

Empowerment and Gender Dynamics in Wonder Woman: A Feminist Analysis
Annabelle Mathilda Karsum¹, Aubrey Jemima Tambunan², Benaiya Tristan Jacobus³,
Emmanuel Tan⁴

English Literature: Literary Criticism,

Boanerges: Makarios Education Journal

Email: annabelle.mathilda.karsum@sekolahmakarios.id,
aubrey.jemima.tambunan@sekolahmakarios.id, benaiya.tristan.jacobus@sekolahmakarios.id,
emmanuel.tan@sekolahmakarios.id

*"One who oppresses the poor to increase his wealth
and one who gives gifts to the rich—both come to poverty."
- Proverbs 22:16 (NIV)*

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the 2017 film *Wonder Woman* through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to explore how the narrative challenges patriarchal norms and redefines women's roles in society. Using a feminist lens, the analysis highlights Diana's experiences as she navigates contrasting gender expectations between Themyscira and patriarchal London. The study produces three key findings: **1)** Diana's resistance to restrictive social roles and clothing illustrates Butler's view that gender is performed rather than innate; **2)** her alienation within patriarchal London reflects the instability of gender identity when confronted with rigid societal norms; and **3)** the solidarity between Diana and other women underscores Butler's emphasis on collective resistance against oppressive structures. Ultimately, *Wonder Woman* emerges as a cultural text that embodies feminist ideals, inspiring new perspectives on empowerment, identity, and the reimagining of gender roles in modern society.

Keywords: *Wonder Woman, gender performativity, feminism, Judith Butler, empowerment, patriarchy*

INTRODUCTION

Wonder Woman stands as a powerful symbol of feminist and the evolving society. As a symbol of strength, equality and justice, inspiring generations to rethink the role and power of

women in a world that keeps trying to achieve the equality of men and women. Wonder Woman being one of the most famous female superhero figures holds an important part in a lot of young girls' growth. Her demeanor subtly underscores the capacity for female leadership and its consequential influence on those within her sphere. Similar research has been done by Hope Abel, written in the journal "Feminism and the Female Superhero: Gender in Wonder Woman", the research talks about women's sexualization, discriminations, and stereotypes that can be seen throughout the Wonder Woman's comic book franchise and the movies, the difference with this analysis is that ours highlight more on how Diana breaks through the gender barrier, turning around gender expectations and proving how women are equally powerful. This analysis explores deeper on how the 2017 film Wonder Woman challenges the expectations of what society has on women.

"Wonder Woman" is a 2017 action/adventure superhero film produced by Warner Bros, DC Films, Atlas Entertainment, and cruel and unusual films based on the DC Comics character. Wonder Woman is the fourth movie of the DC Extended Universe, and also a spin-off to Batman vs Superman: Dawn of Justice in 2016. The main characters include Wonder Woman (*Gal Gadot*), Stever Trevor (*Chris Pine*), Hyppolyta (*Connie Nielsen*), Antiope (*Robin Wright*), Erich Ludendorff (*Danny Huston*), Patrick Morgan (*David Thewlis*), and Dr. Maru (*Elena Anaya*). This movie received several awards and recognition, including AARP's Movies for Grownups awards for the Reader's Choice poll, American Film Institute Awards for top ten films of the year, Dragon Awards for best science fiction or fantasy movie, Empire Awards for best Sci-Fi/fantasy, Hugo awards for best dramatic presentation, MTV Movie and TV Awards for best fight, and many more.

The movie Wonder Woman tells the story of Diana, the daughter of Queen Hippolyta who is raised on a hidden island from the world called Themyscira which is the home to the Amazons. Diana was raised to be a perfect fighter and the soon-to-be queen of Amazons just like her mother. She was born and raised unaware of the conflict and the suffering in the outside world. She was clueless and didn't know anything about the world outside of her home until she met a pilot named Steve Trevor who crashed near the island and brought news of the great war raging beyond their shores. Soon Diana learned that the world she thought she knew about so well ended up being a false imagination. This was Diana's wake-up call to show the world her power and also the beginning of her journey from her upbringing on the hidden island of Themyscira, to her emergence as a powerful warrior and superhero.

Through a conscientious and thorough analysis on Diana's character development and the film's exploration of gender dynamics, this analysis set forth that Wonder Woman emerges as an

influential figure both as a fictional character advocating for empowerment on both personal and societal levels.

“Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.” (Butler, J, 1990). Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity. Feminism is not only about the knowledge of the gender gap but also about the idea of bridging the gender gap. This includes promoting the equal rights and opportunities of both genders in all areas of life including education, labor market, and political representation. *“The marketing and production of Wonder Woman reflect broader gendered expectations in Hollywood, where female-led action films must negotiate risk, bankability, and the challenge of the male-dominated blockbuster landscape”* (Donoghue, 2019). Therefore, we link the movie Wonder Woman with feminist theory owing to the fact that this film shows a form of female empowerment and breaks down various stereotypes of society and their views on women. *“The portrayal of Diana Prince exemplifies gender hybridity, enabling her to succeed in traditionally male domains while challenging the masculine/feminine dichotomy”* (Yong & Stallings, 2022). This analysis wants to criticize society's view of women, where society expects women to act in accordance with certain norms and expectations and women have limitations in doing the things they like and want to do. It also highlights how the Feminist movement is able to reach out and influence culture by crashing traditional gender norms and standing up for gender equality and women’s rights.

This movie shows Diana’s mission and how she ventures into the world of men. This movie portrays how she is able to experience both the wonders and horrors of humanity. Alongside Steve and a team of allies, Diana moves to the front line and confronts the brutality of war, battles against formidable enemies, discovers her true power and finds her destiny as Wonder Woman. Overall “Wonder Woman” (2017) tells a story of courage, compassion, and also the fight for justice. This movie shows the importance of standing up for what is right and also having courage and believing in oneself even in the situation of seemingly impossible moments.

Binary opposition

Female	Male
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Diana shows that despite being a Woman who oftentimes being overlooked shows how she can do many things ● Obligated to unquestioningly obey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Often times shows a patriarchal attitudes towards women and constantly underestimating what a women can do ● Holds authorities and order expects everyone to compliance

METHOD

This study employs Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity as the primary analytical framework to examine Wonder Woman (Jenkins, 2017). Butler (1990) argues that gender is not a fixed identity but a performance constructed through repeated social practices. This theoretical lens is applied to Diana's characterization and narrative trajectory, particularly in how she challenges traditional expectations of femininity and redefines women's roles in a patriarchal context.

The analysis not limited draws on key scenes and dialogue, but also the analyze the cinematography as visual storytelling used in movies, such as the cameraworks, sounds, lightings; the warning "*Be careful in the world of men, Diana, they do not deserve you*" (Jenkins, 2017), to illustrate how the film critiques systemic gender inequality. Diana's actions, choices, and relationships are interpreted as performative acts that destabilize conventional gender binaries and foreground women's capacity for agency and leadership.

Additionally, Butler's emphasis on solidarity among women informs the interpretation of Diana's alliances, underscoring the collective dimension of resistance against oppressive structures. Through this approach, the film is analyzed not merely as a superhero narrative but as a cultural text that embodies and enacts Butler's concept of gender performativity.

DISCUSSION

In a medium shot set within a stylish twentieth-century boutique, Diana and Steve enter a crowded space where they encounter Etta Candy, Steve Trevor's secretary. When Diana inquires about the meaning of "*secretary*," Etta explains, "*I go where he tells me to go and I do what he tells*



me to do." Diana immediately contrasts this with her upbringing in Themyscira, noting that such obedience resembles slavery. This exchange highlights the sharp divide between Themyscira where women exercise autonomy and freedom and patriarchal London, where female roles are restricted by subservience to

male authority.

Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity helps illuminate this moment. Butler (1990) argues that gender is not an inherent truth but is produced through repeated performances, stating, "*Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts... that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance*" (p. 33). Etta's performance of femininity, defined by service, obedience, and adherence to prescribed duties reveals how patriarchal systems discipline women into socially acceptable roles. Diana's critique, however, destabilizes this performance by exposing its constructed and unequal nature.

The boutique scene further underscores the performativity of gender through clothing. As Etta introduces Diana to corsets and layered dresses, Diana expresses frustration at their impracticality, contrasting them with the functional garments of Amazon women. Stephanie (2017) highlights the comedic yet revealing wardrobe scene in *Wonder Woman*, noting how Diana's attempts to fit into the expected fashion, stressing out societal expectations of femininity. Clothing here becomes a material site of gender regulation, as Butler (1990) notes: "*The body is not merely matter but a continual and incessant materializing of possibilities*" (p. 9). The restrictive garments signal London's attempt to "materialize" women's bodies into passivity and decorum, while Diana's resistance exposes the artificiality of such norms.

Thus, through the juxtaposition of Themyscira and London, the film demonstrates how gendered practices from occupational roles to clothing, are socially produced performances rather than natural truths. "*Even the rank-and-file Amazons in Wonder Woman live up to their ancient reputation of being smarter, better, and faster than non-Greek men*" (Penrose, 2019), highlighting how Themyscira's visual rhetoric resists patriarchal norms. Diana's reactions not only critique patriarchal constraints but also embody Butler's call to rethink and resist normative gender expectations.

