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**Looking for the Feminine Heroic:**

**Western “Action Chicks”**

**versus**

**Female Heroes in Native American Tradition.**

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## - INTRODUCTION -

The last two decades have witnessed a significant rise in the number of female action heroines appearing in popular media. To put it in Sherrie Inness' words, "Popular culture cannot seem to get enough of tough females" (*Action Chicks*, 2). With the gender status quo being subverted through the efforts of generations of feminists, women began to make inroads into areas so far reserved for men. Female soldiers, police officers and FBI agents have been entering the male world of violence and toughness in increasing numbers. These new real-life roles were bound to find their reflection in the images of women offered by contemporary television and film. However, as I shall demonstrate, multiple studies on female violence and girl power suggest that despite the obvious fascination with the tough, aggressive woman, pretty often such characters cannot be seen as truly subversive or empowering. Their freedom and power seem to a large extent limited by the traditional Western plots which see female violence as something threatening, anti-social or even pathological, something that needs to be punished or at least somehow contained.

Looking at the long list of objections raised against the action heroines within the body of feminist criticism, one might wonder whether something is inherently contradictory and wrong with the action heroine, or whether she is perhaps being judged using the wrong criteria. Can images of *positive female heroism* be found in contemporary Western narratives or is a *positive female hero* an impossible figure? For that matter, what are the main characteristics of *positive feminine heroic* action? Can the violent women of contemporary action films be seen as truly heroic and empowered? If not, why is this the case and where can alternative archetypal patterns of feminine

heroic action be found? “Fictions . . . provide audiences with materials for creating wish-fulfillment fantasies . . . but also anxiety-fantasies . . . . Moreover, fictions afford audiences opportunities for having their attitudes, beliefs and values reinforced (most popular culture), expanded (some popular culture) or challenged (little popular culture)” Roger R. Rollin argues in his text about the hero *as* popular culture (30). It is the ambition of this dissertation to seek such fictions and analyze such mechanisms that will help expand and challenge the popular understandings of heroism and evaluate its masculine, individualistic ethos, so that it becomes a more inclusive concept allowing for a *positive* construction and reading of a female hero.

“Heroes do not represent definable human figures, but rather mythological ideals to be achieved,” Dorothy Norman claims in *The Hero: Myth/Image/Symbol* (3). Although the main focus of this dissertation is positive *female* heroism, the critical examination of *female* action heroes requires at least a brief investigation into how *male* heroes have traditionally been presented and constructed as the ideals to which the female heroes are expected to aspire. Traditional notions of heroism that have their roots in Antiquity are precisely the criteria against which the worth of female heroes is usually measured. Hence, the first chapter of my dissertation is devoted to a general overview of the traits that can typically be found in most male heroic figures. In order to distill this heroic essence, the chapter traces the transformation that the male hero has undergone on his way from the battlefield of Troy, through the woods and prairies of the new world to the dream factory. “Hero-figures by their very nature are larger-than-life, and rare is the static depiction, no matter how artful, that can communicate the hero’s power and glory more effectively than the movie screen” (Rollin 36). The genre that seems to be best suited for displaying the heroic potential is action cinema, which traditionally has been dominated by men both at the level of production (male stars and

directors) and reception (aimed at male audiences). Therefore, the detailed discussion of the feminine heroic in contemporary American action cinema offered in the second chapter is preceded by an attempt to identify the most characteristic tropes governing the genre as the space which the female action hero will have to either fit into or transform.

Chapter Two starts by acknowledging the fact that female heroism is problematic, even at the level of terminology. That a male heroic figure should be called a *hero* seems self-evident. But how do we call female heroic figures? *Role models*? *Heroines*? *Sheroes*? *Female heroes*? Is *heroine* inferior to *hero*? If so, then why? Is coining the term *shero* a successful attempt to reclaim heroism for women or does it unnecessarily reinforce the disparity between male and female action figures? These and other questions will offer an opportunity to explain and justify my choice of the rather denigratory term *action chicks* to describe Western female action figures, and the term *female heroes* to refer to heroic women from the Native American tradition in the title of this dissertation. Female heroism has certainly been seriously underrepresented both in literature and in contemporary movies and mass media. Even when female characters do find their way into the male world of heroic deeds, very often their construction seems somehow flawed. In the discussion that follows, I have decided not to focus on only a few representative films or TV series, but rather organize my analysis around the key accusations leveled at female action characters within feminist film criticism, some of which I agree with and some of which I do not, illustrating my argument with multiple examples of characters coming both from the big and the small screen. The only exception to this rule is the character of Xena, who will be discussed in greater depth in a separate section, since she is a particularly enlightening example of a broken promise of positive female heroism. Just as in the case of terminology, there has

been little agreement in the feminist critical community as to what constitutes a progressive, empowering image of female heroism. Various critics have read the same figures in diametrically different ways and while I agree that the majority of Western female action characters deserve at least some of the criticism they receive, I also believe that the theoretical models employed as the basis for this criticism are permeated by patriarchal understandings of heroism, gender roles and status, effectively precluding a positive reading of some images. Locked in the male/female, masculine/feminine dichotomies, these theories fall into the trap of interpreting toughness, strength and assertiveness as superior masculine traits while being compassionate, nurturing, flexible and cooperative are seen as feminine traits detracting from the hero's power. Within this framework, a positive female hero is indeed an impossible figure – in comparison to the male hero she will either be found wanting and inferior or sporting a tag of masculinization if she somehow manages to fulfill the criteria established by the Western patriarchal ethos of masculine, individualistic heroism.

In order to break the stalemate, I believe it is useful to try and look for alternative images and a different analytic lens outside the Western patriarchal tradition. In her article “Archetypal Violence and the Feminine Heroic in Multicultural American Women's Writing,” a text that has inspired me to undertake this search, Professor Roberta Rosenberg advocates seeking images of strong assertive females in the works of “American multicultural authors who have both a mythic and political tradition that supports such as vision.” Using examples such as Louise Erdrich's *Tales of Burning Love*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* as well as Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, Rosenberg argues that these authors

... create contemporary literary heroines who access ancient mythological narrative traditions found in the stories of White Buffalo Woman, Grandmother Spider, Kali, Yemanjá, Aido Hwedo, Fa Mu Lan or Chinese astrology. And through this revision or “re-seeing” of the ancient mythic traditions, these authors create a new kind of contemporary heroine largely unknown in American literature.

Indeed, empowering female archetypes that provide models for positive feminine heroism can be found in mythologies of many cultures. While this dissertation focuses specifically on the Native American tradition, a brief overview of examples coming from African, Indian, Asian, and pre-Columbian native Mesoamerican civilizations is offered as a proof that such mythologies are by no means an exception and that the gender inequality characteristic of Western patriarchal mythical narratives does not represent the universal and inevitable order of things. Through the analysis of creation stories and myths, the way these religious beliefs and values are reflected in indigenous social and political systems, as well as the way they are realized in the lives and art of both historical and contemporary Native American female warriors, I shall attempt to pinpoint the differences between the Western and indigenous worldviews that are essential for both the positive construction and positive reading of female heroic figures in fiction. In the introduction to *Spider Woman's Web: Traditional Native American Tales About Women's Power*, Susan Hazen-Hammond observes:

Through the centuries, while their counterparts in Europe grew up on stories that depicted women as weak, helpless, sinister, or untrustworthy, Native American women grew up hearing tales about the powers and strengths of women. They heard stories about women healers, women warriors, women artists, women prophets. But above all, they heard



stories of woman as the divine creator, woman as a supernatural power, woman as a force of transformation in the universe.

There are dozens of variations in the details, but the core meaning is consistent: women, and the female forces of the universe, are strong.  
(1-2)

Such strong role models, mythical and historical, inevitably found their way into contemporary Native American literature and art, offering patterns for constructing female characters that are far different from the western ones.

The project of merging such disparate fields as Western action cinema and Native American mythologies and literature is not without its problems and requires an interdisciplinary approach. My investigation of the various female archetypes that reoccur both in western literature and film, which has lasted over ten years, has largely been grounded in the feminist perspective. This is also the perspective of the majority of critical texts employed in the discussion of the *action chick* in the second chapter. At some point, however, I realized that this approach can only take me this far. Looking for alternative images and theories that would help me move beyond the dead end I felt I had reached, I embarked on a fascinating if uneasy journey into the Native American world. Being a white Polish woman writing about indigenous cultures, I fully realize I run the risk of being accused of appropriation. Such fears are probably one of the reasons why works combining gender and indigenous studies are so few and far between. As Kathleen M. Donovan (a white woman) observes in her book *Feminist Readings of Native American Literature: Coming to Voice*, “Many conscientious feminist theorists are afraid that ‘speaking about’ constitutes ‘speaking for,’ and so simply do not speak at all in matters relating to Native women and their writing” (7). Likewise, Patrice E. M. Hollrah (a white woman) in “*The Old Lady Trill, the Victory*

*Yell*”: *The Power of Women in Native American Literature* argues that “... white feminist theory is not applicable to their [Native American women’s] lives, and, therefore, limited in its approach to their literature” (17). While some indigenous authors such as Cheryl Suzack or Shari M. Huhndorf believe in the usefulness of “conceptualizing Indigenous feminist theories and practices” (3), others are rather adamant about the issue. Laura Tohe (Navajo) discredits feminism as a useful tool for the analysis of Native American cultures in her famous article “There Is No Word for Feminism in My Language.” In *Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism*, Devon Abbott Mishesuah (Choctaw) insists:

At the year 2000, and 502 years after what Natives commonly refer to as the beginning of the “invasion,” thousands of books and articles have been written about Natives. With the exception of works of fiction, the vast majority of these works are written by whites who analyze their subjects using Eurocentric standards of interpretation and by omitting Native’s versions of their cultures and histories. (5)

It is a fact that the white and Native versions are often strikingly different and impossible to reconcile. On the one hand, we are presented with often scant written records, most of which have white Euro-American men as their authors; on the other, there are the oral traditions, which due to their flexible nature generally are not recognized as the most reliable of sources within academia. The resulting accounts often differ significantly and while some authors believe that nations such as the Navajo and Iroquois were in fact matriarchies, others disagree and call such claims utopian fantasies and examples of wishful thinking rather than verifiable historical truth. As a cultural outsider, I have no other choice but to present the competing versions and admit that in

case of doubt, I am always more willing to decide in favor of the Native rather than non-Native interpretation.

What the above mentioned objections to merging feminist and indigenous studies have in common is that they all refer to applying the western feminist lens to the indigenous subject. What this dissertation strives to do is exactly the other way round. I am trying to apply the indigenous lens to the analysis of western characters. In that, I am fully aware of my own limitations as a non-Indian scholar; however, to make up for my western upbringing, I follow the advice of many Indigenous writers to consult Native sources for the cultural insider perspective whenever I can. While in terms of methodology each of the chapters will draw upon literary studies, film studies, culture studies, women's studies and American Indian Studies to varying degrees (themselves employing methods from such varied fields as Anthropology, Sociology and folklore), I hope the result of this disciplinary variety will nevertheless be a coherent argument adding a different dimension to the ongoing debate on the female action hero and female heroism in general.

## **- CHAPTER ONE -**

### **TRADITIONAL NOTIONS OF (MALE) HEROISM**

What it means to be heroic has been subject to constant change over the centuries. “In what Westerners call classic times, their heroes were god-men; in the Middle Ages, God’s men; in the Renaissance, universal men; in the eighteenth century, gentlemen; in the nineteenth century, self-made men. Our century has seen the common man and the outsider become heroic,” Marshall W. Fishwick wrote in 1983 in his comprehensive study on heroism entitled *The Hero In Transition* (10). A lot has been said and written on the subject of heroism. In fact, the amount of critical work on heroic figures in Western culture makes it impossible to provide a one-paragraph-long definition of heroism that would do justice to all the nuances in the construction of such figures. While a detailed analysis of the various traditional notions of (male) heroism is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is necessary to pay close attention to a certain set of traits which can be identified in most, if not all, characters deemed heroic in popular culture. After all, these traits are usually the criteria employed for assessing the female heroes. Since the attitudes towards heroism in contemporary American literature and culture did not come out of nowhere, but are the result of certain historical experiences and social processes, I shall start by examining those aspects of classical heroism which are the roots of the present-day American understanding of what it means to be heroic. Then, I shall briefly overview the transformation which the hero has undergone over the years in American literature to finally emerge victorious in the cinematic medium and capture the imagination of millions of viewers flocking to the theatres in the United

States and worldwide to see the latest action/adventure movies – the most popular movie genre of today.

### **1.1. The Epic Hero: Classical Roots of Contemporary Heroism**

In his essay under a very telling title “Why The American ‘Frontier’ Will Always Be Populated By Democratic, Christian Knights” Thomas S. Engeman puts forward a claim that the conception of heroism in American culture has been heavily influenced by Homeric and Arthurian ideals of heroism. To prove his point, he begins by referring to Walt Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas* in which, in Engeman’s words, “Walt Whitman asserts the necessity of a heroic literature for a great society” (2). Engeman summarizes Whitman’s argument in the following way:

Whitman argues that the Homeric epics provided a standard of nobility and justice among the Greeks and Romans for nearly a thousand years. While the Arthurian legends did the same for the European peoples for another millennia. If America is to become a great nation to rival the living European states, and the still vital memories of ancient glory, Whitman believes it must produce an equally noble and aspiring poetic ideal. (2)

Let us analyze then what heroic features constitute this ancient “standard of nobility and justice.”

Probably the most obvious one is the hero’s maleness. In Homer’s *Iliad*, we find a plethora of mighty male warriors ready to fight to the death in a brutal display of strength and cruelty. Athena the Warrior Goddess notwithstanding, human female heroes in classical texts are few and far between. An occasional Amazon may assist the

hero in his quest, but more often than not, if female characters do appear in the heroic epic, it is as the object of the quest, the spoils of war or a conniving enemy plotting the hero's downfall. War and heroism belong to the province of men. When Andromache, Hector's loving wife, begs him to stay in the tower for fear he might be killed by Achilles, he tells her, "Nay, go thou to the house and busy thyself with thine own tasks, the loom and the distaff, and bid thy handmaids ply their work: but war shall be for men, for all, but most of all for me, of them that dwell in Ilios" (A.T. Murray).



**Figure 1** Matsch, Franz Von. *The Triumph of Achilles*. 1892. Achilleion, Corfu, Greece. *Wikipedia*. 10 Oct. 2007. Web. 23 May 2013. Triumphant Achilles drags Hector's corpse in front of the Gates of Troy. The image taken from a panoramic fresco on the upper level of the main hall of the Achilleion.

Hector's refusal to listen to his wife's pleas and avoid confrontation points to another characteristic feature of classical heroism – an overgrown sense of honor, especially when it comes to winning glory on the battlefield. In his in-depth study on the hero in the traditional Indo-European model entitled *The Epic Hero*, Dean A. Miller observes:

Even if the archaic, epical hero does not answer to any moral command or stricture, he nevertheless requires the concentrated attention, if not the moral approbation, of someone exterior to himself. The fleeting and

fragile concept of honor captures him, as he balances uneasily between perfect and fearless self-confidence and the possibly shaming judgment of a peer or peers. (332)

To avoid shame and deserve the ultimate accolade, the classical hero must prove his supernatural physical prowess and courage, even if it means certain death.

Death on the battlefield, in fact, is an almost foregone conclusion in the classical hero's biography. "He must and will be killed: it is necessary to his essence," Dean A. Miller stresses (122). In his discussion of Homer's epic, he points out:

Our investigations into this hero cult seem to show what will become a familiar bifurcation in a central idea. One line expresses the heroic ideal as we find it in Homer, the powerful image of the physically perfect young hero dying for fame and escaping maturation (and thus the "bad death" of an impotent and ugly old age) by achieving a "good death" that ends his physical history in combat. Everything in this line is concentrated on the *agôn* of the essentially asocial individual. The second line integrates the cult of the dead hero into the new sociopolitical entity of the Greek city-state, or polis: he becomes guarantor and defender of that vital social unit. The first image, with Akhilleus as its most potent representative, stresses the extrasocietal, utterly separated player in the game of death, who seeks by death to earn *kleos aphthiton*, that "eternal fame" or "unfailing praise" that also paradoxically preserves him *athanatos* and *ageraos*, deathless and ageless. Later this is, with some difficulty, attached to a glorious death that is not merely individual but is perceived to defend the polis: those dead in battle for the mother-city can

be associated with the old heroes, and the two kinds of death, old and new, can be declared equally significant. (4)

Indeed, while cowardly figures such as Paris live to see another day, the majority of the great warriors bite the dust by the end of *Iliad*.

The above quote captures another essential characteristic of the hero: his individualism. While most heroic figures act in the defense of one social group or another, or for the benefit of these groups, from the very beginning of their heroic lives, they remain on the margin of or even completely outside that social unit. Tracing the heroic biography, Miller observes that the hero's isolation begins already at the point of conception and birth which are somehow anomalous – many classical heroes boast divine parentage, for example (70). The infant-hero is frequently separated from any family he might have and, as Miller puts it, is “taken ‘out there’” to return to “the center” he is supposed to defend in full physical maturity (134). But the space where he can realize his full heroic potential is “the extensive plane” (133) or the green “wilderness” (135). It is there, on the border of civilization, that he is not limited by the rules imposed on him by various social institutions. Miller writes:

The center, defined as a complex of solid structures, is essentially opposed to the border. The center also threatens the heroic world by its abstractness and impersonality, and by its dangerous potential for turning into a final and fatal trap for the hero. The hero's space is where his excellences—youth, daring or arrogance, animal energy, and personal prowess—can best be deployed. (152)

Defiance being the hero's second nature, obedience to authority in any form does not sit well with him. Achilles had few qualms about withdrawing from the battlefield after the head of the Greek forces, Agamemnon, forced him to hand over his concubine, Briseis.



Similarly, knights from the Arthurian legends “do pretty much as they please” (Engeman, 3). King Arthur's most revered knight, Lancelot has an adulterous relationship with Queen Guinevere, which eventually leads to treason, war, the fall of Camelot and King Arthur's death: So much for the oaths sworn to the leader. In *The Epic Hero*, Miller refers to another study on the etiology of heroism, namely Maurice Bowra's “The Meaning of a Heroic Age,” which demonstrates the tendency of epic texts to group heroic figures into “the constellations of ‘remarkable men’ who are drawn to and surround legendary war leaders like Agamemnon, Charlemagne, and Arthur” (41), The Round Table being a perfect example of such a constellation. However, as Miller rightly observes:

... it is clear that the great hostings, followings (or gatherings?) described in Homer, and also in the Old French chansons de geste and in the Arthurian cycle, are continually beset by centrifugal forces born in and animated by individual heroic pride, and by that diamantine heroic sense of ultimate selfhood. The epic dramas of enraged Akhilleus, of prideful Roland or, later, Raoul of Cambrai or Guillaume d'Orange, or the story of the destructive tensions boiling up between Arthur and Cei (in the Welsh quest tale Culhwch ac Olwen) or Arthur and Lancelot (in the Continental legends), plainly show the fragility of any authority when it comes into conflict with the ever present, ever ready heroic construction of a personal identity tied to an indissoluble sense of honor.

(41)

Ultimately, it is the hero who is his own master. The rule of law is the rule of the strong.

The isolation and separation of the hero from the rest of society is further emphasized by his reluctance or even refusal to engage in ordinary verbal

communication. Miller notes, "... the hero is defined as laconic, self-limited in his use and manipulation of words except for certain ritualized outcries," (238). Thus, when the hero finally opens his mouth it is usually to give his war cry "piercing the air and the ear, and as such ... an individual projection of the hero's own mixture of hostility, threat, presumption, and declared proof of his overwhelming persona" (Miller 232). Alternatively, he may indulge in the verbal aggression of a ritualized boast, challenge or insult "generally intended to heat and overheat the fighting blood" (Miller 236). Outside the battlefield, he is a man of few words. "The medieval knightly-chivalric ethic maintained the tradition ... At least as late as the classicist revival reaching into the eighteenth century of our era, this laconic image resurrects or recollects the 'strong, silent' hero" (Miller 239).

Maleness, a sense of honor, superhuman physical prowess and courage, voluntary submission to death on the battlefield, individualism, isolation, defiance, rule of the strong and laconism seem to be features universally present in the construction of epic heroic figures. At least some of them are deeply antithetical to American democratic and Protestant ideals. Therefore, as Engeman observes, the epic hero of Homeric and Arthurian legends had to be democratized and Christianized before he could conquer America (2).

## **1.2. The Heroic Ideal in the New World**

"America is obsessed with heroes and anti-heroes" (Blythe, Sweet 180). While certain historical events and socio-political changes in America have indeed resulted in outbursts of skepticism or even open hostility towards the concept of heroism, to the point when heroism was pronounced dead, the hero in America appears to possess an

uncanny capacity for resurrection. Neither the closing of the frontier, the urbanization, the Great Depression, the two World Wars nor the Vietnam War<sup>1</sup> – “the leading symbol of the anti-heroic” (Fishwick, *The Hero American Style* 190) – and the resulting dubiety of the core features of the conventional heroic model have managed to lay the hero to rest. To quote Engeman:

If heroism has disappeared from American life, you couldn't guess it by watching Hollywood movies. Heroism is the staple of what is by far the largest movie genre, 'action/adventure' films: westerns, science fiction, detective and police dramas, martial arts, super heroes, natural disasters, and finally, military life and war movies. Looked at through the lens of these movies, modern America appears to possess the most heroic culture of any free nation in history. (1)

Although such movies are often regarded, or disregarded, as cheap entertainment for the mindless masses, the fact is that the heroes of all these sub-genres have their antecedents in American and European literary tradition. “Rousseau's ‘natural man,’ that romantic symbol of freedom which captivated the eighteenth century, triumphantly entered the American forests as the buck-skin clad hunter, only to emerge on the Great Plains a century later as the American cowboy” (Fishwick, *American Heroes* 203). Of course, a pluralistic society requires various kinds of heroes to face forever new challenges; however, there is a constellation of heroic features that seem particularly resistant to change and have remained essentially the same since the times of Homeric

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<sup>1</sup> Analyzing the American Warrior Hero, Peter H. Gibbon also observes that “As a result of Vietnam, Americans not only challenged the idea of an establishment that could confidently lead a nation but also looked with skepticism upon the ethos of masculinity that helped define that establishment. Critics of the war wondered whether President Lyndon Johnson had a ‘John Wayne complex’—too much machismo that caused him to ignore advice and escalate the war and that prevented him from admitting he might be wrong. Before Vietnam, most Americans accepted gender roles and praised masculinity, which was equated with exploration, physical bravery, competition, and risk-taking. ... The debate over Vietnam has led to a critique of conventional masculinity and, indirectly, to a critique of conventional heroism” (66).

warriors and Arthurian knights. They are grouped around two main concepts – the hero's maleness and individualism.

In 2007, Peter H. Gibbon published *A Call to Heroism: Renewing America's Vision of Greatness* in which he advocates the need to restore the notion of heroism and question some of the assumptions and attitudes of the anti-heroic age. It is interesting to note that Gibbon was inspired to start his almost two-decade exploration of the condition of heroism in America by reading about three heroic women: the American missionary Eva Jane Price, the German artist Kathe Kollwitz and the Russian teacher and writer Eugenia Ginzburg. The "three women of extraordinary courage" served as the subject of a commencement speech he gave to high school students in 1992 (171). When in January, 1993 *Newsweek* published Gibbon's article, based on the introduction to the speech, entitled "In Search of Heroes," the number of responses he received from all over America propelled him into his own quest for answers to questions such as "How did we lose our public heroes? Why does it matter? Where do we go from here?" (Gibbon loc.222). Unfortunately, the appreciation and admiration that Gibbon felt for these female heroic figures have been an exception rather than a rule in American history. Until very recently, heroism in America has been gendered almost exclusively male. Gibbon himself observes, "As its title indicates, no women are celebrated in Emerson's essays on heroism, Representative Men;" similarly, not one of the twenty-one plaques unveiled in 1901 in the Hall of Fame for Great Americans celebrated a woman (45).

