that good women are always with their men. However, bad and wretched women do not adhere to the rules prescribed for women by the society. As a result of this they get punishment and, in these films, mostly in the form of death. The films also warn boys subliminally to be careful about wandering women who are alone. They can bring them harm at any time and any place.

The messages thus disseminated create a lot of impressions in young minds. Girls try to look beautiful and young always. They also try to be thin like the women protagonists of these films. The deviance from the expected behavioural roles can create stress in the minds of girls. The boys are also influenced by the femininity thus exhibited. They consider the deviance from the usual feminine roles and traits as obnoxious in women. They expect all women to possess these traits and behave accordingly.

The naturalisation of femininity through these filmic elements generates unconscious acceptance of it. Femininity should not be considered as a synonym for weakness and dependence. The negative attributes which adhere to the stereotype should also disappear from the films eventually. Though fantasy films have narrative based on fictional characters, the messages they convey are taken into real lives by the audiences. The depiction of femininity is done through the elements and is subliminally transferred to the young generations. It is made so subtle that they accept it as natural and do not question it.

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