In another significant sequence, Diana's identity as a fighter is foregrounded through her rejection of restrictive women's clothing. When confronted with corsets and skirts, she directly questions, "*How can a woman possibly fight in this?*" a rhetorical inquiry that emphasizes the incompatibility between patriarchal expectations of femininity and her Amazonian embodiment of freedom and strength. "*Wonder Woman remains an ambiguous feminist symbol, as her empowerment often clings to patriarchal norms, creating tensions between intended representation and ideological conformity*" (Ghaisani, 2025). Etta Candy's response that women "*do not fight using physical contact but with their principles*" represents the broader patriarchal discourse in London, where women's resilience and intellect are acknowledged only in limited, non-physical ways. This exchange highlights a stark contrast: in Themyscira, women not only equaled but often surpassed

men as warriors, leaders, and philosophers, whereas in London, their capacities were constrained and undervalued.

Judith Butler's framework on gender performativity provides a lens to analyze this disparity. Butler (1990) asserts, "*Gender is not a stable identity or locus of agency from which various actions emanate; rather, it is a style of acting, a performance through which subjects constitute themselves as particular kinds of persons*" (p. 191). Diana's embodiment of warriorhood in Themyscira represents one performative iteration of gender where womanhood is defined through strength, leadership, and physical prowess. However, upon entering patriarchal London, she encounters a radically different performance of femininity, one shaped by restriction, submission, and invisibility. The contrast generates what Butler might describe as a destabilization of gender norms, as Diana's Amazonian practices challenge the assumption that women cannot occupy spaces of combat and leadership.

This clash constructs a radical sense of alienation for Diana, who is forced to negotiate her identity with the rigid expectations of patriarchal society. Yet, rather than erasing her identity, this tension underscores Butler's claim that gender is contingent and fluid, shaped by context and repeated practices. Diana's resistance to patriarchal performances of femininity not only exposes the artificiality of such norms but also redefines the possibilities of what women can be in both mythical and real-world contexts.

Gender roles are completely different from the patriarchal societies of the outside world. The place where she came from challenges the concept of gender that shows a flux in gender expression that is suppressed in societies. So when Diana traveled outside of Themyscira and entered a civilized society she faced many inconveniences that came from the society's ideology on gender roles and expectation. As a woman she is expected to do certain things such as to behave, dress modestly, and act in conformity that conform to societal par for the course. Wonder Woman can reverse people's views on traditional gender roles that are still attached to society through actions that show assertiveness and courage in making choices that are often associated with masculine attitudes but also have a sense of compassion that is traditionally associated with femininity.

A wide shot reveals Diana and Steve Trevor as newcomers to the busy metropolitan area of



London. And quite immediately an irreconcilable difference between her home Themyscira and this new world she viewed is apparent as Diana as a woman becomes the target of catcalls and also becomes an object from male passerby. Her confusion about the

situation pointed out the societal expectation of women to be passive recipients of male action towards them. This is further highlighted when Diana, as a fighter, urges Steve to take her to the front lines in the ongoing war. Her impulsive action leads her to take off her coat, which shows that she is ready for battle, only to be stopped by Steve about her attire. The scene stresses out the restrictive social norms imposed on women, which dictate not only their behavior but also their appearance.

The shopping scene that follows is also a small depiction of oppression against women. She is shocked when she sees the various garments that women wear that are very restrictive in any way which is very different from her life in Themyscira. Of the many dresses she tries on, none of them allow her to move freely. Her discomfort and frustration reflect the experiences of many women who are forced to conform to society's standards of beauty and gender roles. Cocca (2014) argues that the Amazons in Wonder Woman dismantle traditional beauty standards by presenting diverse, strong, and non-objectified female bodies, resisting the hegemonic female ideal. This happens because society judges women through very traditional things such as the way they dress. *"The controversies surrounding Wonder Woman's attire reflect broader feminist tensions, suggesting that the costume—more than power or narrative—serves as a battleground for perceptions of the character's feminist identity"* (Marcus, 2018). Diana shows the depiction of how a woman is trapped to wear these garments. It's a stark contrast to her freedom of movement she's accustomed to. These clothes aren't just viewed as garments but it also symbolizes the societal expectations and pressure on women to conform to a specific look. This can symbolize the situation of women who are indirectly forced to wear certain clothes and not wear the clothes they want to "protect themselves" and the situation where people see women as individuals who will always "bow down" to men because of their gentle personalities.