"For most of human history, hero has been synonymous with warrior," Gibbons explains (4). And the idea of a warrior, as the discussion of the epic hero demonstrates, has had strong associations with courage, aggression and physical prowess, enabling the enraged hero to cut off heads with one swing of the heavy sword held in a strong male

arm. Indeed, courage, violence, physical strength and the resulting glory on the battlefield have traditionally been viewed as male traits in patriarchal societies. Muscles seem to be “signifiers of masculine power” (Katz, 465). Discussing the characteristics of the heroic ideal in patriarchal nineteenth-century America, Gibbon observes, “Women could not be warriors, explorers, orators, or politicians – the normal routes to heroism in the nineteenth century” (44), and he adds, “... heroism and greatness were linked to public life, physical bravery, war, and gender” (47). In his analysis of different categories of heroes entitled *Heroes, Villains, and Fools: The Changing American Character*, Orrin E. Klapp points to the imbalance between masculine and feminine hero types and contends that “Glory is concentrated in hero types, the bulk of which in American culture – possibly eight-ninths – cannot properly be called feminine” (97). Although the book is slightly dated now – it was first published in 1962 – this diagnosis, unfortunately, still rings too true.

“The military in all societies is by definition masculine, and descriptions of military training always note how such training involves the invocation of ideologies of aggressive masculinity and explicit, often sexualized deprecation of women,” Nancy J. Chodrow argues in her essay “The Enemy Outside: Thoughts of the Psychodynamics of Extreme Violence with Special Attention to Men and Masculinity” (252)<sup>2</sup>. To some, a woman warrior might have seemed a preposterous idea in an era when the current technological advancement (or the lack thereof) weighed the warrior down with such an amount of steel that even a bulky male was unable to rise once brought to the ground,

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<sup>2</sup> An interesting insight on the attitude towards masculinity and femininity in the war film is offered by John Belton in his book *American Cinema American Culture*. He observes that “relations with a woman suggest a vulnerability in the hero to that which lies outside the masculine world of war – to the feminine – and this vulnerability will eventually destroy him” (205). Therefore, the aim of military training is to eradicate any traces of the feminine from the male soldier’s psyche “to transform him into a ruthless, unemotional, fighting machine” (205). One way to achieve this goal is to challenge the male recruits by calling them feminine names – Belton provides the example of Sgt. Zack in *Steel Helmet* who calls the young soldiers “ballerinas” (206).

not to mention a female.<sup>3</sup> However, the invention first of the gunpowder and then of more and more advanced military technologies that replaced heavy swords with compact guns or even joysticks should have provided equal opportunities even to the most delicate females. Yet no such change has really occurred. White women would work their hands off on the farms, black female slaves would toil in the fields harder than any white master ever would, but still females were deemed the weaker sex. And heroism was for the tough and the strong. In her book *Tough Girls: Women, Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* (1999), Sherrie A. Inness stresses:

Toughness is mythologized in the media, creating heroes with far greater abilities than those of mere mortals. Yet these mythic heroes help support the notion that only men are tough and heroic. ... The connection between men and toughness assures that men, not women, will be the only “real” heroes in a culture where toughness is frequently associated with power and typically only men are allowed to display it. The ability of such heroes as Hercules, John Wayne, Rocky, and Rambo to endure great physical challenges suggests their tough and heroic character. Being able to overcome great hardships is one of the defining features of a hero. (14)

While Inness uses the example of mythic and fictional heroes to prove the obvious privileging of maleness in the construction of heroic figures, David S. Bertolotti refers to a real-life case of discrimination against women in his essay “The Astro-Political Hero.” He discusses the atmosphere surrounding the process of selecting astronaut candidates for Project Mercury in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Despite the successful candidates’ modest denials “... the time had come for astro-heroes, with no

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<sup>3</sup> Although I am sure that such reasoning must appear incongruent to present-day female weightlifters or “strong women”.

option, for heroes were to be created for the astropolitical machine; and, importantly, the machine guaranteed that the heroes would not be female, black, civilian or any combination thereof” (261). The reactions of officials responsible for the selection process to any suggestions that women should also be considered ranged from comic, absurd to downright aggressive. To quote only a few after Bertolotti, the public were told that installing “separate facilities” would generate costs, space was “for men only,” “the talk of a proposed American space woman makes me sick to my stomach,” “women astronauts would be a waste of space [pun?], a luxury the United States effort cannot afford” (261-262). Although some astronauts gallantly maintained that they would welcome “with open arms” any women able to prove they were better qualified for the program, when informed that a group of women had actually successfully completed all the physical and psychological tests at the Lovelace Foundation, they discredited those women’s success saying that “people don’t qualify automatically by passing a test. My mother could pass the physical exam at Lovelace” (“Space Women Expensive” qtd. in Bertolotti 262). Thus, in the period of the greatest popularity of the Western genre, it was the male astronaut who, just like the classic Western hero, conquered another frontier: space. “The weaker sex” stayed on the ground.<sup>4</sup>

The research team who in 1985 published a national bestseller *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* conclude that, “Individualism lies at the very core of American culture. ... We believe in the dignity, indeed the sacredness, of the individual” (142). “Activistic America has honored the soldier more than the saint. The strong cult of individualism in America affected our choice of heroes” Marshall W. Fishwick adds (*American Heroes* 8). “It is the element of rugged

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<sup>4</sup> Bertolotti quotes a fragment of an article published in *Ebony* in 1962, which with a charming sense of humor comments on the alleged inferiority of female astronauts stating that “Women use less oxygen, need less food, have a higher radiation tolerance. They also have greater endurance. Hence, space ladies, notwithstanding the added cost of powder rooms, would be of far greater value to the satellite program than men” (“In the Same Boat” qtd. in Bertolotti 262).

individualism, the independent gesture of defiance that is the seedbed of heroism” claims Leo Gurko in *Heroes, Highbrows and the Popular Mind* (185). Indeed, “individualism,” “individualist,” “individualistic” are words which probably occur with the highest frequency in the various definitions of the American hero. It seems inevitable in a country where the people’s core values were shaped by the experience of being separated from their roots, starting afresh on a new continent, offering seemingly endless possibilities and sense of freedom. The wide open spaces and hostile wilderness of the frontier – a natural environment for the hero as the discussion of classical heroism has already demonstrated – challenged the individualistic hero to conquer them. Early American pioneers, explorers and frontiersmen were perceived as lonely agents of Manifest Destiny, single-handedly taming the wilderness to clear the way for the westward march of the nation. Once again, the hero was seen as occupying space outside the community, his self-reliance and isolation being his defining features.

The term “individualism” was introduced to the English language in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the Saint-Simonians and was used pejoratively to denote the society’s “uprootedness, ... lack of ideals and common beliefs, ... social fragmentation, and ... competitive and exploitative attitudes which evolved from this legitimized anarchy,” claims Yehoshua Arieli in his book *Individualism and Nationalism: American Ideology* (207). However, as he himself observes, “The term, which in the Old World was almost synonymous with selfishness, social anarchy, and individual self-assertion, connoted in America self-determination, moral freedom, the rule of liberty, and the dignity of man” (189). Originating in European political thought, the term was for the first time applied to American values by a French writer and politician Alexis de Tocqueville in his highly popular *Democracy in America*. He defines it as “a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the



mass of his fellow-creatures; and to draw apart with his family and his friends; so that, after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself,” (vol. 2 77). Tocqueville is very careful to differentiate individualism from egotism – “Individualism is a novel expression, to which a novel idea has given birth. Our fathers were only acquainted with egotism,” he writes in the second volume of *Democracy in America* (77) – nevertheless, he still sees it as a negatively valued trait, eventually leading to isolation just like egotism. There is always the danger of slipping all too easily from one into the other. Other thinkers, such as Michel Chevalier, were more positive about the concept and saw it as “a creative and liberating force because of its power to dissolve tradition and authority and to liberate energies” (Arieli, 201). Similarly, E.L. Godkin, editor of *The Nation*, who was openly critical of Tocqueville’s diagnosis, seeing it as too reductive, understood individualism as a complex phenomenon stemming from the unique experience of the frontier life. Arieli summarizes Godkin’s take on individualism in the following way:

Unlike Tocqueville, he stressed its strength. It was not the vice and apathy of a society of long standing, but the primordial energy which conquered an empty and wild continent and built a new society, and it reflected the pioneer’s lonely fight for survival and the character this mode of life developed. (196)

Thus, the term which initially was “a term of abuse,” in America evolved into “one of approval” (Arieli, 319). Indeed, how could it not if it had Emerson himself as its champion? In his essay “Self-Reliance” he wrote “... the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.” Being intuitively moral, the Emersonian hero acted on his instincts and enjoyed an uncompromising autonomy, freedom and self-confidence.

However, the ambivalence surrounding the concept of individualism signaled above has never really ceased to exist, but rather has led to a constant examination of its influence on the American ideal of society as well as the ways in which its potentially harmful effects could be alleviated. In an essay on the changing models of heroism in popular American novels between 1880 and 1920, Arthur Margon stresses:

By 1880, the conventional heroic model was well defined. Whatever his style, whatever his *milieu*, the hero was expected to combine two traditions— one grounded in notions of public duty and "character," the other stressing individual success and power to control surroundings— and thus produce a hero who tempered individualism with personal virtue and a sense of public duty, and thus avoided selfishness.

Such community-oriented individualism of heroic figures is precisely what differentiates the democratic American hero from the classical epic hero.<sup>5</sup> Although the emphasis is on self-reliance and self-interest, it is, to use Tocqueville's phrase, "self-interest rightly understood" that is "individualism tempered by the morality and rhetoric of Protestant virtue" (Margon). To quote Tocqueville again, "... it is held as a truth that man serves himself in serving his fellow-creatures, and that his private interest is to do good" (vol.2 94).<sup>6</sup>

A human embodiment of this heroic ideal was the American frontiersman Daniel Boone. Noble, independent, austere and unsocial, following his instincts, deadly with his rifle and always ready to act in defense of the settlers whom he led onto the frontier,

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<sup>5</sup> Engeman nicely summarizes this difference saying, "While ... selfless patriotism may be understandable to those still living in a Christian, egalitarian age, for the Homeric and Arthurian heroes it defies, to the point of absurdity, natural justice. To paraphrase Friedrich Nietzsche, 'God on the Cross' (instead of a throne on Mt. Olympus) was the greatest sin against the Greek understanding of human nature and justice ever committed" (6).

<sup>6</sup> Similarly, as Theodore P. Greene observes in his book *America's Heroes: The Changing Models of Success in American Magazines*, both Emerson and Whitman, "the most eloquent and elevated prophets of American individualism were assuming a mystical, transcendent moral order in which the more that individuals became true individuals the more they would become linked to and serve one another" (12). In this account, individualism was actually serving communal goals.

Boone epitomizes the romantic ideal of the natural man and provides “the first outline of what eventually became the amalgam hero of America, the man of the West” (Fishwick; *The Hero*, 73). R.W.B. Lewis describes this new-born hero in his book *The American Adam* as “an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources” (5). This short quote seems to be a perfect description of another archetypal hero of the American West – this time fictional – James Fenimore Cooper’s Natty Bumppo. In fact, Cooper’s Leatherstocking novels were loosely based on Boone’s real and mythical adventures. Thomas S. Engeman uses Cooper’s novels as the primary example of the democratization of Homeric and Arthurian heroism. Natty is equally strong, displays superhuman martial skills and courage and is an outsider feeling at home in the wilderness; however, unlike the cruel and bloodthirsty Homeric warriors, his religious beliefs prevent him from mindless violence and killing unless it is absolutely necessary. Engeman calls it “the economy of violence” and believes it to be “a cardinal principle of the American Christian knight” (6). The glorification and inevitability of the “good death” on the battlefield is no longer a certain fate awaiting the hero at the end of his quest. All life is sacred to him, including his own. Furthermore, he does not obey the rule of the strong, but is “a holy servant of Christian democracy” (Engeman 6). Like Boone, he acts selflessly to defend the unsuspecting colonists against whatever danger is awaiting them on their journey through the lawless frontier.

### 1.3. The American Hero and the Dream Factory

If the hero is supposed to be larger than life, then the big screen has enabled him to do so. While he certainly comes in more guises than can be counted, the question of how masculinity and the male image is constructed in action cinema, or for what reasons, is too complex a topic to be analyzed in any great detail here. In fact, most studies devoted to the critical discussion of American action cinema of necessity pay more attention to men and masculinity than women and femininity – the genre has been, after all, dominated by male stars and male directors. However, even in a study such as this one which has female heroism as its main focus, it is impossible not to overview, at least briefly, the transformation that the concept of male heroism has undergone, establishing certain rules, codes and expectations that the female hero would have to either follow or defy, the moment that she came barging into the genre. Therefore, I shall attempt to sketch out the popular image of the male hero in American action cinema with special emphasis on those features which he has inherited from his heroic antecedents described in the previous sections of this chapter, namely features which are organized either around the practice of gendering the action hero as male or around the concept of individualism.

When the westward march of the young American nation finally reached the Pacific Ocean, the iconic figure of the frontiersman did not disappear, but almost seamlessly transformed into the quintessential American hero – the cowboy. First celebrated in dime novels and pulp Westerns, “the cowboy knight” became universally popular when he conquered Hollywood (Engeman 7). “Everyone ... knows what the cowboy looks like,” Marshall Fishwick claims in *American Heroes: Myth and Reality* (207). He goes on:

Physically he is tall, tanned, sinewy, a man at home in the great outdoors. Weatherbeaten and rough, this child of nature is innately handsome, despite eyes squinted from work in the glaring sun and legs bowed from a life in the saddle. He is never far away from his horse, who has almost human intelligence. The two of them form the most enduring team in American mythology. (207)

In this fragment, Fishwick touches upon a number of features already identified as inseparable attributes of the hero – physical strength, rough personality, his place in the wilderness rather than civilized society, not to mention his relationship with his horse, further stressing the association with the heroic knight errant of the years gone by. To that list we might add the Western hero's brooding silence, again a direct continuation of the laconic image of the epic hero or Christian knight, signaling his no-nonsense attitude towards life as well as self-confidence.<sup>7</sup> He never seeks advice – he does not need to since he always knows exactly what to do – and he hardly ever shares his thoughts or feelings with anyone. The “characteristic of loneliness is not a random feature of the western hero; rather, it is the hero's trademark” (Biderman 14).

“Cowboy stories are little courses in Americanism,” Fishwick writes in *The Hero, American Style* (67). He quotes Will Rogers Junior, son of the late Oklahoma cowboy-humorist saying, “The legend of the American cowboy, no matter how phoney, no matter how much Hollywood horses it up, still is the great symbol of America. ... What the knight in armor is to Europe, what the legend of Robin Hood is to England, so the story of the Western cowboy is to America” (67-68). Functioning as a morality tale where the good

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<sup>7</sup> In an essay entitled “Civilization and its Discontents: The Self-Sufficient Western Hero,” Douglas J. Den Uyl stresses the fact that “The western hero has been described as ‘mythic’ and compared to the great mythic heroes of Western civilization. Those earlier heroes, whether Homeric warriors or Norse avengers, possess awe-inspiring strength, skills, and courage that stand out so significantly that the contributions of all others recede completely into the background. Heroes of the American western also evoke this sense of standing apart from, and above, ordinary men and women; yet they simultaneously seem more human and closer to us than those other mythic heroes” (31).



**Figure 2** *Pale Rider*. Clint Eastwood and Sydney Penny, scene still. Dir. Clint Eastwood. Warner Bros., 1985. A classic Western scenario: a cowboy mounted on his faithful horse, holding his gun and saving a damsel in distress.

always triumphs over evil, a cowboy story typically celebrates an individualistic lone hero who emerges from the wilderness to assist frontier communities in their fight against savage Indians, gangs of lawless gunmen, evil ranchers or other corrupted villains. However, when the fight is over, instead of enjoying the well-deserved public admiration and assuming his rightful, respected place within the community, the hero typically chooses to “ride off into the sunset,” the image being one of the most indelible clichés of the genre<sup>8</sup>. While it is possible that the “wide open space... beckoned the cowboy hero, who wanted his freedom” (Kolker 256), an alternative explanation for this particular story ending is offered by John Belton who writes, “Having brought peace to the community through the use of his superior strength and unique skills, the western hero is unable to enter the community because it can no longer tolerate the excessive violence with which he, like his former enemy, remains identified” (254). This, in fact, has always been the fate of warrior heroes in the Indo-European tradition. As Dean A. Miller observes, the very concept of chivalry as a strict code of heroic conduct might be

<sup>8</sup> John Wayne in *Stagecoach* (1939) is probably the most characteristic example. However, numerous other Westerns end on a similar note, for example *Unforgiven* (1992) or *My Darling Clementine* (1946).

seen as an attempt on the part of church and royal power – that is forces of civilization – to “subdue or redirect the bellicose energies of a medieval fighting knighthood” (12).

While the Western enjoyed its heyday in the 1950s, by no means can we say that the values and heroic ideals promoted by the genre withered together with its popularity. In fact, they have continued to permeate not only the fictional world of the action cinema but also political discourse. Engeman observes:

Indeed, the American identification with its frontier life is as longstanding in politics as it is in popular culture. Early Presidents, including Andrew Jackson, William Harrison, and Abraham Lincoln, invoked their poor but virtuous frontier origins to increase their popularity. ... Teddy Roosevelt cultivated his reputation as a Rough Rider in Cuba and South Dakota. A century later, Presidents Reagan and George W. Bush continue to embrace aspects of the Cowboy life. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this pioneer, democratic spirit was also repeatedly reaffirmed to gain support for public policy initiatives. Woodrow Wilson mobilized idealistic Americans to arms during World War I in order “to make the world safe for democracy” – as the pioneers had made America. John F. Kennedy rallied the nation “to bear any burden, pay any price to defend the cause of liberty” by containing the global expansion of communism. President Kennedy also promised the United States would lead the world on the frontier of space by placing the man on the moon before the end of the decade of the 1960’s; he had already made the “New Frontier” the motto of his administration. (1-2)

And what are the main themes of the majority of American action movies if not “making the world safe for democracy,” “defending the cause of liberty” or conquering

outer space? As the formula of the western became old-fashioned, the cowboy hero changed the scene, first from rural to urban then from urban to global or even celestial, but continued to fight for the same causes. A good example of such a transformation is Clint Eastwood's character from the *Dirty Harry* film series (1971, 1973, 1976, 1983, 1988), Harry Callahan, who retains the essential characteristics of Eastwood's Western persona such as solitude, self-sufficiency and defiance against any authority other than himself. The character later became a template for other fictional macho cops fighting for justice using whatever methods they deemed appropriate and thus being forever conflicted with their superiors. This trend can be traced well into 1990s and further, box-office hits such as the *Lethal Weapon* or *Die Hard* film series being perfect examples.

Any discussion of action heroes, especially one putting emphasis on a male individualistic loner type, would be incomplete without the mention of Sylvester Stallone's notorious Rambo, who became the iconic muscle man of the 1980s American action cinema. His outsider status is established in the first film of the series entitled *First Blood* (1981). A Vietnam veteran, John Rambo has difficulty finding his place within the community and ends up being persecuted first by the local and then state authorities. In the ensuing chase and fight, we get the chance to see most of the so-far-mentioned heroic qualities in action. Rambo is the quintessential warrior – a monolithic figure possessing superhuman strength, stamina and martial skills (his weapons of choice are a knife and a bow), being self-sufficient, feeling at home in the wilderness where he is the law, and definitely not a chatterbox. Additionally, in *First Blood: Part II* and *Rambo III* he gets the chance to “make the world safe for democracy” fighting America's Vietnamese and Soviet enemies only to walk off into the sunset at the end of the movie like any proper Western hero should, leaving the society he fought for



behind. In her book entitled *The Warrior Women of Television*, Dawn Heineken offers a definition of heroic identity which perfectly captures the essence of such heroic figures. She writes:

Heroic identity tends to be founded on the isolation of the self from others, in which the body struggles to become impenetrable and self-contained. The hero is both defined by and controls his physical environment. ... Although the hero may work to maintain the community or protect a family, his separation from others is maintained. He does not belong to the public body; he is not a self in relation, constructed through interactions with others, but is a discreet entity; his body consequently suggests solidity. (35)

Characters played by other stars of the 1980s cinema, such as Schwarzenegger or Chuck Norris, certainly fit this definition well. Whether they display their masculinity through their tough physiques or martial arts skills, these brooding silent males are lone fighters single-handedly vanquishing their enemies.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> However, there are some critics who see the 1980s narratives focusing on hard bodies as more ambiguous. In her book *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* Yvonne Tasker, points to the ridicule directed at the figure of Rambo by reviewers of the liberal press, calling him Zombo or a grunt due to his inarticulacy (107), and comparing his “enormous breasts” to those of Jane Russell in *The Outlaw* (80). In these accounts, the 1980s icon of masculinity actually becomes feminized. Looking at the different understandings of the muscular male hero found in film criticism, Tasker wonders whether the narratives of the muscular cinema should be read as stories of “the body in crisis” or “the body triumphant” (109). Do such images “reassert, mourn or hysterically state a lost male power” (Tasker, 109)? She eventually concludes that “In terms of the muscular hero, it is possible to argue that these male figures offer a parodic performance of ‘masculinity,’ which both enacts and calls into question the qualities they embody” (111). The throbbing biceps of a bodybuilder are at once an evidence of his male dominance and his painstaking attention to his appearance, which in the western culture is not seen as masculine at all.



**Figure 3** Arnold Schwarzenegger vs. Sylvester Stallone. Two most iconic muscle men of the 80s action cinema. “If you want to understand America — what we are, what we were, and most of all, what we want to be — then you have to understand Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone. The two actors exemplify two of our country’s most primal national myths. Stallone is a classic Horatio Alger protagonist, rising from impossibly humble beginnings into a world of fame and fortune and triumph and tragedy. Schwarzenegger is simply *the* Great American Immigrant Success Story...,” Darren Franich and Keith Staskiewicz claim in “Arnold Schwarzenegger vs. Sylvester Stallone: The great '80s action movie star debate” (2011). Obviously, so many years later, the two iconic figures continue to have a hold on the popular imagination.

Although late 1980s and 1990s action heroes such as John McClane<sup>10</sup> or Martin Riggs are less muscular and more articulate than Rambo, the portrayal of their male bodies still seems to be of paramount importance to the understanding of what it means to be heroic. As Susan Jeffords observes, “Having withstood the expert torture of the foreign Endo, Riggs’s lethal body appears to remind audiences that, if there is anything heroic left in American culture, it rests in male bodies like these” (198). Dawn Heineken emphasizes the crucial role the suffering male body plays in the construction of heroic identity:

<sup>10</sup> Asked by a terrorist holding his wife captive, “Who are you, just another American who’s seen too many movies...? Do you think you are Rambo or John Wayne?” Bruce Willis’ character chooses to identify with neither of the two iconic figures but rather with Roy Rogers, a singing cowboy of B westerns. What differentiates him from the rugged individualists of the Western genre and the muscular machos of the 1980s action films is that he no longer treats himself with deadly seriousness.

From early Westerns to recent films and series like *The A-Team*, *Rambo*, *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon*, the action hero's body is stained with blood and sweat. The hero emerges victorious after being shot, battered, or tortured in diabolical ways. The marks of violence engraved on his body signify his ability to overcome all physical suffering, yet the cuts and scars also reveal a deeper understanding of his character. It is apparent throughout that it is the hero's indomitable will that drives his body to such extraordinary ends. The hero's taut, heavily muscled body summarizes the genre. At once bleeding and bruised, his chiseled sinews belie the hero's suffering by evoking a "hardness" that exists beyond the physical. The hardness of the hero's body works to define him – as man, as master over his environment. (1)

These characters also essentially remain outsiders functioning on the margins of society until they are suddenly called to action. McClane is a New York cop estranged from his wife; Riggs becomes a recluse after his wife is murdered. Present-day action heroes such as Jason Bourne take solitude and isolation to new extremes. Being international super-spies or highly trained assassins hunted by the joined forces of corrupted government agencies or other powerful and seemingly ubiquitous organizations, they avoid any emotional attachment as it inevitably leads to the death of their loved ones. Such is the fate of Bourne's love interest Marie. Additionally, each film in the Bourne series ends by him going underground. The message seems to be that there is no place in the society for the likes of him. On an optimistic note, although it took four films and eleven years, Mel Gibson's lethal character eventually settles into a happy relationship and even becomes a father. Maybe there is hope for the lone individualistic action hero after all?

Its conventions crystallized in the 1970s, after more than forty years of evolution, the action film by no means can be seen as a homogenous phenomenon having one clearly definable character type as its hero. In a way typical of postmodern times, it blurs the boundaries between different genres, creating hybrids with the potential to throw new light on some of the old concepts and values they draw on. However, as Eric Lichtenfeld observes in his 2007 comprehensive study on the action movie genre, entitled *Action Speaks Louder: Violence, Spectacle, and the American Action Movie*:

Just as there is no one trend of action movie that typifies the genre, there is no one American identity that explains the genre's resonance. It is true that there are many American identities, but also true that there are relatively fewer American myths. And more than any other viable genre from the "New Hollywood" of the 1960s and 1970s on, the action film perpetuates these myths' fundamental tropes. The myths underpinning the American action film are also the ones on which much American history has been founded. These are what we share. (336)

This chapter has been an attempt to identify the most characteristic of those tropes, a reconnaissance of sorts on the terrain that the female action heroes would eventually come to occupy.

While Homeric epics and Arthurian legends may seem to be a thing of the past, the continuing popularity of films such as Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000), Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* (2004), Zack Snyder's *300* (2007) or American TV series *Spartacus* (2010-2013) and the epic fantasy *Game of Thrones* (still running) suggests that the image of a powerful sword-wielding warrior still captures the popular imagination. Strength, toughness, military prowess, courage – the attributes of a real man; as well as

self-sufficiency, autonomy, defiance, solitude and laconism – the attributes of a true individualist – still seem to be the defining features of a hero, whether the story is set in ancient Greece, Camelot, present-day America or outer space.

Now, the question arises, how do female heroes fit into this framework of (white) maleness, moral and physical toughness, mastery over their own bodies and their environment, self-reliance and individualism if, historically, they've been denied all of these features? To be considered "truly" heroic, do they really need to represent all these traits and conform to these traditional notions of heroism, or perhaps should these notions be somehow redefined and expanded to include traits that have traditionally been associated more with femininity than masculinity?

## **- CHAPTER TWO -**

### **THE FEMININE HEROIC IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ACTION**

#### **CINEMA**

As I have tried to prove in the previous chapter, heroism has traditionally been considered the male domain. Whether in ancient Greece, medieval England or the New World, the great heroic figures of song, ballad, prose and, eventually, cinema have mostly been men. Hardly ever have the glory on the battlefield or the leadership roles and the resulting respect, privileges and power been available to the “weaker” sex. Relegated to more subservient roles of mothers, wives, lovers or victims, women have remained in the shadow of the powerful male heroes who took center stage both in real life and in fiction. “The great works on the hero ... all begin with the assumption that the hero is male. This prevailing bias has given the impression that in literature and life, heroism is a male phenomenon,” Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope assert in *The Female Hero in American and British Literature* (qtd. in Davis 11). As Peter Gibbon observes, “Not until the feminist movement of the late twentieth century would American women be given full access to public life and fair representation in our history books” (47). While it is certainly true that women nowadays enjoy a much greater independence and can pursue careers that used to be reserved for men only – in politics, police or army, among others – the feminist milieus generally agree that the fight for equality is far from over. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, for instance, stress in the introduction to *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (2007) that:

The limits of the kind of gender equality enacted within contemporary popular media culture are profound: they are marked by the valorization of female achievement within traditionally male working environments and the celebration of surgical and other disciplinary techniques that “enable” (i.e., require) women to maintain a youthful appearance and attitude in later life. (1-2)

Thus, Tasker and Negra identify two key problems that contemporary women, and, by the same token, contemporary female heroes, still face – both their achievements and their appearance are forever judged according to criteria established by men. While this disturbing trend permeates almost every sphere of life, this chapter will focus on how it influences the way female action heroes are constructed and then interpreted. How do they fare in the traditionally male movie genre which, more often than not, focuses on “traditionally male working environments”, having as its heroes warriors, soldiers, cops, spies and the like? Was Laura Mulvey right when she claimed in her now classic text “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” that “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance” the cinematic pleasure has been structured around the silent image of a passive woman who is subjected to an active, controlling male gaze (750)?

As the most popular movie genre of today, targeting a mostly young audience, the action film seems to have the power to instill certain ideas about gender roles and power relations between the sexes into their viewers. Drawing on numerous studies<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Gilpatric refers to studies such as Bandura’s *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory* (1986), Blumer and Hauser’s *Movies, Delinquency, and Crime* (1933), Gerbner’s “Cultural indicators: The case of violence in television drama” (1970), Lazarsfeld and Merton’s “Mass communication, popular taste, and organized social action” (1948), Gerbner’s “Cultivation analysis: An overview” (1998), Huesmann’s “The effects of childhood aggression and exposure to media violence on adult behaviors, attitudes and mood: Evidence from a 15-year cross-national longitudinal study (1999) and Signorielli and Bacue’s “Recognition and respect: A content analysis of prime-time television characters across three decades” (1999).

Katy Gilpatric concludes in “Violent Female Action Characters in Contemporary American Cinema” that:

Media has long been recognized as an agent of socialization. ... Therefore, it is worth examining the representations of violent female action characters shown in popular action movies because of the potential to influence a young audience and their ideas about gender and violence. (735)

Similarly, Roger R. Rollin notes in “The Lone Ranger and Lenny Skutnik: The Hero as Popular Culture”:

Popular culture experiences ... are in one sense rituals of reinforcement... . In this light popular culture itself can function as a kind of handbook for the mass audience, promising delight but also delivering instruction. As Joseph Campbell has shown, moral, ethical and religious guidance is one of the main purposes served by myth. The gods and heroes of myth serve as role models for the young... . (32-33)

If we assume it to be true, what do contemporary action movies teach their young viewers about what it means to be a man, woman and, more importantly, what it means to be a hero? It would seem that every society should wish to provide its youth with role models that could be called *positive*. Therefore, it is crucial to address a few key questions, some of which have already been outlined in the Introduction. First of all, when looking at how female characters are constructed in fiction and, consequently, what subject positions constructed by those representations are offered to women, is it possible to find images of *positive female heroism* in contemporary Western narratives? What are the main characteristics of a *positive female hero* and how are they different from the traditional notions of male heroism discussed in the previous chapter? Can the



violent women of contemporary American action films be seen as truly heroic and empowered and if not, what are the reasons for it?

## **2.1. Role Models, Heroes, Heroines and Sheroes: Is There a Name for Heroic Women?**

Before proceeding to analyze the characters themselves, I feel it is important to raise the issue of terminology, since there has been considerable disagreement over how female heroic figures should be named. Discussing the emergence of new social types, Orrin E. Klapp observes, “Naming brings it into group consciousness and enables people to organize their opinion toward it and put it into a status system” (20). Women acting for the greater good or in defense of others have been described with a great many adjectives such as self-sacrificing, accomplished, hard-working, kind-hearted, altruistic but hardly ever as truly heroic. They may have been role models, but not *heroes*. An interesting reflection on the problematic usage of terms such as a *role model*, *hero*, *heroine* or even a *shero* can be found in Peter H. Gibbon’s *A Call to Heroism*. Discussing the difference between the term *role model* and *heroine*, he explains:

I like Jill Ker Conway’s distinction. Author of the best-selling autobiography *The Road from Coorain*, Conway recently ended a lecture on extraordinary women, such as nineteenth-century African explorer Mary Kingsley, with the statement “Women should have heroines, not role models.” I asked her later what she meant. Women, she said, are as physically brave and as daring as men, and the routine use of role model to describe outstanding women conceals their bravery and diminishes their heroism. ... Conway’s distinction argues that heroine is a more

powerful word than role model and that heroism is a reach for the extraordinary. (9)

It should be noted, however, that the word *heroine* has itself been a point of contention for many women, feminists and critics as it is frequently associated with and used to denote a female fictional character who has nothing to do with heroism; on the contrary, for many people, the word *heroine* is a “diminutive” term (Pearson and Pope vii) which brings to mind the damsel in distress of romantic fiction. In “Sleeps With Monsters: *Mass Effect* and the Normalization of the Woman Hero,” Liz Bourke observes:

Whether we like it or not, *heroine* is still a word that embodies connotations which differ in many and manifest ways from *hero*. Gothic and romance novels have heroines. Thrillers and action stories have heroes: if these also have *heroines*, the heroine almost always takes second stage to the *hero*. Where the *heroine* has pride of place, she’s (again, almost always) intimately connected to, or in some way (emotionally, intellectually, or politically) dependent upon, a *hero*, whose actions and reactions are either vital to her as a character, or to the resolution of plot and theme. The reverse is much less true. ... The Hero does not depend: his actions are not *contingent* actions.

An interesting observation on the very nature of the term is made by Jolene Marion Davis in “Margaret Laurence’s Manawaka Heroes: Hagar, Rachel, Stacey, as Archetypal and Feminist Heroes.” She writes:

... the OED [Oxford English Dictionary] informs us that the “ine” suffix is “added to the names of persons, animals, or material things and to some other words with the sense of “pertaining to,” or “of the nature of.” What this suffix implies in the word “heroine” is that the male is the

norm and the female must be like him, belong to him, or have a relation to him. The implication is that a “heroine” takes on the nature of a “hero” while not being one herself. (3)

Taking into consideration that the word *hero* was adopted by the English language from the ancient Greek ἥρως, *hērōs* in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, a time when women were restricted to the private sphere and, therefore, were excluded from heroic pursuits, it is no wonder that the term, originally signifying a warrior, defender or demi-god, for a long time was applied to men only and is marked by such strong masculine associations.

Although coming from the British soil, a good recent example of the *hero/heroine* debate is Sebastian Faulks’s assertion that “Jane Eyre is a heroine; Becky Sharp ... is a hero. No one seems to question this distinction; it’s obvious.” Of course, such a distinction requires a definition of what a *heroine* and *hero* exactly means. For Faulks, the difference between the two is ultimately “a question of independence.” The *hero* has it and the *heroine* does not because, as Faulks argues, using Jane Eyre to illustrate his point, “her happiness, and her psychological ‘completion,’ seem to depend on her securing the love and companionship of another.” For Faulks, such desires are obviously antithetical to heroism. He adds, “Ultimately, ... a hero can be disappointed or defeated in love and it will not matter, because pairing off is not the goal or completion of the heroic trajectory. The hero imprints his or her qualities on society and by doing so overcomes false or smothering social restrictions.” Faulks’s essay, published in *The Telegraph* in January 2011, has caused a surge of disagreement in many quarters. To give just two examples, in February 2011, during a BBC radio program Open Book, a British radio presenter Mariella Frostrup challenged him to explain what exactly he meant by such a distinction eventually forcing him with her

questions to deny being, to use Faulks's phrase, "anti-women."<sup>12</sup> An American feature writer Laura Miller, on the other hand, states in her text "In defense of Jane Eyre" that "This definition of heroism is very far from 'obvious,' let alone universally held." Setting aside the question of whether Faulks's judgment of Jane Eyre is not a serious misjudgment, which Miller believes it is, Faulks's definition of heroism seems to have all the hallmarks of sexism, privileging as it does emotional detachment and solitude, traditionally viewed as masculine traits, over the need for companionship and love, traditionally viewed as feminine. Miller concludes:

For Faulks, placing emotional connections at the center of one's life is a form of "surrender" that female protagonists — with the exception of the wicked yet thrilling Becky — too often make. Only by triumphing over others, by treating them as instruments of her will, does Becky transcend this fatal (presumably feminine) weakness and show the "independence" of a true hero. Perhaps it's no surprise, then, that Faulks was chosen to write the continuing adventures of a less amoral but equally self-contained protagonist, James Bond — a man, it must be noted, who does not have a single friend. He can call that heroism if he likes, but I can think of better words.

Thus, in Faulks's account, the term *heroine* becomes a negative term signifying femininity and weakness, while the *hero* is a positive term signifying masculinity and

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<sup>12</sup> During the program, Faulks explains that for him Becky Sharp is a *hero* not a *heroine* because "she is the focus," and goes on to claim that the two terms "actually lose their ... gender connotations." To Frostrup's suggestion that he is "actually employing them because of their gender connotations," he replies, "No, really, I think you can have a woman hero," and then with disarming frankness adds, "I don't think you can have a man heroine, on the other hand." My first thought on hearing this was, as was Frostrup's, why not? If the words "lose their gender connotations" as he himself claims, why can't we have a *man heroine*, only a *man hero*, but we can have a *woman hero* and a *woman heroine*? Faulks's answer is vague at best, "Because these things are not merely images of one another." For him a woman, like Jane Eyre, whose journey, he believes, is to find a man cannot be a *hero*, only a *heroine*. Again the word *hero* becomes superior to *heroine*, and interestingly enough, it is only women who can be the inferior *heroines*, while men are forever the superior *heroes*.

strength. Interestingly, a very similar argument is offered in Lee R. Edwards's *Psyche as Hero: Female Heroism and Fictional Form* (1984), supposedly a feminist text. She writes, "[the female hero] is no sheep in wolf's clothing, no mere heroine in armor. A primary character, the hero inspires and requires followers; the heroine obeys, falls into line, takes second place" (5). According to Edwards, the *hero* possesses "vision, daring and power: to charm; move, break with the past; endure hardship and privation; journey into the unknown; risk death and survive – at least in spirit," while the *heroine* "is eclipsed, upstaged, in darkness" (6). What differentiates Faulks's and Edwards's understanding of the *hero/heroine* distinction is that Edwards claims that *hero* and *heroine* can be represented by both sexes. As has already been mentioned, Faulks maintains that the terms are free of gender connotations but then undermines his own argument stating that you cannot have a *man heroine*. Edwards stays true to her word when she says, "Role, not sex, divides the two" (5). Still, one might wonder whether the concept of a *male heroine* and the alleged lack of gender connotations of the two terms are not too farfetched propositions to have any real influence on the construction and interpretation of heroic figures. It is also disturbing to see a feminist use the word "mere" and "heroine" in one sentence.

While, as we have seen, Faulks is not the only one who believes in the superiority of the *hero* over the *heroine*, the term also has its defenders. Deborah Lyons, for instance, states in her book *Gender and Immortality: Heroines in Ancient Greek Myth and Cult* that:

... in English usage *heroine* most often means a woman of extraordinary qualities, or the female protagonist of a work of fiction or drama. The word *heroine* carries with it an unfortunate freight of associations, suggesting not a powerful being to be invoked and propitiated from

beyond the grave, but a frail creature requiring rescue by none other than a hero. I decided not to circumvent this problem by the use of the phrase “female hero,” since such a phrase reinforces the notion of the female as the special case, the other, the marked category, while the male remains unmarked, normative, universal. In English, a language in which gender is relatively unmarked, gender-specific forms like “poetess” can be rightly rejected as patronizing. In translating from Greek, a language with a high degree of gender specificity, it would be a distortion to deny the existence or significance of gender-marked terms. For these reasons, I have elected to use the word *heroine* as the female equivalent of the male *hero*, confident that it needs not rescue but a chance to speak for itself.

In a similar vein, Elizabeth Vonarburgh, an award-winning author of fantasy and science fiction, recalls how she used to play make-believe heroes as a child, and wonders:

... why not «heroines», by the way? But I've been told a few years ago that «heroine» as a feminine form of «hero» is not politically correct — I suppose it evokes too many pallid females wringing their hands at the top of a tower with their long hair streaming in the wind. I thought then, and I still do, that I can't see why we shouldn't reclaim the word for ourselves — if we don't do it, who will?

This would not be the first case when feminists have tried to reverse the negative associations with certain gender-specific words or words describing sexual orientation. The fairly successful reappropriation of the word *queer* is a good example. Similarly, there have been attempts to reappropriate the word *cunt*, generally believed to be “the

most taboo word on the media” (Creed, *Media Matrix* 52).<sup>13</sup> For now, we must find comfort in the fact that most (if not all) dictionaries define *heroine* first as a woman admired for extreme bravery and heroic acts and only then as the main female character of fiction, including locked-up princesses and damsels in distress.<sup>14</sup>

Satisfied neither with the *hero* nor the *heroine*, some feminists have elected to tread a still different path and make an attempt to reclaim heroism for women by the introduction of the term *shero*. “How important it is for us to recognize and celebrate our heroes and she-roes!” Maya Angelou, African-American poet, Civil Rights leader, once wrote, inspiring many women to adopt the term. As the word has yet to enter dictionaries, available definitions of *shero* are relatively few. One particularly appealing example was provided by Women’s Refuge, an organization fighting to prevent and stop family violence in New Zealand. Inviting everyone to “Be a Shero!” they explain:

A hero/heroine is someone who fights for human rights in general. Expanding on general “heroism,” a Shero is a woman or a man who stands up specifically for female rights. In order to be considered as a Shero, one must DO something to help the women’s cause, or be a historical figure who was unconventional in their thinking for that time of what females can do.

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<sup>13</sup> A very energetic movement called cunt-power was initiated by Germaine Greer already in the 1960s. An interesting and comprehensive analysis of the subject can be found in Matthew Hunt’s *Cunt: The History of the C-Word*. He writes: “The purpose of the reappropriation of ‘cunt’ is to reclaim it as a neutral or even positive anatomical term, replacing its persistently pejorative male usage.” Certainly, a similar agenda could be set for the reappropriation of the word *heroine*.

<sup>14</sup> Such order of uses can be found in *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (International Student’s Edition), *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Updated Edition), *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language* (Fourth Edition), *Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged*, *Random House Kernerman Webster’s College Dictionary* and many more. In fact, I have not managed to find even one dictionary in which the order would be reversed.

It is understandable that many women embrace and celebrate the term<sup>15</sup> because they are frustrated with the pervasive use of the gender-specific pronoun “he” to refer to a person of unspecified sex, thus making women virtually invisible in many contexts. The question is, however, whether the term *shero* helps to purge the English language of sexism or, on the contrary, unnecessarily reinforces the distinction between male and female heroic figures, just like the *hero/heroine* distinction does.

Deborah Cameron begins the introduction to *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader* (1990) by asking “Why is language a feminist issue?” and stresses that “contemporary feminisms (I use the plural advisedly) have placed language on the political agenda” (1). She emphasizes, “Feminist views on language are diverse. This reflects both the political differences that have always existed within feminism, and the great proliferation of ‘discourses’ – intellectual traditions, theoretical frameworks, academic disciplines – in which language itself is discussed” (1). As the above-mentioned arguments show, there has been an ongoing debate regarding linguistic sexism; a debate in which there are as many opinions as there are participants. Writing about positive female heroism, of necessity, I found myself forced to take sides. As the title of this thesis suggests, I elected to call the female action characters populating contemporary action/adventure movie genre *action chicks*. Borrowed from the book title *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture* by Sherrie A. Inness, the term immediately points to a certain contradiction inherent in the construction of most contemporary female action figures; generally used to denote a young girl or

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<sup>15</sup> The term has been adopted by other organizations, for example, SHEROES United, which, to use a quote from their website “embraces ‘female super role models’ in our local and global communities to empower their voices and become triumph creators for positive change.” The word has also been repeatedly used by Oprah Winfrey and her guests during her show on 30 May 2011 (as reported on the blog Word Lily, focusing on English words which are new or rarely used). Those willing, can participate in the course “The Shero’s Journey” with Jennifer Loudon, a best-selling author and personal growth teacher. In the promotional material for the course we read, “Your she-ro’s journey is about a quest – the quest to claim your power, trust it, and use it transform the world - while following your truest desires. Your quest requires self-compassion, self-care, and doing what brings you alive – not martyrdom, burn out and proving yourself worthy.”



woman, especially an attractive one, the term *chick* seems antithetical to the ideal of heroic toughness.

As for the female heroic figures found in the Native American tradition, my personal preference is the “female hero.” I have found the feminist definition of the word *hero* provided by Berenice Fisher in Cheris Kramarae’s *A Feminist Dictionary* (1985) to be particularly helpful in making that choice:

Rather than one who is superhuman and above the rest of society in strength and power, [a hero] is a woman who shares our conflicts and struggles in a contradictory world. She shows us how to struggle more successfully ... The genuine hero helps her friends and comrades by *teaching* them directly or indirectly what she has learned from her experience, and how she has applied theoretical and practical knowledge to specific situations (emphasis added). (qtd. in Davis 7)

This definition does not simply adopt a traditionally masculine term to apply it to women; rather it involves a serious reevaluation and rethinking of what heroism means. In the Greek language, the word *hero* originally did not have a female equivalent. I believe it would only be fair to use the term to describe heroic figures of both sexes alike, adding the *male* or *female* qualifier only when, for some reason, the sex of the *hero* is important. Just as some feminists advocate the reappropriation of the word *heroine* and purging it of negative associations, so it is possible to claim the word *hero* for feminism. Personally, I believe it would be more beneficial since unlike the gender-specific, derivative words *heroine* and *shero*, pertaining to women only, the reappropriation of the term *hero*, traditionally associated with men and masculinity, seems to create space for a more effective reformulation of the heroic ideal, affecting women and men alike.

## 2.2.Heroic Women and the Problem of Underrepresentation

In the preface to his book *American Heroes: Myth and Reality*, Marshall W. Fishwick asks, “Why are the American people hero-worshippers? By what process are our heroes chosen? How are they elevated and by whom?” (v). Obviously, these questions suggest that Fishwick recognizes the existence of an active, conscious force in the process of turning a given individual into a hero. Indeed, he identifies this force as “a behind-the scenes group” (v) that he calls “the hero-makers” (v). Likewise, Roger R. Rollin opens his essay with “The *sine qua non* of heroism is publicity. Without publicity, an act of heroism is like the sound made by the tree that falls in the empty forest” (14). To continue with this metaphor, judging by the acknowledgement female heroes have received in history, grudging and belated at best and nonexistent at worst, empty forests all over the world seem to have been their “preferred” action space with few “hero-makers” in sight. Female heroism has not been publicized and celebrated enough. In a foreword to Varla Ventura’s *Sheroes: Bold, Brash, and Absolutely Unabashed Superwomen From Susan Anthony B. to Xena* (1998), Viki Leon points out that although there have been numerous *sheroes* in human history, “even in the late twentieth century, the historical invisibility process often begins immediately – in a woman’s own lifetime” (xii). To prove her point, during her numerous meetings and lectures following the publication of *Uppity Women of Ancient Times* (1995), she has given her audiences what she calls a “pop quiz,” (xii) asking them about three randomly chosen real-life women achievers from recent American history. “I regret to say that no one has known the answers,” she concludes (xii). Perhaps it is no wonder then that the first female superhero of Marvel comics was called – *nomen omen* – The Invisible Woman. A fitting name indeed.

The fact that, in comparison to men, so few women have been celebrated as truly heroic by no means is a proof that heroism is an exclusively male trait. Rather, as Peter H. Gibbon indicates, having limited access to the traditionally heroic activities such as warfare or politics, women have had to “channel their heroic impulses” (45) into spheres available to them, such as “altruism and reform” (45). He provides numerous examples of real-life women activists who, as he says, “Although not fully recognized in their time, ... not only reflected the ideology of heroism in nineteenth-century America but helped shape it” (45). Dorothea Dix fought to reform treatment of the mentally ill; Lucretia Mott travelled all over America to openly oppose slavery at Quaker meetings and demand fair treatment of women; Harriet Tubman earned the nickname “Moses” as she led hundreds of slaves to freedom, smuggling them in the dead of night to the free states. She took an active part in the American Civil War, acting first as a cook and nurse, and then venturing into the traditionally male territory performing missions as a scout and spy (Gibbon 45-47). In her book *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* (1999), Sherrie A. Inness states, “We have been told a lie. The media have supported the myth that men are tough heroes – or predators – and women are frail victims – or prey. Despite what the media might suggest, women have always been tough, both in literature and in real life” (18). Inness illustrates her argument with examples of fictional characters belonging to the literary tradition which depicts tough working-class women, such as Deborah from *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861), toiling away in a nineteenth-century cotton mill; the unnamed narrator from “Soap and Water” (1920) working in the laundry to pay for her education; or Judith from *Weeds* (1923), struggling to raise a family as a poor tobacco farmer’s wife. What all of them have in common is that they are forced to be tough by their economic situation. Their toughness is a necessity, not a choice. Nevertheless, there are

also women who choose to adopt more “masculine” characteristics at the risk of being ostracized as being not feminine enough. Fictional characters such as Calamity Jane, Mattie Ross or Idgie Threadgoode are female dare-devils sporting guns, drinking whiskey, wearing breeches and killing when need be. Such Western heroines are not only the products of artistic imagination. Inness refers to Shelley Armitage’s essay on nineteenth-century real-life cowgirls such as Lizzie Williams, Mrs. William Mannix, Sally Skull or Annie MacDoulet known as “Cattle Annie,” (*Tough Girls* 19). She stresses that they are “a few of the many tough women who had to fight to survive the rough conditions of frontier life” (19). Yet, unlike a host of tough and rough cowboys, so few of the tough cowgirls have made it to the big screen.