Through her experience, she was able to challenge the traditional idea society has on women and that women are helpless victims of society. She eventually withstand these expectations and bravely shows that women don't have to be defined by their appearance or to tolerate mistreatment they get. *"The very injunction to be a given gender produces necessary failures, a constitutive instability in gender's performance because gender is always performed to an audience that is never fully known, and whose criteria for recognition are never fully met."* Butler, J. (2004). Undoing gender Judith Butler explains that the idea of gender is not a fixed or inherent trait but rather something that's shown and performed through societal expectations. Society uses certain standards to determine whether someone shows their gender correctly are impossible to fully satisfy because these standards are so complex, sensitive, and also very subjective across different cultures. And as a result, individuals (often female) feel that they are not belonged and not feel accepted as a proper

embodiments of their gender no matter how hard they try to blend in

A scene shows young Diana was training with her Aunt Antiope in Themyscira. Antiope trained Diana hard to prepare her to become a strong person when she grew up. While practicing,



Antiope continuously provided training to Diana so that she could exceed the limits of her abilities. Antiope knows that Diana often feels insecure about her abilities so she often makes mistakes in training and Antiope, as a good aunt, always tries to motivate her. In the middle of the training suddenly came Queen Hippolyta along with

several of her soldiers and she saw Diana and Antiope fighting and saw Diana fall to the ground. Antiope told Diana to go accompanied by her soldiers. Hippolyta showed disappointment and anger at Antiope for training Diana because she believed that Diana should have no contact and should be kept away from conflict even though she knew there would be a big threat to Diana as successor to the throne and as leader of Themyscira. Even though Hippolyta was angry and disappointed with her sister, Antiope continued to train Diana until she became proficient and became a strong person. This scene shows how important mentoring is from someone who supports and believes in us because it can foster personal development both physically, mentally and emotionally, as well as empowering abilities.

This scene reflects on the broader topics of how support and belief from a mentor can be really crucial in encouraging someone's individual growth and development as well empowerment. Through Antiope's guidance and teaching it leads to Diana as a strong and a powerful fighter that can face many things despite being a female in a society. Diana learns to channel her abilities showing that with the right support, anyone can achieve greatness. *"Each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies... the body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence."* Butler, J. (2004). Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence. Butler explains the intricate and complex relationship between the body and the political implications. Our society shapes our identities by the defenselessness of our bodies within the social context. It conforms to how our bodies are viewed and perceived treated by others has both social as well political consequences. Butler's reflection on the political significance of the vulnerability of the body deeply connects deeply with feminist sisterhood solidarity.

CONCLUSION

Finally, the movie *Wonder Woman* (2017) tells not only about how Diana fights as a warrior but also how a woman fights the struggles the world gives her. Other than being a role model for all ages of females, this movie gives the viewers another perspective on not only how a woman has to be brave, but also as an impulse that every woman doesn't deserve to be seen wrongly by the stereotypes that are always given to them. This movie also highlights the way Diana was having a culture shock between her hometown, Themyscira and also London, where it's more "modern".

In Themyscira, they have these beliefs that women are warriors and smart leaders. But then, when Diana came to London, she got hit by the reality where women are treated very differently in London. Women are supposed to be obedient and well-dressed, as in wearing closeted dresses which is totally different from how Diana dresses daily. This makes her feel very uncomfortable. This movie wants to give its viewers another perspective on women. They want to send a message about how women are actually treated in society and how bad it is. People tend to think that women are a bunch of individuals who are weak and can't even do anything right without men. But no, this movie proves them wrong. Not just Diana, but the people of Themyscira are also part of the women representatives in this movie. Why is that? That's because when women support each other, it creates such a powerful dynamic and people should be aware of what they're capable of.

REFERENCE

- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. Verso.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. Routledge.
- Cocca, C. (2014). Negotiating the third wave of feminism in *Wonder Woman*. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 47(1), 98–103.
- Donoghue, C. B. (2019). Gendered expectations for female-driven films: Risk and rescue narratives around Warner Bros.' *Wonder Woman*. *Feminist Media Studies*, 22(3), 485–501. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1636111>
- Ghaisani, M. P. D. (2025). *Wonder Woman (2017): An ambiguous symbol of feminism*. *Rubikon: Journal of Transnational American Studies*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.22146/rubikon.v6i1.61486>
- Jenkins, P. (Director). (2017). *Wonder Woman* [Film]. Warner Bros.

- Marcus, J. (2018). Wonder Woman's costume as a site for feminist debate. *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies*, 9(2), 55–65. <https://doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.FCM.9.2.6>
- Penrose, W. D. Jr. (2019). *The Unwanted Gaze? Feminism and the Reception of the Amazons in Wonder Woman*. *Eugesta*. <https://doi.org/10.54563/eugesta.379>
- Solis, M. (2017, June 7). *Wonder Woman's skimpy clothing is no match for the movie's feminist statement*. *Mic*. Retrieved from <https://www.mic.com/articles/179098/wonder-womans-skimpy-clothing-is-no-match-for-the-movies-feminist-statement>
- Yong, A. L., & Stallings, B. (2022). *Weaving Womanhood into Warfare: Gender-Hybrid Narratives of Amazons Penthesilea and Diana Prince*. *Journal of Student Research*, 10(3). <https://doi.org/10.47611/jsrhs.v10i3.1932>