However, as a result of cultural and social changes brought about by the efforts of three waves of feminism, women have eventually started to occupy more active roles and enjoy more respect and recognition. Access to education, the right to vote and entering the paid labor force on a mass scale have given women much greater autonomy. Martha McCaughey and Neal King describe this change, “In this new world, women move away from the moral (and nonviolent) purity of the Victorian ‘Cult of True Womanhood’ and onto men’s turf – police work, military service, and a growing self-defense movement. Such a culture puts violent women (as heroes or villains) in its movies” (5). Indeed, many feminist critics have observed that in recent years, the number of violent female action figures in the popular media has been steadily growing. Referring to *Aliens* (1986), *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and *Terminator 2* (1991), Yvonne Tasker argues in *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (1993), “The success of these films serves to highlight the existence of a cinematic tradition which has placed women at the centre of the action narrative, a tradition that stretches back to the 1970s and beyond” (3). In *Tough Girls*, Sherrie A. Inness

announces, “Tough girls are in with a vengeance” (6). “Popular culture cannot seem to get enough of tough females,” she maintains five years later in *Action Chicks* (2004) (2). The author of *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* (2011), Jeffrey A. Brown refers to the action heroine’s “seemingly omnipresent image” (8).

The increasing popularity of female action figures has also attracted more critical attention. As observed by Sherrie A. Inness in the introduction to her book *Tough Girls*, for a long time, studies on heroism and toughness focused almost exclusively on male heroes. While she provides a long list of male-centered studies written by male authors,<sup>16</sup> she points out that even feminist critics such as Susan Jeffords in *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (1994) or Yvonne Tasker in *Spectacular Bodies* focus primarily on men. In “The Problem of Woman as Hero in the Work of Joseph Campbell” (2011), Sarah Nicholson notes that, “In early modern books on the hero,” for instance Carlyle’s *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1908), Rank’s *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero: A Psychological Exploration of Myth* (1909) or Raglan’s *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* (1936), “heroism is assigned almost exclusively to men” (187). The main focus of her article, Joseph Campbell’s landmark work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), is a striking example of a male-centered text on heroism, where the author offers a pattern of the Hero’s Journey but fails to give an adequate account of a heroic journey undertaken by a woman. Although Campbell maintains that the hero can be both male and female, in effect he “proceeds to discuss the heroic pattern as male and to define the female characters as goddesses, temptresses, and earth mothers,” (Pearson

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<sup>16</sup> She refers to studies such as Peter Shaw’s “The Tough Guy Intellectual” (1966), David Madden’s *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties* (1968), Harry Hossent’s *Gangster Movies: Gangsters, Hoodlums and Tough Guys of the Screen* (1974), Joan Mellen’s *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film* (1977), James L. Neibaur’s *Tough Guy: The American Movie Macho* (1989), Antony Easthope’s *What a Man’s Gotta Do* (1990).

and Pope qtd. in Nicholson 188). Nicholson sums up, “Is woman a hero of myth and life, for Campbell? He answers with a definitive ‘Yes.’ But if we look at the symbolism the answer is, ‘Not really’” (190). Luckily, in recent years, as a result of the increasing popularity of female action heroes in the media, the situation has changed and a number of essays and book-length studies on female heroic figures have appeared, among them the already-mentioned: Pearson and Pope’s *The Female Hero in American and British Literature* (1981), *Though Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* (1999) and *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture* (2004) by Sherrie A. Inness, Varla Ventura’s *Sheroes: Bold, Brash, and Absolutely Unabashed Superwomen From Susan Anthony B. to Xena* (1998), *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies* (2001) edited by Martha McCaughey and Neal King, *The Warrior Women of Television: A Feminist Cultural Analysis of the New Female Body in Popular Media* by Dawn Heineken (2004), *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* (2011) by Jeffrey A. Brown as well as Kathleen Raglan’s *Fearless Girls, Wise Women & Beloved Sisters: Heroines in Folktales from Around the World* (1998), *Athena’s Daughters: Television’s New Women Warriors* (2003) edited by Frances H. Elary and Kathleen Kennedy, Rikke Schubart’s *Super Bitches and Action Babes: The Female in Popular Cinema, 1970 – 2006* (2007), *Female Action Heroes: A Guide to Women in Comics, Video Games, Film, and Television* (2010) by Gladys L. Knight, *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors: Superwomen in Modern Mythology* (2010) by Jennifer K. Stuller, and many more.

While it is understandable that after so many years, or rather centuries, of the male hero’s dominance, feminist critics applaud both the growth in the number of female heroic figures in the various media forms and the growth in the number of woman-centered critical studies, any real satisfaction or trumpeting the victory would

arguably be premature. Indeed, the number of female heroic figures has been on the increase, but so has the number of action films in general. Selected statistics for the years 1995 – 2014 provided by The Numbers, a reference library analyzing trends in the domestic movie industry indicate that the film genres most conducive to heroic deeds such as adventure, action, thriller/suspense or superhero genre have also enjoyed an increasing popularity over the years.<sup>17</sup> This trend has grown stronger especially in the last few years, when the overall number of such movies in release has nearly doubled when compared to 1995. Therefore, if we want to judge the extent to which female heroic figures have caught up with men, we need to look at the proportion. An extremely useful source for such analysis is Katy Gilpatric’s study “Violent Female Action Characters in Contemporary American Cinema” (2010). It is a very comprehensive content analysis of action films featuring violent female action characters (“VFACs”) that were released between 1991<sup>18</sup> and 2005 and ranked by IMDB as the top twenty grossing action films of the year. To be qualified as a VFAC, the character had to be “a leading female character in the film who engaged in at least

<sup>17</sup> Selected statistics for the years 1995 – 2014 from The Numbers

Year	Movies in release				
	Adventure	Action	Thriller/ Suspense	Superhero	Together
1995	25	29	18	1	73
1996	23	35	19	1	78
1997	13	34	23	2	72
1998	20	31	19	1	72
1999	18	23	15	1	57
2000	21	28	21	3	73
2001	24	28	22	1	75
2002	35	27	32	3	97
2003	36	30	19	4	89
2004	34	27	29	5	95
2005	36	42	27	5	110
2006	32	31	35	4	102
2007	30	38	55	3	126
2008	43	37	51	8	139
2009	35	31	51	6	123
2010	30	30	50	3	113
2011	45	45	59	5	154
2012	38	45	61	4	148
2013	32	44	69	4	149
2014	42	48	60	5	155

<sup>18</sup> Gilpatric justifies the choice of this time frame saying, “The year 1991 was selected as a starting point because it attracted feminist attention with the release of *Thelma and Louise* and *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*,” (737).

one act of physical violence” (737). Of the three hundred movies analyzed according to these criteria, a final sample of 112 films was selected for detailed coding, which amounts to 37% of the initial sampling frame. Why only 37%? Because the rest did not have any VFACs present. Gilpatric’s research focused on three main aspects of VFACs: “(1) gender stereotypes, (2) demographics, and (3) quantity and type of violence” (734). While the findings of Gilpatric’s study will be analyzed in greater detail in the following sections, which will discuss the various objections formed around female action characters within feminist film criticism, in the context of the discussion at hand, it is crucial to mention, as Gilpatric reports, that “of the 157 VFACs coded, only 15.3 % were depicted as the main heroine” (739). These numbers clearly show that by the year 2005, female action figures still had a long way to go as far as gender equity in the movie industry was concerned.

A fairly recent controversy over the discrimination against women in Hollywood was sparked when Editor in Chief of *Deadline.com*, Nikki Finke reported on October 5, 2007 that Jeff Robinov, Warner Bros’ president of production, informed three different producers that “[they] are no longer doing movies with women in the lead.” As she explains, this decree was allegedly caused by the poor box office performance of Jodie Foster’s *The Brave One* (2007) and Nicole Kidman’s *The Invasion* (2007). Asked by Finke to comment on the situation, Gloria Allred, an eminent women’s rights attorney, stated:

If that’s what he said, when movies with men as the lead fail, no one says we’ll stop making movies with men in the lead. This is an insult to all moviegoers and particularly women. It is truly unfortunate that women get blamed for decisions which are made by men. Instead of taking responsibility for their own lack of judgment about which scripts to



make, directors to hire and budgets to OK, some men in the movie industry find it easier to place blame for their lack of success on women leads and to exclude talented female actors from the top employment opportunities in Hollywood in favor of macho males. If that studio confirms that their policy is to now exclude women as leads, then my policy would be to boycott films made by Warner Bros.

Although the online story attracted numerous responses, especially from outraged bloggers, one from Jennifer Kesler was particularly enlightening. A former trainee for a screenwriter, she had access to the inside information on the various unwritten but universally held rules governing the industry. She observes that whether Robinov really made that statement or not, “remarks like that are amazingly common in the film industry,” (October 8, 2007)<sup>19</sup>. In a different article from June 30, 2008, she recalls her experiences from film classes at UCLA, where she was told on more than one occasion that she should not write scripts that passed the Bechdel test (also known as Mo Movie Measure or “Dykes To Watch Out For” test). The test is named after the author of the comic strip in which the idea first appeared, Alison Bechdel. The rules are quite simple: to pass the test, a film must have (1) at least two named female characters who (2) talk to each other about (3) something other than a man. It is surprising how many films, especially of the action/adventure/thriller genre, do not pass this test.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly enough, even films which have women as the leading characters, for example *Alien 3*

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<sup>19</sup> In a report on the box office results of female-led action films, Martha M. Lauzen refers to a comment published by *The New York Times* film critic Manohla Dargis in response to the rumors about Robinov’s decree. Dargis makes it perfectly clear that this way of thinking is by no means new to Hollywood. She writes, “it is hard to believe that anyone would be so stupid as to actually say what many in that town think: Women can’t direct. Women can’t open movies. Women are a niche” (Lauzen, “Women @ the Box Office” 1).

<sup>20</sup> To give only a few examples from along list provided on Feminist Frequency by Anita Sarkeesian: *The Dark Knight*, *District 9*, *Terminator Salvation*, *GI Joe*, *Bourne Supremacy*, *Bourne Identity*, *Transformers*, *Ocean’s Twelve*, *Pirates of the Caribbean 1, 2 and 3*, *Fight Club*, *The Fifth Element*, *Quantum of Solace 007*, *Indiana Jones*, *Alien 3*, *Lord of the Rings 1, 2 and 3*, *Mission Impossible*, *Braveheart*, *Gladiator*, *X Men*, *Wolverine*, *Tomb Raider* and many more.

(1992) or *Tomb Raider* (2001), frequently fail the Bechdel test, showing how underdeveloped these characters are. If they are represented at all, women's complex lives, experiences, interests and conversations are reduced to just one focal point – men. “The audience doesn't want to listen to a bunch of women talking about whatever it is women talk about,” Jennifer Kesler reported being told by an industry pro on demanding an explanation on why she should only write scripts about “white, straight, male leads” (June 30, 2008).

As the news about Robinov's “no more female-led movies” decree spread from website to website and blog to blog causing more and more public outcry and calls for boycott, Warner Bros implemented damage control and denied the accusations. *The Movie Blog* was informed by a Warner Bros representative that “Mr. Robinov never made that statement, nor is it his policy” (Giles). Four days after Nikki Finke's original report, a short article by Anne Thompson was posted on Variety.com saying:

Despite the failure of three femme-centered actioners produced by Joel Silver — Jodie Foster starrer “The Brave One”; “The Reaping,” with Hilary Swank; and the remake “The Invasion,” starring Nicole Kidman — Warner production proxy Jeff Robinov insists he is moving forward with several movies with women in the lead. Indeed, he is offended by rumors of his cinematic misogyny.

While not a personal denial, this statement obviously represents the official stand of Robinov and the studio. It might have been more convincing had it not been for Finke's another article entitled “The Reality Behind Jeff Robinov's ‘Denial’” from October 10, where she presents a “behind-the-scenes” story of “charming” and “cordial” phone calls and emails exchanged with Robinov. Since some of the exchange was private and off the record, Finke does not reveal the actual content of those conversations. Suffice it is

to say that though he denied being bothered by any phone calls regarding the posting, Robinov eventually expressed a wish to issue a denial only to withdraw at the very last moment, and according to Finke, sources inside Warner Bros suggest that Robinov was actually inundated with calls and admitted to his colleagues he was “in the room” when the infamous statement was articulated.

While Gilpatric observed an upward trend in the number of VFACs and violent scenes with them during 2003 and 2004, the study concluded in 2005 and was unable to determine whether the trend would continue. The Robinov scandal took place in 2007. What is the situation of female heroic figures now, in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Not very good, it seems. In an article entitled “Hollywood’s glass ceiling: Why doesn’t the film industry trust women?” Melissa Silverstein comments, “It would be wonderful to say that in 2013 things were looking up for women in Hollywood – both onscreen and behind the scenes – but the sad news is that the numbers have remained consistently dismal for the last decade.” The statistics provided every year by The Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University indicate that the percentage of women employed in key behind-the-scenes roles has been fluctuating between 16 - 19% since 1998 and has actually dropped a couple of percentage points in 2013 when compared to the first year the report was published (data from Martha M. Lauzen’s report “The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind-the Scenes Employment of women on the Top 250 Films of 2013”). According to the latest report for 2014, that year, 17% of behind-the-scenes employees were women: the same figure as in 1998. In a separate report published in 2012 focusing on the number of female characters featured in the movies entitled “It’s a Man’s (Celluloid) World: On-Screen Representations of Female Characters in the Top 100 Films of 2011,” Lauzen observes:

In 2011, females remained dramatically under-represented as characters in film when compared with their representation in the U.S. population. Last year, females accounted for 33% of all characters in the top 100 domestic grossing films. This represents an increase of 5 percentage points since 2002 ... .

While the percentage of female characters has increased over the last decade, the percentage of female protagonists has declined. In 2002, female characters accounted for 16% of protagonists. In 2011, females comprised only 11% of protagonists. (1)

A similar analysis conducted by Lauzen for the year 2014 has found that women comprised 12% of protagonists and that only 30% of all speaking characters were female (1). These numbers speak for themselves. In a country where women constitute over half of the moviegoers,<sup>21</sup> they are notoriously marginalized by the film industry, the action/adventure genre traditionally being the most male-dominated of all. In circles critical of the present situation, it is a commonly held belief that as long as men remain the dominant behind-the-scenes group and decision-makers, there is little hope for any positive change as far as the on-screen representation of female characters is concerned. Research studies commissioned by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media confirm that

... female involvement in the creative process is imperative for creating greater gender balance before production even begins. There is a causal relationship between positive female portrayals and female content creators involved in production. In fact, when even one woman writer

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<sup>21</sup> According to MPAA's report for the year 2012, "Females have comprised a larger share of moviegoers ... than males during 2009-2012. The trend is relatively consistent, but in 2012 there was an increase of 1 percentage point in the share of females that attended the cinema (52%) relative to 2011" (13). In 2014, that number hasn't changed (13).

works on a film, there is a 10.4% difference in screen time for female characters. Sadly, men outnumber women in key production roles by nearly 5 to 1. (Smith)

Without female filmmakers, the female voice and female stories are unlikely to find their way onto the big screen in equal share with men.<sup>22</sup>

It seems that especially now, in times of global economic crisis and film budgets inflated by highly advanced digital technologies, studios are calculating the potential profits very carefully and their policy is to rely on the well-tested, safe formulas.<sup>23</sup> And that means having white, straight, male leads, as these have been clear sources of revenue over the past decades. Melissa Silverstein argues that female leads may not be viewed the same way:

It's clear that Hollywood has a woman problem. It's not just that they don't trust the vision of a woman to direct; they don't trust that people want to see our stories. There's a prevailing sense that male stories are universal, for everyone, and that women's stories are just for women. ... The reality that female directors and producers and writers deal with is the ongoing perception that women will go see movies about men and that men won't go see stories about women.

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<sup>22</sup> There have been several national initiatives aimed at providing young female filmmakers with proper education and tools to give them an easier start in the industry. As Kathleen Sweeny observes in "Grrls Male Movies: The Emergence of Women-Led Filmmaking Initiatives for Teenage Girls," "Since the turn of the millennium, women filmmakers, youth advocates, media artists, and self-proclaimed 'geek chicks' have moved beyond media critique and hand-wringing to proactive girls programming via digital filmmaking." She mentions programs such as Girls Film School at the College of Santa Fe in New Mexico; Girls-Eye View at Eyebeam's After-School Atelier in New York City; Divas Direct in San Diego, California; Seattle, Washington's Reel Grrls, and Girls Inc.'s national pilot video program for teenage girls, Girls Make the Message.

<sup>23</sup> Scott Huver, entertainment and pop culture expert, summarizes this trend telling FOX411's Pop Tarts column that, "Safe and familiar rules the blockbuster mentality at the moment, and very few are trying to trail-blaze for action heroines" (qtd. in McKay). Similarly, Dr. Dean Conrad, writer and academic, author of "Where have all the Ripleys gone?" observed during his appearance on Woman's Hour on BBC Radio 4 in May 2013 that because the films, especially science-fiction films have become very expensive to make "film makers are becoming more conservative [and] drifting back ... to the old idea of the woman as the sex object or the love interest and we've lost all those really positive scientists and astronauts."

Is there really a link between the gender of the protagonists and filmmakers and the box office gross? The Robinov scandal prompted Dr. Martha M. Lauzen to conduct another study, this time to establish whether the gender of the protagonist and filmmakers involved in the production really has a direct influence on box office takings. The study analyzed the top 100 worldwide grossing films of 2007. Lauzen's conclusions are as follows:

Overall, when women and men filmmakers have similar budgets for their films, the resulting box office grosses are also similar. In other words, the sex of filmmakers does not determine box office grosses. ...

When the size of the budget is held constant, films with female protagonists or prominent females in an ensemble cast earn similar box office grosses (domestic, international, opening weekend) and DVD sales as films with male protagonists. Because films featuring male protagonists have larger budgets, they earn larger box office grosses. However, the differences in box office grosses are not caused by the sex of the protagonist but by the size of the budget. Films with larger budgets generate larger grosses, regardless of the sex of the protagonist. (1-2)

The results of this study as well as the box office success of female-led films such as the *Underworld* series (2003, 2006, 2009, 2012) or *The Hunger Games* (2012), *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (2013) and *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 1* (2014) clearly show that with a good budget and a good script, female action figures can be a magnet equally strong as their male counterparts. In February 2014, Vocativ published an analysis of the 2013 top 50 box office hits, which shows that although only half of them passed the Bechdel test, the combined income at the box office of those which did was much greater than that of the ones which did not: 4.22 billion dollars US box office

gross against 2.66 billion. This might suggest the audiences do appreciate well-developed female characters after all. If that is not proof enough, consider the cult surrounding Sigourney Weaver's Ellen Ripley, by many hailed as the most iconic action heroine of all time, listed by the American Film Institute as the eighth-greatest protagonist in American cinematic history (Meslow).

Returning to the questions that this discussion opened with, i.e. how heroes are chosen and elevated in America and by whom, the answer, in relation to Hollywood, would unfortunately be that they are chosen by men. Male heroic figures are elevated by large film budgets and good publicity orchestrated by male decision-makers in the film industry. In *Blood, Guns, and Testosterone: Action Films, Audiences, and a Thirst for Violence* (2010), Barna W. Donovan observes:

... the stars who shaped the modern action film were primarily speaking to men. Although this is undergoing a transformation today, with Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt, Nicolas Cage, and Matt Damon becoming the new A-list of action, for the participants of this study, the quintessential modern action heroes are men who speak to the problems, insecurities, and longings of men. (140)

If that is true, what happens when the action hero is a woman? Is she a progressive figure that confuses gender barriers and provides an empowering image for female viewers? Or is she simply a *woman* who just like the male hero “speaks to the problems, insecurities, and longings of men” reinforcing the already-existing gender stereotypes?

### 2.3. Western “Action Chicks”: Positive or Negative?

As the previous section demonstrates, in recent years, there has been a significant increase in the amount of critical attention devoted to female heroism and violence. While all these studies seem to agree that the present-day female heroes are much tougher, more powerful and more aggressive than their predecessors, they also point to the fact that, to quote Inness, “The freedoms that these figures suggest frequently lie within a narrow set of prescribed social boundaries” (*Action Chicks* 8). While on the surface these characters may seem subversive since they complicate the traditional perception of women as “*affectionate, submissive, emotional, sympathetic, talkative, and gentle*”; and men as “*dominant, aggressive, competitive, independent, ambitious, self-confident, adventurous, and decisive*,”<sup>24</sup> (Gilpatric 735) at the same time, they frequently adhere to a number of other stereotypes about gender, sexuality, race or class. There has been at least a two-decade-long ongoing debate on how, and if, such violent female characters contribute to feminist progress, and the feminist community has been divided on this matter, to say the least. Although perhaps it would be more accurate to say that feminist and postfeminist critics have generally tended to differ in their readings of the female hero. Rikke Schubart pinpoints this divide in *Super Bitches and Action Babes: The Female Hero in Popular Cinema, 1970-2006* (2007). She writes:

This clash of abuse and female agency is the central dilemma of the female hero, who is what I call in-between. In-betweenness is the space

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<sup>24</sup> This set of gender traits for feminine and masculine stereotypes has been, as Gilpatric observes, “an established standard ... employed in social science research.” Here she refers to studies such as Eschholz and Bufkin’s “Crime in the movies: Investigating the efficacy of measures of both sex and gender for predicting victimization and offending in film” (2001), Lueptow’s et al, “Social change and the persistence of sex typing: 1974 – 1997” (2001), and Twenge’s “Changes in masculine and feminine traits over time: A meta-analysis” (1997) (735).



between two usually joined poles — male-female, active-passive. The term captures the dual nature of the female hero composed from stereotypical feminine traits (beauty, a sexy appearance, empathy) and masculine traits (aggression, stamina, violence). Rather than unite two genders she is in-between, a position that may only last as long as the plot but which creates fascination and unease, ambivalent responses and conflicted interpretations. From a feminist perspective, she is a victim of patriarchy. From a postfeminist perspective, she represents female agency. (Kindle Locations 57-62)

In the introduction to *Reel Knockouts*, Martha McCaughey and Neal King offer an accurate summary of the most commonly voiced fears:

Some might prefer that we celebrate movie violence only for women on the “right” side of the law ... . Others fear sellout and prefer violent women to act outside the (racist, colonialist, patriarchal) law. Still others worry about racism even among the lawless women and so prefer vengeful force against men or the systems that abuse women first. ... Some dislike the sexual charge attending much of women’s violent action. Others celebrate such images in most any context. Still others remain skeptical of those they see as “masculinist,” “objectified,” or otherwise “patriarchal.” (3)

From a vast array of objections against violent female characters voiced by feminist scholars and others, McCaughey and King identify four main ones: that they are “too unrealistic, too sexy, too emotional, and too co-opted” (12). If we look at a later study by Inness, *Action Chicks*, the most important concern seems to be “how tough women are frequently toned down to make them more palatable to a mass audience” (9). Of

course, this partially overlaps with what McCaughey and King propose since “toning down” is often achieved by making the heroine too sexy and too emotional or relegating her to the far-away world of fantasy. Another widely discussed and very disturbing trend in the construction of powerful females on screen is their short life expectancy. “When a woman who is too powerful and tough appears in the American imagination, her life is invariably cut short, reminding the audience of the threat posed by such women” (Inness, *Action Chicks* 11). Her power must be contained by the end of the story, death being the most extreme and ultimate solution. Katy Gilpatric also observes that VFACs actually reinforce gender stereotypes by being “most often portrayed in a submissive role and ... romantically involved with the dominant male hero character” (743). A sidekick rather than the main character in the story, the woman’s role frequently boils down to being eye candy or the hero’s romantic interest, who at some point in the story can conveniently be turned into a damsel in distress saved by the knight in shining armor.

Obviously, the list of objections is long and often nuanced. While I agree with some, I strongly disagree with others. Having familiarized myself with multiple critical works on female heroism and violence in the cinema, I believe that the various concerns and reservations expressed in them can be grouped into five main categories: the characters are either (1) highly sexualized, (2) not tough enough, (3) masculinized (4) too unrealistic, or (5) reined in before the story ends. I shall discuss each of these objections in turn in the following sections.

### 2.3.1. Action Chicks as Sex Bombs

In her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), Laura Mulvey argues that in the narrative cinema dominated by patriarchal ideology, the cinematic pleasure is structured around the silent image of a passive woman who is subjected to an active, controlling male gaze. While the male character pushes the narrative forward, when the female character appears on the screen, the flow of action is frozen in a moment of erotic contemplation. According to Mulvey, traditionally, the displayed female figure has been an object of a male gaze on two levels: she has been subjected to a controlling look of the male characters within the screen story as well as of the spectator within the auditorium. In a process that Mulvey calls a fetishistic scopophilia, the woman becomes an object which connotes “to-be-looked-at-ness,” “a perfect product whose body, stylised and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator’s look” (Mulvey 2006). She goes on to notice that certain devices, for example, the device of a showgirl makes it possible for the two looks to be combined with no apparent break in narrative verisimilitude (203).

Although Mulvey’s work has been justly criticized on various grounds, her argument that women are all too frequently objectified on screen and depicted as sex objects rather than active agents has been high on the feminist agenda. On the surface, action heroines seem to be a far cry from the passive, silent image described by Mulvey since they engage in violent acts and contribute to or, in the case of the female-led films, are mainly responsible for advancing the narrative. However, as Roz Kaveney points out in the Foreword to Jennifer K. Stuller’s *Ink-stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors: Superwomen in Modern Mythology* (2010), there are critics who worry that



**Figures 4 and 5** A female action hero or a BDSM club employee? On the left, Howard Brooks’ oil painting of Cara Mason (Tabrett Bethell) from the TV series *Legend of the Seeker* (2008-2010) armed with Agiels, magical rods bearing an all-too-obvious resemblance to dildos. She is a member of an elite group of cruel and lethal female warriors called Mord-Sith, who are always ready to serve their master Lord Rahl in any way he chooses. On the right, a scene still from *Catwoman* (2004). Equipped with a whip, dressed in a leather bra and prancing on what looks like a stage, Patience Philips (Halle Berry) looks like the ultimate male striptease fantasy.

such figures are in fact just an excuse “for middle-aged men to fetishize young fit female bodies” (Kindle Location 83). Even a cursory glance at the publicity shots for films featuring violent female characters proves that these fears may not be without merit. Contrary to any logic, these females go into fights with their most sensitive areas, such as the abdomen and chest, bared. Who needs a breastplate or a bullet-proof jacket? Why not fight bad guys in a skimpy bikini? If they do cover up, their typical armor of choice is a skin-tight leather<sup>25</sup> or latex catsuit, preferably one including a tight-fitting corset which makes their waists fashionably and “breathtakingly” narrow and their full

<sup>25</sup> In *Tough Girls*, Inness argues that clothes are equally important in communicating toughness as the strong athletic body. She draws particular attention to the symbolic function of leather. “In American culture, leather is strongly associated with masculinity and tough men. Mention the word ‘leather’ and images of motorcycle-straddling Hell’s Angels are apt to spring to mind. Leather is tough and masculine” (57). Indeed, black leather jackets seem to be trademarks of some male action heroes such as Sylvester Stallone’s Marion Cobretti from *Cobra* (1986) or Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Terminator. In the case of female action heroines, however, the message communicated by leather clothes is not all that clear. Skin-tight bodysuits that somehow never get zipped all the way up, are more likely to emphasize the character’s dominatrix-style sexuality than real toughness.

bosoms even fuller; features especially useful during physically challenging chases and fights, as are stilettos and long, carefully manicured nails. Granted, spearing someone with a heel or scratching their eyes out may be quite a painful and efficient way of incapacitating an opponent, but you must catch them first and stilettos are not known for being the most comfortable running shoes. Clearly, when viewed from a practical perspective, these action chicks do not present a particularly tough and dangerous image. A Miss Bikini or a leather-clad, straight-from-a-BDSM-club dominatrix are ready for action!



**Figures 6 and 7.** Publicity shots of the original 1970s show with Farrah Fawcett, Kate Jackson, and Jaclyn Smith (on the left) and the 2003 remake *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* with Drew Berrymore, Lucy Liu and Cameron Diaz (on the right). Miss Bikini Club is ready to fight!

The proliferation of these figures makes it impossible to provide an all-inclusive list. The Miss Bikini club boasts such iconic figures as Charlie's Angels, both those from the 1970s and their 21<sup>st</sup>-century reincarnations. "Only the show's creator disagreed

with his critics who saw Charlie's Angels as nothing but sex, sex, sex," Sherrie Inness comments on the original show (*Tough Girls* 40). Although she believes the images of such capable, gun-shooting, active women were to some extent progressive in the 1970s, a time when the cultural perception of gender roles was only beginning to change, it cannot be denied that it was the sex appeal of the main actresses coupled with the "fashion utopia" that was mostly responsible for the show's tremendous success (40). Young, beautiful, sexy, perfectly groomed and dressed, Charlie's Angels testify to the media's obsession with female appearance. Inness explains, "The Angels presented a fantasy of ideal femininity; viewers never saw the makeup artists, hair stylists, clothing designers, or the many others who labored to create the Angels' look. Viewers saw only the fantasy that was the Angels – a fantasy that appealed to both men and women" (41). In light of this, they are a perfect illustration of what Tasker and Negra mean by "disciplinary techniques" forcing women to conform to a clearly defined but impossible to achieve standard of beauty. To quote another insightful comment on the matter, this time by Rikke Schubart:

It's not fair. Heroes can have broken teeth and squint like Clint Eastwood, suffer from a speech defect like Sylvester Stallone, have foreign accents like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jean-Claude Van Damme, be old like Charles Bronson, bald like Kojak, wear constant I-am-very-very-pissed-off expressions like Steven Seagal, or be just plain ugly like Chuck Norris. In short, men don't have to look good to be heroes. It's different with women. The first step to qualify as female hero in a man's world is to be young and beautiful. If not young, then she must be Botoxed to look young. If not beautiful, then she must have



silicone breasts, be aided by plastic surgery, wigs, makeup and never ever a wrinkle on her pretty face. (Kindle Locations 98-103)

Indeed, in the case of women, beauty and sex appeal somehow seem to be a necessary prerequisite for heroism thus effectively limiting “the kind of gender equality enacted within contemporary popular media culture,” as observed by Tasker and Negra.

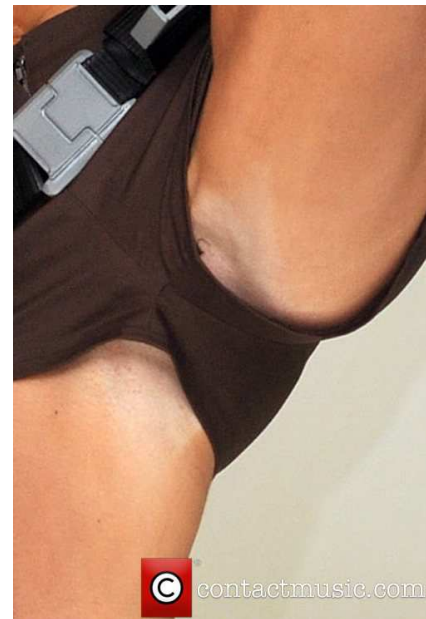


**Figures 8 and 9** Armed and hot. Halle Berry as Jinx in *Die Another Day* (2002) and Angelina Jolie as Lara Croft in *Lara Croft Tomb Raider* (2001).

Two more recent examples of action chicks occasionally donning bikinis but not averse to the bodysuit either are Angelina Jolie’s Lara Croft in *Lara Croft Tomb Raider* (2001) and *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life* (2003) or Halle Berry’s Bond Girl Jinx in *Die Another Day* (2002). Of the two, Lara Croft begs more attention since the figure enjoyed something of a cult status as a video-game persona years before the film was made. The game *Tomb Raider* debuted in 1996 and launched Lara’s international career not only as a video-game character but also as an image used

worldwide by various advertising campaigns to sell just about everything. The game itself has already had eleven installments over the period of seventeen years, the latest released in March 2013. What is it about her that makes her such a commercial success? Well, as the old saying goes: sex sells. And Lara's sex appeal cannot be denied. Clad in revealing tank tops, shorts and occasionally bodysuits or bikinis, Lara's body brings a new meaning to the idea of an hourglass figure with her almost non-existent waist (no need for a corset here) and generous chest that can put Barbie to shame. From the very beginning, her image has been a point of contention among the critics. The controversy surrounding her is perfectly captured by the title of Helen W. Kennedy's article "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo?" On the one hand, a clever, well-educated, independent, ass-kicking and gun-toting heroine who managed to gain such popularity in the male-dominated world of computer games seems a step forward in terms of female empowerment. Her success proves that females need not necessarily occupy passive roles and that female action heroines can sell well, thus paving the way for more powerful and inspiring female cyber characters. On the other hand, as Claudia Herbst notes, "She is a sex symbol and is openly exploited as such" (25). This reading is further confirmed by the multiple unofficial versions of Lara found online that take her sexiness to new extremes, dressing her in more and more skimpy clothes, or even removing them altogether. Angelina Jolie's incarnation of Lara actually seems to be the mildest in terms of the blatant emphasis on the character's sexuality. It is enough to look at the promotional photos of official Lara Croft models to see that they exude not only self-confidence and power but also sex appeal. A good example is Alison Carroll, an English gymnast, model and actress who in the years 2008 – 2010 served as the last official Lara Croft model promoting the eighth installment of the *Tomb Raider* series, *Tomb Raider: Underworld*. Extremely fit, she is capable of performing with ease all the





**Figures 10 and 11** Picture - Alison Carroll, Lara Croft and Tomb Raider London, England, Monday 11th August 2008. Digital image. *Contactmusic.com*. Web. 18 Aug. 2013. Promotional photos of Alison Carroll as Lara Croft for the 2008 installment of the game. It is hard to believe that in times when digital doctoring has become so popular that more than one advertising campaign has been banned for using overly airbrushed images, someone forgot to give Alison Carroll a more even suntan. The fact that Contactmusic.com went as far as to include an actual close-up of Carroll's pale crotch makes it perfectly clear what is supposed to stand out and catch the eye in these photos.

side kicks, front kicks, jump kicks, somersaults and back flips that the character uses in the game.<sup>26</sup> Margaret Wallach, CEO of casual game firm Rebel Monkey praises Carroll for her competence:

She combines poise, strength and sexiness all in one package—not to mention her real-life athletic skills and experience in competing at events. In this sense, both Ms. Carroll and the Lara Croft character

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<sup>26</sup> Here it might be useful to refer to Mary Russo's concept of "stunting bodies" discussed in her book *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (1994). Kennedy summarizes Russo's argument in the following way: stunting bodies are "Female figures which through their performance of extraordinary feats, undermine conventional understandings of the female body." While she provides other examples, such as Thelma and Louise or Trinity in *Matrix*, Kennedy believes that Lara is a perfect embodiment of the concept. "The transgressive stunting body of the action heroine is replicated in the figure of Lara. Her occupation of a traditionally masculine world, her rejection of particular patriarchal values and the norms of femininity and the physical spaces that she traverses are all in direct contradiction of the typical location of femininity within the private or domestic space. ... Lara's presence within, and familiarity with, a particularly masculine space is in and of itself transgressive. By being there she disturbs the natural symbolism of masculine culture," Kennedy writes.

embody aspirational qualities. The fact that they are considered sex symbols only adds to their overall power and allure. (qtd. in Graft)

Similarly, Tracy Whitelaw, PR representative for LesbianGamers.com believes that although using hot models for men to “drool over” is not empowering to women but rather demeaning, “At least having a skilled model who can pull off some of what Lara puts out there is a step towards seeing her as not just eye candy, but as a capable, strong role model for young girls” (qtd. in Graft). Unfortunately, these skills earned Carroll not only praise and admiration but also a nickname Lara Crotch as the people responsible for the promotional photo shoots went out of their way to capture her in poses offering us glimpses of her intimate parts. To quote Kennedy, “What is certainly apparent is the voyeuristic appeal of Lara,” be it a video-game character, her movie incarnation or a real-life model assuming Lara’s persona. It is a great pity that a cheap marketing trick subverts Carroll’s competence and skills reducing her to an objectified, to-be-looked-at sex symbol.

While many feminists are ready to dismiss any female action figure who possesses even a small degree of sex appeal, some people are more ambivalent about sexy heroines like Lara Croft. In an article “Is Lara Croft Sexist?” Kris Graft quotes several women from the games industry who believe that while Lara certainly owes much of her popularity to her sexual attractiveness, viewing her only as an objectified sex symbol does not do justice to this complex pop culture phenomenon. Tracy Whitelaw, for example, declares, “She’s a dichotomy in our opinion. Lara was primarily viewed as an idealized female gaming character with an unattainable body. ... However, and this is where we disagree with many feminists, what Lara did for women in gaming is provide great strides forward in including female characters as the playable character in videogames” (qtd. in Graft). The same thing could be said about the movie

industry, and especially the male-dominated action/adventure genre. Step by step, the leather-clad sexy sidekicks paved the way for more developed, powerful, central and less sexualized female action figures capable of appealing to female and male viewers alike.

A good recent example of a successful complex female heroic figure who is not sexualized in the movie is Jennifer Lawrence's Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* film series (2012, 2013, 2014, the last part to be released in 2015). She is beautiful but is not sexualized or objectified at all, even though the story provides ample opportunity to do so. She takes part in a game viewed by millions of spectators and is under constant surveillance – a perfect voyeuristic set-up. And yet there are no scenes with her taking quick baths or parading in wet clinging clothes or ridiculous outfits displaying her belly or chest. Her image is all about comfort and efficiency, which makes her akin to contemporary male action characters like Jason Bourne or Ethan Hunt. When at some point, Peeta, the male tribute from Katniss' district, publically admits he has been secretly in love with her, she lashes out at him. She pins him to the wall in a very aggressive manner and accuses him, "He made me look weak!" Their mentor answers, "He made you look desirable, which in your case can't hurt sweetheart." This short exchange is an insightful comment on the popular feminist argument that being sexy and desirable detracts from the female hero's strength. This is precisely what Katniss is initially afraid of. She wants to fight on her own terms, relying on her own skills, not on being perceived as "star-crossed lovers." However, being an intelligent girl, she understands that sometimes you just have to use whatever means are available to survive and still, in your heart, stay true to yourself. Viewed in this way, being sexy and desirable is not a sign of weakness but rather becomes another weapon. In her article "'Catching Fire': Positive Fuel for the Feminist Flame," Natalie Wilson

expresses hope that “perhaps the series will be the start of a new trend: politically themed narratives with rebellious female protagonists who have their sights set on revolution more than love, on cultural change more than the latest sparkling hottie.”



**Figures 12 and 13** Jennifer Lawrence as Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* (2012). She represents the new type of female heroic figure, a complex powerful character who is conventionally beautiful but is not overly sexualized. Interestingly, the new Lara Croft from the 2013 installment presents a very similar image of young Lara, a far cry from the original unrealistic sex symbol. While she could certainly do with a jacket, the new Lara has much more realistic body proportions and for the first time is a thoroughly developed character. A reviewer Matt Western describes the change saying, “The ‘Tomb Raider’ series is no longer the poster boy for female objectification in games but for female empowerment. Lara Croft isn’t a Barbie-esque collection of polygons made for men to ogle anymore. Now she is a believable combination of vulnerability and bad-assery who relies just as much on wit as she does athleticism.”

Many critics worry that films, TV series, computer games and other media which suggest that being sexy is actually empowering for women send a dangerous message to young girls. Patty Miller, a researcher studying the influence media have on kids, fears that “The message now is that it’s OK to be strong and assertive, but you better be sexual and attractive” (qtd. in Spicuzza). She worries that the type of attractiveness promoted by these media forms is unrealistic and very difficult if not impossible to achieve and thus a very bad role model to aspire to. On the other hand,

some critics believe that tough female characters have a subversive potential precisely because of the emphasis put on their sexuality, preventing a popular reading of them as “men in drag.” In an essay “Gender, Sexuality, and Toughness: The Bad Girls of Action Film and Comic Books,” Jeffrey A. Brown argues, “My contention is that modern action heroines are transgressive characters not only because their toughness allows them to critique normative standards of femininity but because their coexistent sexuality ... destabilizes the very concept of gender traits as mutually exclusive” (50). For Brown “tough” and “sexy” is not an either/or situation. He writes, “the tough action heroine is a transgressive character not because she operates outside of gender restrictions but because she straddles both sides of the psychoanalytic gender divide. She is both subject and object, looker and looked at, ass-kicker and sex object” (52).

The key problem in the argument on whether depicting action heroines as sexy is a positive or negative practice is the understanding of what “sexy” means. Unlike many feminists, I do not believe that being sexy or desirable necessarily weakens and disqualifies the female hero, but the media’s very limiting interpretation of being “sexy” is reprehensible. Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder, we are told, suggesting there are as many opinions on what is and is not beautiful as there are people. Different men and women find different traits desirable, yet most action heroines seem to conform to only one standard of beauty and sexiness. Depicting a female action figure as attractive, desirable and sexy need not be demeaning but rather might add to her appeal and self-confidence and offer an empowering fantasy for the viewers as long as it is not just one prescribed type of sexiness that is promoted, especially one which is impossible to attain without the aid of “disciplinary techniques” or digital doctoring. Although it is my personal feeling that women should not be presented as silly bimbos unable to fend for themselves whose only role is to serve as a spectacle of shapely legs, buttocks and

breasts, it is equally unfair and unproductive to disqualify otherwise complex, capable and powerful female heroic figures simply on the grounds that they are too sexy. Some women find such images empowering too. A more varied range of images presenting strong female characters in many guises is needed – be they strong and cartoonishly sexy, strong and conventionally sexy, strong and unconventionally sexy or strong and not sexy at all.



**Figures 14, 15, 16 and 17** Celebrating variety – a gallery of strong female characters: the cartoonishly sexualized Pamela Anderson in *Barb Wire* (1996), the conventionally sexy Scarlett Johansson as Black Widow in *Iron Man 2* (2010), the unconventionally sexy Rooney Mara as Lisbeth Salander in *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* (2011), and a completely non-sexualized Saoirse Ronan as Hanna in British-German action thriller *Hanna* (2011). So far, the last two types have been dismally underrepresented but there is always hope for more to come.

### 2.3.2. “Girlish tough ain’t enough.”

That was the response a young aspiring boxer Meggie Fitzgerald (Hilary Swank) got from a hardened trainer Frankie (Clint Eastwood) to her assertion “I’m tough” in *Million Dollar Baby* (2004). Although Frankie is proved wrong by the time the story comes to its tragic end, his comment sounds all too familiar. Indeed, an accusation frequently leveled at female heroic characters has been that they are not tough enough. Their overt sexuality, discussed in the previous section, is only one of the many ways in which, as many feminist critics believe, women’s strength is subverted and toned down.

Unlike male heroes, they are portrayed as too emotional, in need of rescue or in secondary roles of an assistant or sidekick. Compared to male toughness, they fall short very visibly. Sherrie Inness pinpoints this problem in *Tough Girls*:

Whatever our reservations about toughness may be, we worship it because of its association with success and strength. As long as men are the primary people associated with toughness, they will continue to be the ones associated with success and power. This is why it is necessary to study how toughness is constituted in our culture and analyze what the changing representation of tough women in recent years suggests. As we shall discover, depicting women as not tough or as “pseudo-tough” is one of the ways that the media perpetuate the myth that women are less capable and competent than men. Even more insidious are the books, films, television shows, and magazines that depict women as tough, but simultaneously show that woman’s toughness is still not the equal of a man’s. (14)

When asked to think of someone that they consider tough, most people have no problem conjuring up a range of images; unfortunately, very few of them, if any, would be images of tough women. “Without even pausing for reflection, we find it easy to identify many men as either tough or not tough. Reagan was; Bush was not (although he wanted to be). Batman was; Robin was not. ... Although toughness is not always easy to spot, we have some common ideas about what toughness entails,” Inness explains (*Tough Girls* 11). What are then the requirements that a character must fulfill in order to be perceived as tough? Inness proposes, quite perceptively, that toughness depends on the possession of certain traits associated with “body, attitude, action, and authority”



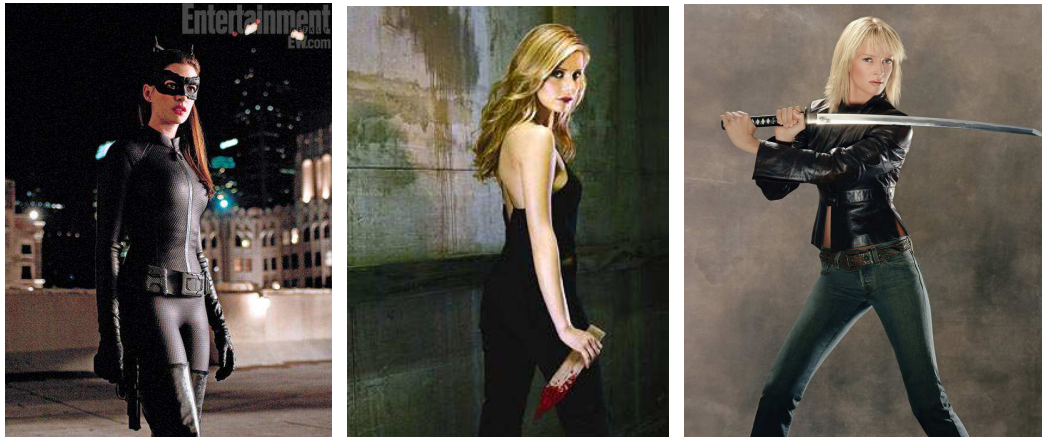
(24). Together, these four aspects determine whether a given female character performs her toughness successfully or is easily exposed as a fake.



**Figures 18 and 19** Little women in the men’s world. On the left, Jodie Foster as an FBI agent Clarice Sterling in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). On the right, Holly Hunter as Detective M.J. Monahan in *Copycat* (1995)

“Action heroes and heroines are cinematically constructed almost exclusively through their physicality, and the display of the body forms a key part of the visual excess that is offered in the muscular action cinema,” Yvonne Tasker stresses in *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (35). Physical toughness, being the most tangible of the four aspects of toughness identified by Inness, is the easiest to judge. A character either does or does not look imposing, strong and threatening. In the case of action chicks, the latter is too often true. Generous breasts notwithstanding, they are often of diminutive size. Jodie Foster’s character in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) looks almost childish when she enters an elevator full of towering men. Similarly, Detective M.J. Monahan (Holly Hunter) from *Copycat* (1995) is referred to as “the wee inspector.” Thus, to defeat their enemies, they are forced to rely on their guns, rather than their “tough” bodies. Smart choice, I would say. Engaging in hand-to-hand combat with a man twice your size does not testify to the possession of common sense or the instinct for self-preservation. Interestingly enough, some filmmakers seem to think otherwise, repeatedly casting shapely but slightly built actresses in the roles of violent, ass-kicking action figures. To make up for their small





**Figures 20, 21 and 23** Can they get any thinner than that? Waif-fu fighters: Anne Hathaway’s Selina from *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), Sarah Michelle Gellar as Buffy from the TV series *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), and Uma Thurman as The Bride in Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* (2003, 2004).

stature, these characters are often depicted as martial arts experts, capable of knocking opponents out with one precise kick or punch. This practice has been so prevalent that it has eventually gained its own very telling name – waif-fu. Contemporary action/adventure movies featuring female heroines are peopled with waif-fu fighters. Although quite tall, lean and equipped with razor-sharp stilettos, Anne Hathaway’s Selina in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) would be more likely to dislocate her joints than do much damage to the burly men she kicks and punches. Even if she had, which she does not, all the muscles that a delicate frame like hers can accommodate, she would still be too weak to throw a bulky man to the ground using just one arm. No amount of fancy martial arts moves can work so much magic. When she gets surrounded on a rooftop by a group of villains, it is Batman’s intervention that enables her to escape. When instead of the expected “Thank you,” all he gets is “See you around” and “I had it under control,” he chastises her, “Those weren’t street thugs. They were trained killers. I saved your life.” The scene makes it clear that she bit off more than she could chew and it is only the real hero, Batman, who can fight the real villains. Tough and confident

she may seem, but she is nowhere near Batman's toughness, even if he requires special leg braces to walk without a cane.

"No matter how a woman's pecs might bulge or how strongly her clothing might be coded as tough, she will not be considered tough unless she has the right attitude," Inness argues (*Tough Girls* 25). She provides a list of behaviors that are considered markers of the right, tough attitude, such as displaying little or no fear, appearing competent and in control and hiding emotions effectively. Indeed, as the first chapter of this thesis stressed, being fearless, even in the face of death, is one of the essential features of a truly heroic warrior. It is "Maximus the invincible, who knows no fear" not the scheming Commodus who "has been afraid all his life" that wins the Roman crowd in *Gladiator* (2000). After years of watching hysterical ninnies in need of male rescue, the modern female audience is hungry for strong heroic women who can hold their ground even in the most dire circumstances. This is a source of personal frustration when watching such films as *Oblivion* (2013) with Tom Cruise, where a trained female astronaut shrieks with panic when something unexpectedly jumps round the corner. Nor is it particularly empowering to see U.S. Special Forces officer Sonya Blade from *Mortal Kombat* (1995) being dragged by her hair and virtually screaming "Let me go!" at the top of her voice as if she actually expects the evil Shang Tsung to see reason and comply. Just like Selina, she is not capable enough to deal with the main villain, which is made perfectly clear in the story. When one of her comrades asks, "Can Sonya beat Shang Tsung?" their teacher and mentor answers "No" without even a second of hesitation. She cannot stand up for herself, she is not depicted as "competent and in control"; all she can do is scream for help. "Would John Wayne have screamed?" Inness wonders using another example of a shrieking female from the original *Charlie's*

*Angels (Tough Girls 44)*. A tough hero never screams unless it is to issue a fierce battle cry.

The question of female heroes being depicted as too emotional has probably been brought up in every major study on the subject. Fear is only one of the many emotions that are believed to subvert the hero's toughness. Many are weakened by compassion. A perfect embodiment of such a compassionate female hero is Peta Wilson's Nikita from the television series *La Femme Nikita* (1997-2001). "True to gender stereotypes, she is the emotionally sensitive character who has qualms about killing in cold blood," Charlene Tung comments in "Embodying an Image: Gender, Race, and Sexuality in *La Femme Nikita*" (96). I watched the show quite avidly as a schoolgirl, and I would not describe her character as "tough" but rather as "an emotional mess." I remember her as being close to tears in virtually every episode, half of the time because of the heartrending crush she had on her enigmatic supervisor Michael, a man who is a walking definition of a withdrawn, silent hero. And that brings us to another emotion that is detrimental to the female hero's toughness – love. While by the end of the show, the dynamics in this relationship significantly change, with Nikita assuming a more assertive role both in relation to Michael and in the organization they work for, it remains a fact that throughout most of the show, her feelings for Michael result in hurt and confusion, emphasizing her vulnerability. Although the series was advertised as action-oriented and each episode revolves around a dangerous mission, it is not Nikita's fighting skills and competence that ultimately come across as the primary focus of the show. Charlene Tung observes:

Nikita is constructed as the embodiment of Western heterosexual fantasy while not surprisingly, the narrative reinforces a compulsory heterosexuality. Nikita's almost exclusively male writers follow a

standard formula that builds romantic tension between male and female leads and, in particular, incorporates an outside force that keeps them apart. ... True to form, the central figures and their relationship-that-can-never-be was continually cited by female fans as a major appeal of the show. (107)

While *La Femme Nikita* at least casts a woman as the central character, Gilpatric's study of violent female action characters in contemporary American cinema identifies a tendency to relegate such heroines to the secondary roles of romantic interests. She concludes:

Over 40% of all VFACs were portrayed as girlfriends or wives to the male heroes in the movies. The findings suggest that VFACs seem to be inserted into the story to support and promote the actions of the male hero. The VFAC often appeared as a damsel-in-distress providing the impetus for a male hero to overcome obstacles in order to save her. This was more likely to occur if the VFAC was also linked romantically to the male hero. (743)

A fine example of this scenario is the figure of Marion (Cate Blanchett) from the latest film adaptation of *Robin Hood* (2010). The film opens with her shooting an arrow to chase away thieves stealing grain from her barn. She is depicted as a strong, adult, no-nonsense woman who runs the household while her husband fights holy wars with King Richard. When circumstances force her to pretend she is Robin's (Russell Crowe) wife and share a chamber with him, she makes him sleep on the floor with the dogs after she coldly informs him, "I sleep with a dagger. If you so much as move to touch me, I will sever your manhood." That sounds like a very tough attitude. The more of a disappointment it is when the next thing she does is light a candle behind the drawn bed

curtains and give him a nice show of her shapely body as she undresses illuminated by the candlelight. A little naive, I feel.

The creators of the film seem unable to decide just how tough and independent they want Marion to be. The mechanism that is at play here is striving to achieve a balance that would allow the heroine to enjoy a certain amount of agency and power without compromising her acceptability or making her a threat to the male hero's central role. The workings of this mechanism have been widely discussed in studies on female heroism. I shall use Charlene Tung's perceptive description to show the way Marion's character is simultaneously empowered and disempowered within the film's narrative. "The kick-ass heroines of the late 1990s and 2000s retain key characteristics that maintain their acceptability as female heroines and reaffirm male character's masculinity (and that of male viewers)," she explains (100). "For example, a tough woman, past or present might have a male father figure in her life who is physically stronger or more competent, or is her love interest" (100). In Marion's case, Robin is such a figure. "Or she may have 'mothering' qualities, be emotionally sensitive, or be the moral conscience of the show," Tung continues (100). Although childless herself, Marion assumes a mothering function as she takes care of the children hiding in the woods. "Any of these qualities, singly or in combination, suffices in an effort to retain her femininity in light of her ability to shoot weapons ... [Marion can use a bow], her stoicism and intellect... [She remains collected and calm when she receives news of her husband's death as well as in the face of an attempted rape], and her physical strength... [we see her plowing the field along with her serfs]" (100). Tung's conclusion is that in the case of such heroines, "the mythical norms of female comportment are only partially called into question" (100). The scene that best demonstrates the creators' give-and-take mentality is when Marion joins Robin on the battlefield. His first reaction when he

recognizes Marion as the little knight leading an “army” of vicious children on their vicious ponies is a condescending “Marion, for Christ’s sake!” To his credit, he collects himself pretty quickly and orders her to take position instead of serving her a medieval equivalent of “wait-in-the-car” line. In a symbolic gesture, he calls her by her husband’s family name, thus suggesting that he recognizes her right to fight as the equal of other lords who represent their people and land. That was “give”; now it is time for “take.” How is she equal to other lords if all the men from her land are under Robin’s command and she, their lawful liege lady, is left with a bunch of underfed children riding not horses but ponies? The film could not be more explicit in measuring female heroism and toughness against that of a man’s. That she “falls short” is pretty literal here. And fall she does, indeed. The final blow to her toughness is delivered when she decides to avenge her father-in-law’s death and attacks the main villain. In a scenario we have already seen in the case of Selina from *The Dark Knight Rises* and Sonya from *Mortal Kombat*, being a woman, Marion is no match for the main villain and needs to be rescued by the main male hero. Both she and Robin nearly drown in the process and it is left to him to kill the running enemy with an impossibly long bow shot and carry limp Marion, chainmail and all, from the water so that they can share a passionate kiss in the middle of a raging battle. Marion’s fate as the damsel in distress is sealed. Her tough attitude is laid to rest.

Not only romantic love can detract from the female hero’s toughness. An even more “feminizing” effect on the action heroine, as many feminist critics argue, is produced by the already-mentioned motherly affection. In *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors*, Jennifer K. Stuller asks, “But can motherhood be heroic? Or is it always just a way of containing women’s potential power by showing what sorts of heroism are socially appropriate for them?” (9). As usual, the feminist critical

community has not been unanimous in their opinion on this issue. Early studies on female heroic figures tend to emphasize that depicting violent women as acting on their maternal instincts in defense of their offspring deprives these characters of real agency and reinforces feminine stereotypes. Many of those studies used *Aliens* as their primary example of a tough hero who is toned down by her nurturing side. In *Tough Girls*, Inness refers to several of such critical voices, coming not only from the feminist community. In his essay “Fembo: Aliens’ Intentions” (1988), Harvey R. Greenberg, to use Inness’ words, “points out some serious flaws in the second film, which presents Ripley as tough but is even more insistent than the first film on the need to contain that toughness by emphasizing her maternal, nurturing side” (*Tough Girls* 107 – 108). In a similar vein, Constance Penny suggests that “Ripley is ... marked by a difference that is automatically taken to be a sign of her femininity ... *Aliens* reintroduces the issue of sexual difference, but not in order to offer a newer, more modern configuration of that difference” (qtd. in *Tough Girls* 109). In “Blood Relations: Feminist Theory Meets the Uncanny Alien Bug Mother” (1992) Lynda Zwinger goes as far as to claim that “it is only in order to preserve her position as new, nuclear, sentimentalized mom that Ripley appropriates military, masculine attributes” (qtd. in *Tough Girls* 109-110) and Dennis Patrick Slattery describes Newt as “the only image for which [Ripley] lives” (qtd. in *Tough Girls* 111). While Inness herself believes such readings are simplistic and “disregard her complicated personality,” she admits, “Still, the mothering relationship does tone down her tough demeanor by emphasizing a role traditionally considered feminine and, therefore, not tough” (111). Very similar charges are laid at Sarah Connor’s door. Tough as nails, armed to the teeth, her primary motivation for action is not tough at all. She has made herself tough only to protect her son. “Sarah’s toughness

is controlled by her reinscription as a mother. Notably, *she* is not going to save the world; her son will,” Inness observes (*Tough Girls* 125).

A more recent example of reading motherhood as a way to contain female violence and power is Lisa Coulthard’s essay “Killing Bill: Rethinking Feminism and Film Violence” published in Tasker and Negra’s *Interrogating Postfeminism* (2007). This is how she describes the final mother-daughter reunion:

It is an idealized vision of maternal wholeness, one predicated on violent revenge but also on absolute and idealized familial feminine sacrifice. The Bride gives up everything, including her powerful, active identity as a skilled fighter (a point Bill repeats and emphasizes), for her daughter. Any crises in identity, gender, or communities of belonging are erased in the familial emphasis, and this holds despite all the rhetorical references made to the Bride’s essentially violent nature (as a “Black Mamba,” a “renegade killer bee,” a lioness). (166)

Coulthard believes that, for all its excess of violence and bloodshed, the film is essentially structured around a maternal bonding. “It is ultimately the figure of the child and the significance of her reclamation that unify the film both structurally and thematically,” she stresses (167). The Bride’s discovery of her daughter’s existence is the single most startling revelation in volume one, a fact which is emphasized by Tarantino’s choice to break the film up at this culminating moment. So far the Bride’s primary motivation was revenge; now it is saving her child. Coulthard uses *Kill Bill* to make a point about the cinematic constructions of violent women in general:

Rather than being an instance of ironic play, I suggest that in *Kill Bill*’s maternal avenger – who operates within a confluence of genre, cultural appropriation, and celebration of an essentially pure and nonviolent white



femininity – we can recognize the dominant cultural and ideological constructions of femaleness that occupy popular culture and discourse. In particular, we can identify the tropes that construct femininity's relation to violent acts in ways that attempt to control, contain, and rationalize threats of female violence while maintaining the appearance of ironic distance from patriarchy and active gender transgression. It is not insignificant that the most dominant popular culture images of female power are those in which the violence is ideologically, visually, and fantasmically contained within some individualized, apolitical frame.

(167)

In the case of *Kill Bill*, this individualized frame is The Bride's personal revenge and then her personal quest to reclaim her child. When all the names from the list are crossed out and the child is finally in her arms, the powerful female heroine "can return to her natural habitat of an enclosed, private, nonviolent, and passive domestic sphere," Coulthard concludes (166).

However, as I have already indicated, not all feminist scholars share this understanding of love and motherhood as detracting from the female hero's power. The Mother is one of the five archetypes of female action hero identified by Rikke Schubart in *Super Bitches and Action Babes: The Female in Popular Cinema, 1970 – 2006* (2007), the other four being the Amazon, the rape avenger, the daughter, and the dominatrix. Like many previous studies, Schubart uses *Aliens* as a primary text in her analysis of the mother archetype. However, her take on Ripley's mothering side differs significantly from that of Greenberg's, for example, as can be seen from the following extract:

When Ripley stumbles into the alien nest, the “badass” queen is lit from behind to give her body a halo. The light has connotations of a religious revelation and the queen is an awe-inspiring image of maternity. A gigantic external uterus produces the eggs before our very eyes. Monstrous, yes, but also a rational matriarch ordering her “soldiers” to back away when Ripley threatens to destroy her eggs. When Ripley later has armed herself by mounting the huge powerloader which gives her a stature equal of the alien, she is similarly lit from behind and the camera pauses to contemplate Ripley as an awe-inspiring mother-warrior. The twin mothers are mirror images, protecting their offspring, ruling armies, and commanding troops. (Kindle Locations 3072-3076)

What is clear in this fragment is the marked difference in tone. Both the alien mother and Ripley are described as “awe-inspiring.” Mothers they may be, but they are far from powerless. A similar celebration of the power of love can be found in Stuller’s *Ink-stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors*. Although Stuller is careful to acknowledge the possible problems that incorporating love into female heroic narratives might pose for the feminist agenda of eroding stereotypical categories of femaleness and femininity, she believes that love has a heroic potential. She wonders:

Does the suggestion of love as strength, or as gift, embrace innately female characteristics? Does it infuse what is “naturally” powerful about women into a liberating archetype? Or does it reinforce stereotypes about how women should behave as self-sacrificing nurturers? The assumption that love is inherent in women, but not in men, is a sticky, even sexist concept, and the idea that a female superhero's greatest gift is her nurturing temperament or her ability to love selflessly certainly has the

potential to reinforce stereotypical feminine ideals. But there's evidence that love in the superwoman does in fact present a reimagining of heroism. Wonder Woman, Xena and Gabrielle, Buffy and the Scoobies, and Max Guevara (among others) are compelled by their values, which are in turn reinforced by love – a power greater than any of their physical skills. Their love is the impetus, but becomes integral to their strength, and thus the success of their missions. These superwomen illustrate a new form of heroism for popular culture that is based on loving compassion, and compassion itself is a heroic act. (88)

What Stuller proposes here, is indeed a thorough reimagining of heroism. The quintessential male warrior Achilles was nowhere near compassionate when he defiled Hektor's body. It was not love but a prize in the form of land, power, fame, acclaim, a woman that most often motivated male warriors on their quest. Seeing emotions such as compassion and love, be it romantic, maternal or simply human affection, not as a sign of weakness but as a source of strength stands in direct opposition to the Western patriarchal understanding of heroism so deeply ingrained in popular consciousness. However, as I shall try to prove in the third chapter of this thesis, such a reimagining may be possible if we use a different lens, one that is not pervaded with the rigidly bounded system of gender roles casting femaleness/femininity as necessarily inferior to a more heroic maleness/masculinity. As Marilyn Farwell rightly observes, the heroic space constructed by traditional Western narratives is only "conditionally male defined [as] the result of history, tradition, symbolic connections, and reader's expectations" (qtd. in Early and Kennedy 3). It is to be hoped that by employing alternative heroic narratives coming from outside the Western patriarchal tradition, popular myths and perceptions of heroism permeating Western consciousness can be effectively

reconstructed. For now, however, let us look at the third of the four aspects identified by Inness as the necessary components of toughness – action.

As the name of the genre suggests, action films are all about action. Action is frequently necessitated by adventure and so, since the 1980s onwards, many films have been classified under a hybrid name action-adventure. Steve Neale identifies a number of characteristics defining the genre, such as its “propensity for spectacular physical action, ... the deployment of state-of-the-art special effects, an emphasis... on athletic feats and stunts. The hyperbolic nature of this emphasis has often been accompanied by an emphasis on the ‘hyperbolic bodies’ and physical skills of the stars involved” (71). Confronting this definition with the Mulvian paradigm, once so popular in feminist film theory, which casts the woman as a necessarily passive object as opposed to the man as an active subject, it can be seen that the model renders the figure of an action heroine virtually impossible. Fortunately, over the years, this very restrictive binary take on gender roles in narrative cinema has been revised considerably and now most feminist scholars recognize that both genders can occupy either end of the passive/active spectrum. Criticizing Mulvey’s one-sided argument, Schubart insists:

Men have undressed in cinema since Johnny Weismüller wore a fig leaf in *Glorifying the American Girl* (1929), and an eroticization of the male as well as the female body is part of our western culture as evidenced by Margaret Walters’ study *The Nude Male: A New Perspective* (1979 ) and Richard Dyer’s *White* (1997). Action icons Bruce Lee, Jean-Claude Van Damme, Sylvester Stallone, and Arnold Schwarzenegger all earned their claim to fame by exposing flesh. (Kindle Locations 231-234)

Indeed, it has often been emphasized that contemporary action films, and the muscular cinema of the 1980s in particular, seem to indulge in the perverse pleasures offered by

the spectacle of a suffering male body. However, in terms of proportions, such scenes occupy only a fraction of the screen time, the remainder presenting an active male hero engaging in all sorts of adventurous deeds. In the case of women, the situation is often exactly the opposite. More time is devoted to showing them being rescued, fought over and decided about than showing them rescuing and fighting others or deciding about themselves. That is certainly not tough. In a BBC Radio 4 program *Woman's Hour*, Dr. Christine Cornea and Dr. Dean Conrad debated on whether Sci-Fi Women are “strong independent women or damsels in distress.” Answering the host’s question whether the movie industry ever “got it right” in terms of presenting tough female characters, Dean Conrad states, “I think we have got it right. The key for me is whether the female drives the narrative in the film.” Although he sees the emphasis on women’s appearance and sexuality as problematic and objectifying, he seems willing to overlook these shortcomings if it is the female character who is the driving force in the story. After all, to quote Tasker, “The ‘action’ of action cinema refers to the enactment of spectacle *as* narrative” (*Spectacular Bodies* 6). Unfortunately, such portrayals are still very rare. According to Gilpatric’s study, of the 300 movies she analyzed, only 7 % had a VFAC as a main heroine. “Instead of breaking gender barriers and portraying empowering female roles, most VFACs were shown as sidekicks and helpmates to the more dominant male hero and were frequently involved in a romantic relationship with him” (Gilpatric 743).

A VFAC who acts as the main driving force within the story and, at the same time, is a sexually objectified spectacle is personified in The Bride from *Kill Bill Vol.1* and *Vol.2*. The narrative structure of the films is organized around her personal revenge and thus she is the one who decides on all the whys and hows within the story as represented by the orderly list of enemies to be eliminated. She decides who to kill, in

what order and how. Interestingly, unlike many action films which, as I have pointed out above, tend to privilege men in terms of the amount of screen time devoted to fighting scenes, in *Kill Bill* it is the fights between women that are more prominent (Coulthard 160). Heavily stylized and carefully choreographed, these fighting scenes allow for the woman as an action figure and woman as a spectacle to come as one. Commenting on the active/passive dynamics of the films, Coulthard notes:

Varied in tone, theme, narrational style, and context, all of these fight scenes are defined by the strong kinetic action of the heroine. In opposition to this action, there are three points in the two parts of the film during which the Bride is passive: when she is presumed to be dead on the floor of a church, when she is unconscious on a hospital bed, and when she is bound and gagged in a coffin. In each instance of passivity, the Bride is objectified and eroticized as her appearance is given diegetic (in each instance, the male characters offer comments about her attractiveness) and stylistic (each involves an overhead shot) attention. Set in opposition to the Bride's active violence, these scenes stand out in a way that both potentially reinforces and ironically critiques the eroticization of victimized, powerless, and silent female bodies. At least on the surface, the Bride is set apart from these discourses of eroticized passive femininity: only when she is dead or gagged is this female heroine inactive. (160 – 161)

Thus, reading *The Bride* as either communicating a positive, powerful representation of an active woman or as a regressive image reinforcing old stereotypes of victimization and sexual objectification seems open to question and the interpretation of the individual viewer.

Last but not least, is the question of authority. “Even with her physical prowess, her ‘bad’ attitude, and ability to act when necessary, the tough woman must project authority if she is to be heeded,” Inness stresses (*Tough Girls* 26). For a definition of “authority” she refers to Richard Sennett’s work by the same title. He defines it as, “Assurance, superior judgment, the ability to impose discipline, the capacity to inspire fear” (qtd. in Inness *Tough Girls* 26). The relationship of women and authority in Western culture is certainly problematic and is connected with issues of gender, sexuality and representation. Academic approaches to these topics for a long time relied heavily on the psychoanalytic framework which dominated film theory in the 1960s and thus, to a large extent, determined its present-day form. Initially, its application to film studies was informed almost exclusively by theories of Sigmund Freud himself. However, the concepts developed in post-1970s psychoanalytic film theory have been dominated by Jacques Lacan’s readings of Freud. Placing the concept of lack in the symbolic not nature – phallus versus penis – and consequently discrediting biological determinism, so much hated by feminist critics, is the main reason why the Lacanian model was favored over the Freudian one. However, soon it became clear that the problem both these models share is the absence of a satisfactory account of feminine subject formation. This problem was transplanted to the film theory together with these models. Laura Mulvey’s seminal article pointed out the inadequacies of early psychoanalytic film theory saying that it “has not sufficiently brought out the importance of the representation of the female form in a symbolic order in which, in the last resort, it speaks castration and nothing else” (746). Ironically, her theory seemed to reinforce the idea of a woman as a passive spectacle and failed to include the female spectator either. Although psychoanalytic film theory is too broad a topic to be given any justice in the space of a few paragraphs or even pages, it is sufficient to state that

many poststructuralist feminists doubted whether any apparatus-based theory could successfully discuss female spectatorship and representation. Such theories, they claimed, seemed too deeply rooted in patriarchal ideology positioning masculinity as the norm. While, feminist psychoanalytic film theorists have arguably been successful in their struggle with the extremely limiting male/female, masculine/feminine binary thinking that characterized the early psychoanalytic theories of spectatorial positioning, their success has been far more limited regarding their accounts of woman as image. Over the years, the feminist theory of spectatorship has gradually started to acknowledge the fluidity of spectatorial positioning and the possibility of oscillation between various identifications. But feminist psychoanalytic approaches to the representation of woman in film have largely remained locked in the phallogentric thinking. All the three most recognizable female archetypes running through the psychoanalytic film criticism and frequently referred to even by critics not working strictly within the psychoanalytic framework<sup>27</sup> – woman as castrated, woman as phallic and woman as castrator – depend on the phallus for their definition. In the symbolic order promoted by such theories, ultimately, the only plausible “authority” is the Father – he who possesses the phallus.

That the strong position of female heroic characters is undermined by surrounding them with multiple father figures has been an accusation voiced equally frequently as the accusation of their being weakened by their motherly tendencies. The list of such characters is long indeed. Nikita, whom Schubart believes to be the prototype of the “daddy’s action girl” (Kindle Location 3328), Lara Croft, Hanna,

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<sup>27</sup> While many film scholars have been increasingly critical of psychoanalysis as a valid tool for analyzing the workings of the cinematic medium, the fact is that concepts such as the phallic woman, castration complex, Oedipal complex and the like continue to appear in a great number of works in film studies. To quote Barbara Creed, “it would be misleading to argue that application of psychoanalysis to the cinema is a thing of the past. If anything, the interest in psychoanalytic film theory is as strong as ever. And the debates continue” (87).



Sydney from the TV series *Alias*, The Bride in *Kill Bill*, Charlie's Angels, Mathilda from *Léon*, Charly in *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, Hit-Girl from the movie *Kick-Ass*; all of these women are inspired, trained, raised or supervised by their biological or symbolic fathers. In the cop movies, a female heroine may be a good officer, detective or inspector, sometimes even the head of a team but she is never "The Boss."<sup>28</sup> These women also tend to look up to their fathers, who being policemen themselves, preferably killed while on duty, inspired them to follow in their footsteps. Jodie Foster's Clarice Starling from *The Silence of the Lambs* has three father figures, not one. Already at the beginning of the film it is clear that she looks up to her supervisor Jack Crawford (Scott Glenn). She addresses him as "Sir" with obvious respect. It is at his order that she becomes involved in the investigation central to the plot and meets another, more curious father figure, Hannibal Lecter. It might be said that she is propelled into action by these two men. As if that was not enough, from her forced interviews with Hannibal we learn that one of her reasons for joining the FBI was her father's premature death while on duty as a policeman. Although, eventually, it is she, and not the male-led team, who solves the crime, her authority is undermined by making her success conditional on Lecter's clues. To some extent, she is a puppet and he pulls the strings. Her childish status is emphasized by the comforting fatherly hug she gets from Crawford after the traumatizing confrontation with the killer. Similarly, the tough-as-nails heroine of a spy thriller *Haywire* (2012) is hugged by her father after she witnesses the death of her one-time partner and one-night stand Aaron (Channing Tatum). A hug that was completely unnecessary, I believe, given the fact that Mallory (Gina Carano) deals with the loss in a very composed way. She does not cry, only looks

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<sup>28</sup> It is possible to find a few female police "bosses" in TV series such as *The Mentalist* or *Dexter*. However, they are usually transient characters appearing for a few episodes or one season, preceded and followed by a long line of other conventionally male bosses. They may also be shown as accountable to other bosses of higher rank, thus effectively depriving them of any real authority.

distraught and the audience is allowed access to her thoughts in a short flashback of a tender moment she shared with Aaron. She is a decent human being, she knows he was not a bad person, even if a little naïve and easily manipulated, so it is natural she feels regret. However, by this point in the story, it should be clear that she by no means lets her emotions rule her actions and whatever bond she had with Aaron was very transient and casual. A few scenes back, she had few qualms about breaking his arm and wiping the floor of a diner with him when the need arises. Would mothers be there to hug and comfort Rambos, Bournes, and Bonds if their one-night stand got killed? Not likely.

Although some viewers and critics accustomed to the state-of-the-art special effects in action movies seem unable to appreciate that, Soderbergh's film is an artful experiment with the genre. Unlike most contemporary action films, *Haywire* does not rely heavily on the slow motion cinematography, the ultra-fast cutting and editing or the Woo-Ping Yuen acrobatic aesthetic in choreography, believed to be the three major visual structures governing the genre (Lanzagorta). The relatively long shots, real-time frame rate and realistic fight scenes allow the audience to admire the real-life martial arts skills of the female lead who is a five-foot-eight MMA fighter and obviously does not need special effects and fast-paced montage to make the combat scenes believable. No waif-fu fighting here. Carano's Mallory exudes confidence and tough, smug attitude. Within the diegesis, she is perceived as a force to be reckoned with. When Michael Fassbender's Paul, a spy hired to eliminate Mallory says, "I've never done a woman before," her double-crossing boss Kenneth (Ewan McGregor) warns him, "You shouldn't think of her as being a woman, that would be a mistake." The message is clear: he should not treat her differently or underestimate her just because of her sex. Woman or not, she is a true professional and must be treated seriously. The film certainly has a subversive potential in terms of its gender politic. It has a woman as the



**Figures 24 and 25** You would not want to cross this woman. Whether in an evening dress or a combat gear, her kicks and punches can definitely do a lot of damage. A real-life MMA fighter Gina Carano as the charming and lethal Mallory Kane in *Haywire* (2012).

lead not a sidekick; although she is attractive, she is not overly sexualized; her life does not revolve around romance; she is shown as equal or superior to the men she works with or fights. Soderbergh makes it clear he is fascinated by Carano's skills and so he built the film to showcase them. In one of the interviews he asks, "Why is Angelina Jolie the only female action star in the world? ... Because someone made her that way, and I'm going to make Gina into one of the biggest action stars in the world." It looks like Joss Whedon is no longer the only openly declared champion of the female action heroines in the male-dominated Hollywood. Maybe with the help of such "hero-makers" they will finally come out of the woods. That is why I was profoundly disappointed about the film's obvious shortcomings, which could easily have been avoided. Inserting a father figure into the story looks forced, especially in the sense that it brings very little to the plot other than occasionally turning this professional covert-ops specialist into a daddy's girl. The film does not pass the Bechdel test either, as there are virtually no other female characters throughout the whole film. Thus, competent as

she is, Mallory looks like an exception rather than a rule in the man-populated world of politics and espionage.

Even in films without a clearly identifiable father figure, female authority is continuously questioned. For example, Ripley's orders to follow the rules of quarantine are disobeyed, which leads to a tragic end for most of the crew. Although she shows "superior judgment, " at this point she lacks "the ability to impose discipline." Unlike male heroes, female action figures are also frequently expected to explain and justify their career choices. Carol M. Dole observes that Megan Turner from *Blue Steel* must explain why she chose to become a police officer not once, as was the case in *Fatal Beauty* or *A Stranger Among Us*, but three times (85). Female authority is also lessened by a strategy Carol M. Dole calls "splitting" (89). She explains, "Splitting, which distributes among multiple personalities or characters the modes of power that would otherwise be concentrated in a single female hero, reduces the threat of each individual protagonist" (89). Dole uses *The Silence of the Lambs* to illustrate her argument, with power being split between the incarcerated mastermind of the operation, Lecter, and Clarice, who can move freely but is dependent on Lecter for advice. However, such strategies may have a positive potential, subverting as they do the highly individualistic tendencies of Western heroism, especially when authority and power are split not between the female hero and a more dominant and clearly superior male character, but between women who are shown as equals. This reading will be explored in greater detail in the last section of this chapter using the TV series *Xena: The Warrior Princess* as the primary example.

Obviously, it is not easy for a female action figure to be "tough enough." Her body, attitude, action and authority are under very close scrutiny and are frequently found lacking in comparison to male heroes. Her body is not strong enough; her attitude

betrays emotions such as fear, compassion or love (whether romantic or motherly); statistically, she is more likely to be a passive damsel in distress in need of rescue than an active action heroine driving the narrative forward; she also lacks the authority enjoyed by the male heroes or the multiple father figures who surround her. If these are her weaknesses, then the recipe for success should be fairly simple: harden her body, conceal or eliminate her emotions and thus win the right to take center stage in action and enjoy the so far inaccessible authority. Wrong. With bulging biceps and a bad-ass attitude the female action figure is more likely to win a tag of a “male in drag” than acclaim.

### **2.3.3. Action Chicks as Men in Drag**

As we have seen, female action figures have frequently been criticized for their overly sexualized image or softness. However, their increasingly popular alter ego – the tough masculinized woman – has been equally contested. For many critics, films showing that a woman can become truly heroic only on condition that she loses all female traits and becomes masculinized are regressive and have little to do with true empowerment. Thus, while some people may cheer Demi Moore’s transformation into a hardened female Navy SEAL in *G.I. Jane* (1997) as a proof that women can compete with men even in the most psychologically and physically challenging working environments, others dismiss the film as showing a transformation of a female character into a “masculine proxy” (Brown, “Gender, Sexuality, and Toughness” 55). Lauren Tucker and Alan Fried, for example, argue that shaving off her long hair and her Rocky-like training which stops her period and gives her a muscular and, therefore, more masculine look transport her into the realm of “techno masculinity” presenting her

success as a Navy SEAL as dependent on leaving her femininity behind (qtd. in Brown “Gender, Sexuality, and Toughness” 55).



**Figures 26 and 27** The hard bodies and tough attitudes of Linda Hamilton’s Sarah Connor in *Terminator: Judgment Day* (1991) and Demi Moore’s Jordan O’Neill in *G.I. Jane* (1997).

Before I proceed any further, I believe it is important to establish what such critiques understand as masculine and feminine traits. Apart from the obvious assumption that a muscular body is a masculine body, it would be useful to refer once again to what Gilpatric calls “an established standard of gender traits employed in social science research” listing feminine traits as being “*affectionate, submissive, emotional, sympathetic, talkative, and gentle,*” and masculine as “*dominant, aggressive, competitive, independent, ambitious, self-confident, adventurous, and decisive*” (Gilpatric 735). In *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam observes that, “Masculinity in this society inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege” (2). On the other hand, “compliant forms of femininity” “pressed onto all girls” are “lessons in restraint, punishment, and repression” (6). Applying this binary gender system to the analysis of tough female action figures, such as Ripley, Connor, O’Neil and others, must inevitably lead to a conclusion that these women are in fact “enacting masculinity rather than providing legitimate examples of female heroism” (Brown, “Gender, Sexuality and Toughness” 47-48). Brown traces this line of feminist critique

in more than one of his works. Using the female protagonists of *G.I. Jane* or *The Long Kiss Goodnight* as the example, he explains what “enacting masculinity” exactly means:

The essence of the action heroine who enacts masculinity is crystallized in the open challenge to “suck my dick” extended by both Samantha/Charly and O’Neil. By assuming the traits of maleness, they gain access to a form of power (both physical and social) that has been systematically denied to women while simultaneously demonstrating that the association of “maleness” with “power” is not innate but culturally defined since anyone can mobilize even the most basic of male privileges: the privilege to assert phallic authority through reference to an actual phallus. (“Gender, Sexuality and Toughness” 57)

Though Brown uses this example to illustrate how artificial the binary opposition between the masculine and the feminine really is, to my mind such reasoning only further reinforces this division. The use of phrases such as “assume traits of maleness” or “phallic authority” forces a return to judging female heroism within the same old framework of sexual difference. Such language is very difficult to escape though, as Brown himself is fully aware. “Any critique that takes the unusualness of the female character as its starting point is likely to become mired in a language of ‘maleness’ and femaleness,” he writes (“Gender, Sexuality, and Toughness” 49). Since action cinema traditionally has been a male genre in which tough women started rising to prominence only recently, “the unusualness” of these characters is likely to be highlighted. One of the attempts to divorce “masculinity” and “maleness” is Halberstam’s concept of “female masculinity,” which, she believes, “can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity” by “exploring a queer subject position” (9). However, I am afraid that the association of the term “masculinity” with “maleness” is itself so

deeply ingrained in the Western consciousness that as long as we retain such terminology it will be very difficult to positively theorize tough, assertive, or even aggressive women without instantly falling into the trap of calling them phallic or pseudo men. To the question, “Is strength, power and privilege masculine or feminine?” I would contend the answer “gender neutral” is more suitable than masculine, feminine, or female masculine, or male feminine, as all these options are still locked up within a binary opposition, at least at the level of terminology.

A very characteristic example of such binary thinking can be found in Carol Clover’s critical examination of the horror genre and her concept of the Final Girl whom she sees as phallicized at the end of the film in order to castrate the oppressor. In “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film,” she describes the Final Girl as “intelligent, watchful, level-headed” (79) with “masculine interests” and exercising “active investigating gaze” which signals her “unfemininity” (80). For Clover, a typical horror narrative is structured like a coming-of-age story where the Final Girl “has delivered herself into the adult world” in the course of her heroic trial (81). She explains:

But the tale is no less one of maleness. If the early experience of the oedipal drama can be – is perhaps ideally – enacted in female form, the achievement of full adulthood requires the assumption and, apparently, brutal employment of the phallus. The helpless child is gendered feminine; the autonomous adult or subject is gendered masculine; the passage from childhood to adulthood entails a shift from feminine to masculine. It is the male killer’s tragedy that his incipient femininity is not reversed but completed (castration) and the Final Girl’s victory that



her incipient masculinity is not thwarted but realized (phallicization).

(81)

Clover's argument essentially boils down to the conviction that a woman who is intelligent and resourceful enough to be capable of a triumphant self-rescue and single-handedly defeating her oppressor is in fact a man in drag, as if only men are ever able to utilize whatever means and tools necessary to emerge victorious from a life-and-death fight.

This line of argument has been heavily criticized by Elizabeth Hills and Barbara Creed, among others. In *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Creed disagrees with Clover saying, "But because the heroine is represented as resourceful, intelligent and dangerous it does not follow that she should be seen as a pseudo man" (127). Likewise, in "From 'Figurative Males' to Action Heroines: Further Thoughts on Active Women in the Cinema," Hills objects, "Although these powerfully transgressive characters open up interesting questions about the fluidity of gendered identities and changing popular cinematic representations of women, action heroines are often described within feminist film theory as 'pseudo males' or as being not 'really' women" (qtd. in Brown "Gender, Sexuality, and Toughness" 51). She continues, "action heroines cannot easily be contained, or productively explained, within a theoretical model which denies the possibility of female subjectivity as active or full" (qtd. in Proctor). Should these characters really be accused of losing their female traits just because they actively resist their opponents, often with the use of weapons such as sharp objects or guns? Why must the use of a knife, a bat, a branch or a gun code a heroine as phallic? What if she uses a rock to smash her enemy's head? Does that make her phallic, too? If the rock is round maybe not, but what if it is oblong? Is it not logical that the most effective weapons are long as they allow you to keep your distance from

your opponent? Firearms have the shape they do not in order to resemble a male organ but because of pure laws of physics and ease of handling. Objects, such as guns, swords or knives, are not inherently phallic; they have been conventionally coded as such by certain patriarchal cultural practices necessarily linking aggression and the use of weapons with men. Jennifer Proctor criticizes the tendency to read gun-toting women as phallic in her analysis of *La Femme Nikita*. She writes:

I would like to argue that the action heroine, in her co-optation of weapons for her own use, possesses the potential to de-eroticize traditionally male apparatuses. The shift of masculine-coded technology into the feminine domain onscreen (and off) enables such technology – including guns, cars, computers, and other symbols of phallic power – to take on new (feminine) significance. If other traditionally masculine practices – including the simple wearing of pants – have succeeded in merging with feminine applications, then with increased repetition and co-optation into feminine use, the phallic power of guns may be defused and their feminine connotations normalized, thus enabling a reading of the woman who possesses a gun *as woman*.

It is hard to disagree with Proctor's argument. In the 21st century, I do not think anyone would go on to claim that a woman wearing jeans is masculinized or phallic. They have become gender neutral. It is to be hoped that the same can be achieved for other practices traditionally coded masculine. Indeed, with the increasing popularity of fitness and bodybuilding programs for women, even the definition of an ideal "feminine" body is beginning to change. Magazines, TV shows, sports clubs encourage women to work on their muscle definition, and slogans such as "Strong is the new skinny" and "Fit is the new thin" are all over the Internet. In *Spectacular Bodies*, Yvonne Tasker coins the

phrase “musculinity” of which she writes that it “indicates the extent to which a physical definition of masculinity in terms of a developed musculature is not limited to the male body within representation” (3). In a section entitled “Musculinity and the Action Heroine,” Tasker elaborates on the concept:

In order to function effectively within the threatening, macho world of the action picture, the action heroine must be masculinized. The masculinization of the female body, which is effected most visibly through her muscles, can be understood in terms of a notion of ‘musculinity.’ That is, some of the qualities associated with masculinity are written over the muscular female body. ‘Musculinity’ indicates the way in which the signifiers of strength are not limited to male characters. These action heroines, though, are still marked as women, despite the arguments advanced by some critics that figures like Ripley are merely men in drag. (149)

There is no mistaking Gina Carano from *Haywire* for a man, even though she possesses impressive musculature. With the changing social perception of how much muscle definition is acceptable on a woman, images such as Sarah Connor’s tough physique in *Terminator 2* no longer shock but are rather more and more often seen as desirable in order to render the female action figure’s performance credible. Judging by the viewers’ comments on Carano’s performance, both as an actress and as a fighter, a strong athletic body like hers has already become as attractive and acceptable as the soft and sexy bodies of earlier action heroines discussed in one of the previous sections. While many feminists worry that such images in fact mean exchanging one form of oppression for another, since both the skinny soft body and the strong athletic one require the use of various “disciplinary techniques” to attain, I believe that expanding the range of

acceptable bodily images for women is always a positive phenomenon. I must also admit that in the midst of all the waif-fu fighters, I found Carano's commanding presence and real-life fighting skills refreshing, and yes, in a way empowering. Talking about his choice of a retro visual style and avoidance of the popular hand-held shots typical of contemporary action cinema camerawork, Soderbergh comments:

We were really consciously going against the grain there, because my feeling is that lately, there has been a way of disguising the fact that people can't really do what's required, and knowing that I had Gina, and knowing that we had cast people around her who could actually do this stuff, we took the conscious position of letting you really see it, not cutting fast, keeping the shots looser, and having you feel, "Wow, that's really happening in front of us."

And that brings us to the fourth main accusation – that the female action chicks are too unrealistic.

#### **2.3.4. Action Chicks in the Realm of Fantasy**

In the conclusions of her study, Gilpatric observes that "VFACs ... appeared to become more unrealistic over time. VFACs included superheroines, extra-terrestrial beings, and vampires, all of which were aided by special effects and computer generated imagery" (744). McCaughey and King point out that "Many violent-movies, such as the *Alien* series with its invincible hero Ripley, strike people as uselessly unrealistic. The women seem too strong, their stamina inhuman, pathetic imitations of silly male fantasies" (12) and as such "not 'real' enough to seem like part of genuine feminist struggle" (13). To justify these characters' success within the story, without

compromising their acceptability as females by giving them overly tough physiques, filmmakers have frequently resorted to endowing these women with superpowers and magical skills that allow them to be strong and efficient and at the same time look sexy and feminine. Halle Berry as *Catwoman* (2004) and Storm in the *X-Men* series, Milla Jovovic as Alice in the *Resident Evil* series, Jessica Alba as The Invisible Woman in *Fantastic Four* (2005) and *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2007), Kate Beckinsale as Selena in the *Underworld* series are only a few of the many female action figures who possess superpowers such as telepathy, telekinesis, healing powers, superhuman longevity, strength and agility and many more. Whatever power they might have and however dangerous they might seem, they are contained within the clearly imaginary world stressing the fact that they are not “normal” women. “ABNORMAL” is what Hanna’s blood test states. As she learns from the man who trained her (another father figure) and whom she believed to be her biological father, she is in fact a product of an experiment. Her DNA has been changed, he informs her, “to reduce the capacity for fear, for pity, to increase muscle strength, heighten senses, anything to make a better soldier, a perfect soldier.” She has been deprived of the features which are believed “natural” in a woman, such as fear and compassion; and equipped with “masculine” assets such as enhanced strength. Her terrified response “I’m a freak” seems to capture particularly well the condition of an active strong female within the male world of action film saturated with patriarchal ideology. As Coulthard stresses in her analysis of *Kill Bill* and other movies featuring violent women, “In these texts, female violence is set apart as exceptional, as an individualized, and sometimes pathologized, action that is established in the end as both artificial or unnatural and as potentially liberating or gender transgressive” (168). A similar argument is put forward by Schubart in *Super Bitches and Action Babes*:

Take CIA agent Charly in *The Long Kiss Goodnight*; she is not only prettier and smarter than any of her colleagues, but she is also the only female agent in the film and thus exceptional in more than one sense: she is an anomaly. Despite the “realistic” narrative and a daughter, a boyfriend, and a job as a schoolteacher, Charly is not a “realistic” character, neither viewed from the audience’s perspective nor from within the film. Charly is a fantasy about a woman *outside her natural place*. As she breaks society’s gender expectations she also confirms them. (Kindle Locations 122-126)

While of course a certain amount of realism is necessary for the audience to be able to form a bond with the character, the question that needs to be considered is whether only “real” portrayals have a progressive potential. For that matter, what does a “real” portrayal mean? In an interview in 1996, Edward W. Said expressed the very apt opinion that “All representation is misrepresentation of one sort or another” (qtd. in Kauffeldt, *Introduction* 2). Therefore, assuming that we do not have access to “real” images, it needs to be considered whether, from the perspective of feminist goals of empowerment, it is more productive to circulate images of victimization, often argued to resemble reality more closely, or images of strong action heroines or even superwomen, striking as less realistic but perhaps more empowering?

Super strong, super fast, super intelligent, many action heroines are clearly superhuman or “superwomen” to use Jennifer K. Stuller’s phrase. “So what is a superwoman?” she asks. “She can be a spy, a secret agent, an assassin, a detective, a witch, a reporter, or a superhero. She becomes super by surpassing the limits of the human body and mind, either through rigorous training, an industrial accident, by virtue of being an alien, mutation, or advanced evolution” (5). For Stuller, “an element of the

fantastic” (6) is one of the four criteria she uses to identify a superwoman. A superwoman, therefore, is characterized not by realism but rather by excess. In *Action Speaks Louder*, Eric Lichtenfeld identifies “excess” as a feature defining the action/adventure genre. He writes, “given the industry’s advances in technology, the showman’s constant drive to best what has been done before, and how quickly audiences can become inured toward last season’s thrill-making technique, the action film has evolved along a trajectory of excess. ... the genre’s commitment to excess is its only constant” (335). Here, I think it is useful to quote Sherrie Inness’ comment on how “being able to overcome great hardships is one of the defining features of a hero” and her concern that traditionally only men have been viewed as capable of that. She writes:

Although the depiction of male toughness offers real social power to men, we also need to recognize the essentially mythical nature of toughness. The toughness we find in films, television shows, or books is frequently exaggerated. Whether we are watching Batman slug out two dozen bad guys or John Wayne shooting and defeating ten tribes of Indians, we are viewing a mythic enactment of toughness. No real person can perform the feats of Batman or John Wayne. No real person is a Rocky Balboa. Toughness is mythologized in the media, creating heroes with far greater abilities than those of mere mortals. Yet these mythic heroes help support the notion that only men are tough and heroic. (14)

Advocating against “unrealistic” images of tough women in favor of “more realistic” images of oppressed women definitely will do little to change that.

Too sexy, not tough enough, too masculine, too unrealistic – it seems the female action chicks never get it quite right. If they succeed in one respect, they fail in another. However, there are some characters, like Xena, who navigate the murky waters of

sexuality and toughness particularly well and enjoy huge popularity among fans. They manage to disrupt the rigidly bounded system of representation based on the male/female, masculine/feminine binary oppositions. They transgress into the male domain. Unfortunately, transgression often meets with punishment. And it is frequently punishment by death.

### **2.3.5. "The Bitch is Dead."**

In these words James Bond informs his superiors about Vesper Lynd's death in the novel, and later its film adaptation, *Casino Royale*. Whatever regret he may feel, he hides it behind these contemptuous words. She betrayed him and so her suicidal death caused by remorse seems to be a fate well deserved and places her in a long line of *femme fatales* who, according to the classic Hollywood scenario of *film noir*, must inevitably be brought under male control before the story ends. The threat they pose must be contained and death is the ultimate solution.

However, it is not only the evil traitorous *femme fatales* who frequently meet a tragic end. Gilpatric's study shows that 30% of violent female action characters are killed by the end of the movie. Even the main protagonists are not spared. The two heroines of *Thelma & Louise*, Meg Ryan's Captain Walden in *Courage under Fire* (1996), and Ripley in the third part of the *Alien* series amount to 8 % of the death toll. 47% of VFACs died deserved deaths as they were evil and so had to be punished, and 45% occupied a role submissive to the main male protagonist. Some actresses, such as Michelle Rodriguez, are now known for the roles of tough women who inevitably end up dead. As she herself says, "... people can call it typecast, but I pigeonholed myself... Saying no to the girlfriend, saying no to the girl that gets captured, and eventually I just



got left with the strong chick who's always being killed" (qtd. in "Vasquez Always Dies"). The pattern is so popular that it is a separate entry on TV Tropes named after the butch female character from the second part of *Aliens* "Vasquez Always Dies."

A concept which I find particularly useful in the discussion of this trend is Sara Crosby's "republican compromise." Following a series of suicidal deaths of female action heroes (Max from *Dark Angel*, Xena, Buffy) in the spring of 2001, in her essay "The Cruellest Season: Female Heroes Snapped into Sacrificial Heroines," Sara Crosby proposes that an ideology "that has proven historically capable of accommodating both the tough, heroic feminine and its necessary sacrifice" is republicanism (154). She argues:

American republicanism links muscular self-assertion and individualism to heroism and political power. Its historians and critics clash over if and how republicanism applies to women. Is republicanism liberating and profeminist or oppressive and neopatriarchal? Does it justify individual desire, regardless of gender, and protect the right to pursue heroic self-identity and political empowerment? Or does it create a sexist binary between the passive, feminized represented and the active, masculine representative? The answer is "yes" to both questions. Republicanism enacts a compromise through the bodies of tough female heroes. Its muscular, self-actualizing ethic creates them, and then patriarchy reclaims them by transforming them into sacrificial heroines. Republican individualism has long accommodated American women's desires for tough, heroic identities and continues to push tough female heroes into mainstream culture. For over 200 years, popular literature has stretched to produce women who race miles across country, sneak through enemy

lines, plow 60 acres with a babe on each hip, and tomahawk “savages” with ease. But, in spite of their accomplishments, their narratives end by denying them the male hero’s ultimate goal: political authority wielded to reform and empower his own community. (154)

Crosby suggests that to defend the patriarchal community against the threat posed by tough female heroes, and at the same maintain its individualistic ethic, republicanism institutes a “rubber band effect” for those heroes. They may push the limits, but sooner or later, the rubber band snaps to turn them into sacrificial heroines. According to Crosby, before that snapping point occurs, the heroes “must assume three fundamental ‘truths’ about themselves and about their communities”: (1) They bear a burden of guilt because of their heroism. “Their agency, their toughness is their sin” (155); (2) “Because of their guilty criminality and because of their passive ‘nature,’ female heroes do not want their transgressive toughness. [...] They want redemption; they want to relinquish their power and agency”; and finally (3) “The only stable or pragmatic possible community is the patriarchal community” which the female hero must eventually choose over the feminist community that might have formed around her on her heroic journey. However, the fact that she chooses the patriarchal community does not mean she will be accepted and cherished within this community. Roberta Rosenberg emphasizes:

In the 1960s and 1970s, white Euro-American literature provided few positive role models for feminine, transformative violence, and most frequently (with notable exceptions) neither accommodated disruptive women nor welcomed them back into the community after a period of aggression. Although violent women’s actions are often celebrated or

sensationalized, eventually these hostile women have to be neutralized, usually by death or madness.

Unfortunately, what Rosenberg writes about 1960s and 1970s seems to be still true. Violent heroic women usually have no community to go back to. Such is the fate of Hanna, the genetically modified girl who is left all alone in the world after she brutally dispatches all her adversaries. Such is the fate of Xena, who in the end must die to redeem herself. However, while Xena's threat and power is "neutralized" within the diegesis, the character managed to gain a foothold in popular culture and even now, many years after the show was cancelled, enjoys devotion and respect within the community of her fans who call themselves Xenites.<sup>29</sup> She is a rare example of a female heroic figure who was denied the chance to empower her community within the story, but continues to empower and inspire the real-life community of her fans. I must confess that I remember myself entertaining thoughts of attending martial arts classes under the influence of my teenage fascination with strong action heroines who knew their jump kicks and somersaults and Xena was one of them. It is perhaps one of the reasons why I have decided to devote the last section of this chapter to the analysis of the show as an example of a broken promise of positive female heroism.

#### **2.4. *Xena: Warrior Princess* – A Broken Promise of Positive Female Heroism**

The TV series *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001) was very promising and revolutionary in its representation of the female hero. As we are told in the show's introduction, "In a time of ancient gods, warlords, and kings, a land in turmoil cried out for a hero. She was Xena, a mighty princess forged in the heat of battle. The passion.

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<sup>29</sup> In fact, Xenites even hold international conventions dedicated to the TV series.

The danger. Her courage will change the world.” No doubt she is a far cry from the stereotypical representation of women as weak, passive and submissive. But is she any different from the other female action figures discussed in the previous sections? What does she have that the other characters lack? From a feminist perspective, can she be called a positive female hero? In an interesting article entitled “*Xena: Warrior Princess* Through the Lenses of Feminism,” Melissa Meister summarizes the show’s importance in the following variation on the words from the show’s introduction, “In a time of a monotheistic god, gangs, and politicians, a land in subjugation cried out for a hero. She was XENA: WARRIOR PRINCESS, an inspirational television show forged in the heat of male-dominated programming. Her presence just might change the world.”



**Figures 28 and 29** Two faces of Xena: on the left, Lucy Lawless as the fierce warrior woman on the battlefield, and on the right, the loyal, affectionate friend to Gabriel.

Indeed, *Xena: Warrior Princess* is pretty unique in its subversive take on gender. Although heroism has traditionally been associated with masculinity and maleness, this female character is undoubtedly a heroic warrior. She is powerful in her own right, equal or superior to men; her strength and agility are envied by men and women alike. She is autonomous, independent and free. She is not a sidekick to any man; rather she is

perfectly capable of subduing any man with her kicks if he crosses her. Furthermore, unlike many female characters in film and on TV, action heroines included, her life does not revolve around a man. As Meister writes:

Women on television have always been defined through their interactions with men. There has never before been a woman on television that was a *signified* woman without a male *signifier*. However, the creators of XENA: WARRIOR PRINCESS have managed to break through this cultural paradigm to create the first woman-identified woman on television. The character of Xena is a woman without male *signifiers*. The text of the show does not revolve in any way around Xena's interpersonal interactions with men. On the contrary, the show most directly revolves around Xena's interpersonal interaction with her traveling companion, Gabrielle. It is Xena and Gabrielle who have become each other's *signifiers*.

The only instance when Xena's relationship with a man caused controversy among the fans and critics was turning the god Ares from Xena's adversary to a potential love interest in the fifth season of the series. As Cathy Young observes in her article "The God Who Loved Her: The Xena-Ares Storyline on *Xena: Warrior Princess*," "Many fans who saw Xena and Gabrielle as a couple viewed this move as part of an effort to 'heterosexualize' the show and de-emphasize not only the lesbian subtext but also the bond between the heroes." Some also believed this story line compromised the feminist message of the show by "romanticizing abusive behavior" (Young). Eventually, however, the "relationship" between Xena and Ares is never consummated, unless we count his sexual encounter with Xena's body temporarily inhabited by the evil Callisto, and it is not Xena but Ares who is growing increasingly obsessive about their potential

future together. Ultimately, the show seems to suggest that his affection for Xena teaches him unconditional love and redeems his dark soul. While Xena appreciates that, there is no happily ever after.

Xena's lack of any special interest in men is probably one of the reasons why she cannot be reduced to the status of a hungered-after sex symbol despite her relatively skimpy outfit. True, she is a beautiful and sexy woman who feels comfortable in her own skin but she is not a conventional beauty from a woman's magazine. She is not a model-like skinny waif who would not be able to hold a sword longer than a minute, let alone fight with it. She is strong and she looks strong. Yet she is not overly muscled and, therefore, her body cannot easily be called "masculinized." She seems to navigate quite well between "masculinity" and "femininity" in this respect. In an article entitled "The Female Hero, Duality of Gender, and Postmodern Feminism in *Xena: Warrior Princess*," Rhonda Nelson writes:

...one of Xena's most noticeable characteristics as superhero is her positive display of duality of gender. This duality is shown in her relationships (having male lovers while in deeply emotional relationship with Gabrielle), in her display of warriorhood (wielding the sword as a phallic symbol, using her signature chakram symbolizing the female sex), and all the while accentuating her female form, not hiding it. Men are attracted to her and terrified of her. She is part harem girl and part warrior; part male and part female; and, part princess and part warrior. [...] This ability to carry the strengths of both genders is empowering for Xena's viewership.

At this point, it is important to mention one of the main characteristics of positive feminine heroic action as described by Professor Roberta Rosenberg in her essay

“Archetypal Violence and the Feminine Heroic in Multicultural American Women’s Writing,” to the more detailed discussion of which I shall return in the last chapter of this thesis. Rosenberg suggests that to find new models for feminine heroic action, we need to look outside of white Western, patriarchal culture, for example, in multicultural American women’s writing where such images are supported both by a mythic and political tradition. She writes:

Some contemporary multicultural American female authors have access to non-western archetypes for feminine heroism... These narratives also make possible a new kind of heroine in American literature. The Native American, African-American, and Asian-American authors [... have access to ] holistic goddesses whose violent actions are sanctioned by non-Western mythic narratives and an oppressed society that allows women to transgress in order to survive.

Rosenberg refers to heroines who are “neither all good nor evil, but a cyclical holistic combination,” heroines who reject simplistic good/evil dualities. Xena is a perfect embodiment of such a heroine. As a child, she survives a massacre of her village, vows vengeance and eventually loses her soul to it. For a time, she becomes like the evil warlord who killed her family. At some point, she undergoes a transformation, makes a conscious choice to suppress her evil side and turn towards the good. However, it is precisely the evil, violent side of her personality that is frequently necessary to win the day. She is not a black-and-white character. To refer back to Rosenberg’s phrase – she has to transgress in order to survive and defend others.

The ability to defend the community is another characteristic of positive female heroism mentioned by Rosenberg. And it is something that Xena, together with Gabrielle, does very successfully. During their travels, like all great heroes, they come

across many hardships and obstacles that they need to overcome, usually to help the weak and mistreated. A concept particularly useful for the discussion of Xena's and Gabrielle's heroism is *epistemic negotiation*. Drawing on the work by Lorraine Code, who in turn borrowed the term from Elizabeth Potter, Sharon Ross defines it in an essay entitled "'Tough Enough': Female Friendship and Heroism in *Xena* and *Buffy*" as "a process of building knowledge in which individuals come together as a community to discuss what they each know and then debate how best to address the situation at hand. [Female heroes] are not heroes *for* other women so much as they are heroes *with* them" (232). Epistemic negotiation is, therefore, based on "communal action, interdependency and emotional knowing" (Ross 233). In her analysis, Ross shows how this process can be used in series featuring female action heroes to "inflect the concept of toughness with the notion of flexibility" (231) and thus challenge and redefine traditional notions of heroism favoring and prioritizing individualism, isolationism and emotional withdrawal. By employing the strategy of epistemic negotiation, Xena manages to form a feminist community around her, consisting of Gabrielle and the oppressed people they are helping, which becomes for her a source of strength and support. Together they can resist patriarchal oppression more successfully as, thanks to the epistemic negotiation – that is sharing knowledge and experiences – they achieve a much better understanding of the situations in which they find themselves and, consequently, they make well-informed decisions. A recent example of epistemic negotiation at work can be found in *The Hunger Games* series where the main character's survival depends on her ability to successfully cooperate with others. In an article entitled "Screenshot: Is Katniss Everdeen the new face of feminism?" Emma Noble observes that:

Katniss's survival strategy doesn't just depend on her stoic, independent demeanour alone. From the outset she's neither the most intelligent nor



the fastest or strongest, but the girl on fire embraces one characteristic that saved her life in the first Hunger Games and continues to do so in *Catching Fire*: her ability to nurture meaningful relationships. From her sister Primrose to coal miner Gale and the baker's son, Peeta, Katniss draws strength from those around her... .

The trouble is that relying on others for support is seen as a sign of weakness according to the traditional notions of individualistic heroism. It is enough to recall the already-mentioned tactic of “splitting” as a way of diffusing authority across many characters. Lorraine Code, for example, points out that emotional bonding and interdependency, characteristic of epistemic negotiation, have traditionally been seen as a domain of women, and, therefore, have been devalued in the patriarchal culture. In this context, Xena or Katniss seem to be moving the concept of heroism in a completely new direction, one that can change the general understanding of what it means to be “truly” heroic not only for the female but for the male hero as well. But that, of course, can be achieved only as long the patriarchal assumptions about “true” heroism are open to question.

Unfortunately, revolutionary and promising as the series was, the last episode put an end to all hopes and expectations. Among the characteristics of positive female heroism mentioned by Rosenberg a prominent place is reserved for the ability for self-rescue. The violent actions of a positive heroine should not be self-defeating or suicidal. Most texts analyzing Xena that were written before the end of the series applauded her as a fantasy of a survivor, a woman who could find a way out of even the most dangerous situation. She was supposed to be invincible. Rhonda Nelson wrote: “Xena is the woman triumphant over all obstacles set before her. Even death does not conquer

her, as her soul has inhabited other bodies until she can rectify the situation.” Well, the more shocked and disappointed Xena’s fans were having watched the series finale.

Sara Crosby uses Xena as an example of a TV show in which one can detect the workings of “the republican compromise” and “the rubber band effect,” which I have referred to towards the end of the previous section. In the last episode of *Xena*, the rubber band snaps. The republican compromise, which the series managed to avoid for 6 seasons, hits with double force. We are told, to quote the producer Robert Tapert, that “Xena’s story is the story to redeem herself” (qtd. in Crosby 173) and that the only way to achieve the ultimate redemption is to sacrifice herself to save 40,000 souls of villagers who died in a fire accidentally started by Xena, in self-defense against those villagers we might add, a few years before. Crosby describes the logic of this episode in the following way:

Fatally deaf to her partner’s moral authority, Xena internalizes the patriarchal assumptions she had earlier rejected. Accepting her guilt she no longer wants her heroism. She puts down her sword and allows herself to be perforated by a dozen arrows, beheaded, and symbolically raped before her ghost body defeats Yodoshi. But even that punishment fails to satisfy. She needs to make her final choice of community clear. As she tells Gabrielle in their last scene together, “for those souls to be released into a state of grace, they must be avenged. I must stay dead.” Having internalized the patriarchal community’s need to punish the female hero, Xena repeats their cruelty and thwarts Gabrielle’s heroic mission to retrieve her ashes and resurrect her. She must disempower her partner, and she literally and figuratively turns away from her and their feminist

community toward patriarchy. She devotes her death, her final heroism to it. (171)

Now, this can hardly be called an example of positive female heroism. It rather proves the point made by Elaine Showalter that female assertiveness is more likely to harm instead of help the protagonist (qtd. in Rosenberg). Unlike male heroes, most contemporary female action heroines of western popular culture eventually fall victim to the republican compromise which, at the end of the day, must see them reined in, either by turning them into sacrificial heroines, showing their violence as something unnatural and untypical of other “normal” women, reducing them to the status of a sex symbol, questioning their toughness and power on the grounds that “girlish tough ain’t enough” or at least relegating them to the realm of fantasy which makes them more palatable to the patriarchal mass audience. *Xena: Warrior Princess*, unfortunately, is such a heroine; a perfect example of a broken promise of positive female heroism.

Virginia Woolf once wrote, “It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction were ... not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex ... Suppose, for instance, that men were only represented in literature as the lovers of women, and were never the friends of men, soldiers, thinkers, dreamers ...” (qtd. in Stuller 137). Suppose they were never heroes. I strongly believe that women do want and need to see more images of positive female heroism. This is a fact borne out by the numerous anecdotes of empowering childhood fantasies and identifications told by women studying female heroic figures, as well as female viewers’ responses to films featuring such characters. When Jennifer K. Stuller confessed to Trina Robbins over an afternoon coffee that she used to hope Princess Ozma would take her to the magical world of Oz, Robbin’s response was, “OK—then you understand, why, in the privacy of my bedroom, I used to go ‘SHAZAM? SHAZAM!’ hoping that it would work” (Kindle

Location 3444). My own childhood dreams of magical powers made me turn my great-grandmother's ring around my finger just like the adventurous girl from a Polish TV series *Janka* did whenever she needed strength during her heroic endeavors. Unfortunately, for girls as well as for adult women, such inspiring fantasies of potency and power are still less available than they are for boys and men, and the images of heroic women circulating in popular culture are often seriously flawed.

However, it is not only the images of female heroic figures offered by contemporary Western popular culture that are wanting. It is my contention that the theoretical models frequently applied to the study and interpretation of such figures are flawed too, for they use a lens that does not allow for a positive reading of certain images. The same figure may be seen as empowering or not depending on the theoretical framework and definitions of role and status that are employed. Although most feminist critics contest the Western association of power with maleness and masculinity, whenever they object to the depiction of strong women as masculinized or the depiction of maternal women as weakening, they reinforce these associations. They fall into the trap of classifying toughness as a masculine trait and making feminine experiences such as motherhood sound somehow inferior and detrimental to a woman's heroism. Bearing in mind that for the human species to continue, women will have to give birth to children, I find it disturbing that motherhood is so often presented as antithetical to heroism. Rather, instead of pitching female heroes against the Western patriarchal concept of heroism – they will inevitably be found wanting – the definition of heroism should be extended to be more inclusive of the experiences of social groups other than solely white heterosexual men. Therefore, I believe it would be productive to look for archetypes of positive female heroism in cultural traditions where traits such as toughness, strength and assertiveness have not traditionally been assigned to one sex

only and thus expose how artificial such binary distinctions and associations are. New images of heroism need to be sought, as well as different lenses through which to view them. As Marshall McLuhan famously said, “I don’t know who discovered water, but I’m pretty sure it wasn’t a fish” (qtd. in “Leading Ideas”).

### **- CHAPTER THREE -**

## **ALTERNATIVE ARCHETYPAL PATTERNS OF FEMINIE HEROIC ACTION: FEMALE HEROES IN THE NATIVE AMERICAN TRADITION**

As I have suggested at the end of the previous chapter, it is not only the images of heroic women but also the theoretical models applied to the analysis of such images within the Western feminist critical communities that seem to be bounded by patriarchal terminology and patriarchal definitions of role and status. There have been various attempts to escape what many feminists believe to be a prison of male-dominated language and imagery that are effective instruments of patriarchal oppression. A prominent, although widely debated, example of such an attempt is the *Écriture féminine* movement advocating the need for woman to “write her self” (Cixous 875) using not a man’s but a woman’s style of writing. Another one, perhaps less likely to cause accusations of essentialism and promoting a feminism of difference, is the concept of *revisionist mythmaking*. In *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women’s Poetry in America* (1986), Alicia Suskin Ostriker proposes that “revisionist mythmaking in women’s poetry is a means of redefining both woman and culture” (211). She goes on to notice:

At first thought, mythology seems an inhospitable terrain for a woman writer. There we find the conquering gods and heroes, the deities of pure thought and spirituality so superior to Mother Nature; there we find the sexually wicked Venus, Circe, Pandora, Helen, Medea, Eve, and the virtuously passive Iphigenia, Alcestis, Mary, and Cinderella. It is thanks

to myth that we believe that woman must be either angel or monster.  
(211-212)

While this is not true of all mythologies, as this chapter is about to prove, it is certainly true of classical Western myths. Ostriker advances a theory that even such oppressive patriarchal mythology can be subjected to “revisionist mythmaking” (212) that is appropriating a well-known figure or tale “for altered ends” (212) so that it becomes “the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible” (212-213). Although she is particularly interested in three book-length mythological poems – H. D.’s *Helen in Egypt*, Susan Griffin’s *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* and Anne Sexton’s *Transformations* – since, as she writes, “To be great in our culture usually requires being big” (223), she also provides a comprehensive overview of poets writing smaller forms, such as Phyllis Wheatley, Mercy Warren, Maria Brooks, Elizabeth Oakes Smith, Emma Lazarus, Adelaide Crapsey and others, who use mythical heroines such as Niobe, Medea, Eve or Penelope to explore themes of women’s rage, eroticism, victimization as well as themes of woman as artist or a force capable of bringing about social change (214). She argues that the poet

may ... deviate from or explicitly challenge the meanings attributed to mythic figures and tales. She may keep the name but change the game, and here is where revisionist mythology comes in. ... the old stories are changed, changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy or as the pillars sustaining phallogentric “high” culture. Instead, they are corrections; they are representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves; they are retrieved images of what women have

collectively and historically suffered; in some cases they are instructions for survival (215).

Such “corrections” and “revisions” of the oppressive patriarchal myths require, as Adrienne Rich puts it, “seeing with fresh eyes, ... entering an old text from a new critical direction” (qtd. in Ostriker 235). Arguably, to achieve that fresh look and rewrite classical Western myths so that their heroines become powerful heroic subjects instead of passive silent objects, it would be valuable to explore mythologies which do not need to be revised but rather rediscovered as sources of positive archetypal patterns for feminine heroic action. In her insightful essay entitled “Archetypal Violence and the Feminine Heroic in Multicultural American Women’s Writing,” Professor Roberta Rosenberg suggests:

... if contemporary American literature is to find new archetypal patterns for feminine heroic action – narratives that include the defense of a community as well as “triumphant self-rescue ... one of the traditional markers of heroism,” we will need to look to some American multicultural authors who have both a mythic and political tradition that supports such a vision.

Multicultural writers seem to have access to mythologies which, contrary to the western tradition, provide models for feminine heroism. They do not need to invent them or “correct” them, as Western societies do; they just need to rediscover them. This study is primarily concerned with the Native American tradition, which once inspired early American suffragettes to dream of a world where women enjoyed authority and power, and which still has much to offer in the fight for gender equality; however, it is of crucial importance to stress that archetypes of positive female heroes are by no means unique to this tradition. They are not an exception or an oddity but rather a recurring



motif common to many mythologies all over the world, thus exposing the great Western fallacy that seeks to present gender inequality as a natural and inevitable order of things. Therefore, although I am fully aware that the discussion I am about to offer, brief as it must be, cannot do justice to the complexity and variety within this body of work, I shall nevertheless try to trace the practice of seeking inspiration in the empowering myths of ancient goddesses that characterizes much of contemporary multicultural women's writing in the United States before I proceed to examine the Native American tradition more thoroughly.

Rosenberg herself provides examples of writers coming from a diversity of backgrounds and cultural traditions: the Native American, African-American, Hindu-American and Asian-American. She refers to African-American writers and critics, such as Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison or Sabrina Sojourner to show how they draw on the myths of African goddesses to offer powerful role models that can teach women assertiveness, autonomous action and agency. Celie from Walker's *The Color Purple* or Sethe from Morrison's *Beloved* are embodiments of aggressive, heroic women capable of transformative violence. "These aggressive and angry women," Rosenberg writes, "reject patriarchal imperatives for passive female behavior and appropriate violent archetypes as a form of personal and communal salvation." The Amazons of Libya or the deities of Yoruba culture become inspiration for aggressive action that is necessary to fight inequality and oppression. Looking for positive, autonomous heroines capable of reforming their community, we shouldn't forget about Flora Nwapa's<sup>30</sup> *Efuru*, the heroine of one of the first published English-language

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<sup>30</sup> Because of the topics tackled in her novels and the way her heroines are constructed, Flora Nwapa has often been associated with such feminist concerns as empowerment, gender equality or female agency. However, she herself objected to being called a feminist. In a review of *Efuru*, Ahmad Ghashmari quotes a fragment of a 1993 interview by Marie Umeh, in which Nwapa clearly stated, "I don't even accept that I'm a feminist. I accept that I'm an ordinary woman who is writing about what she knows. I try to project the image of women positively." Although from a Western perspective some of the choices made by

novels written by a woman of African descent. Despite various misfortunes in her personal life, she manages to remain a successful and respected member of her tribe drawing her strength from the wisdom of the lake goddess Uhamiri. Mami Wata, a pantheon of ancient water deities, the Yoruba Orishas (goddesses) – Yemoja, the Goddess of the Sea; Osun, the Goddess of the Rivers or Oya, the Goddess of the Winds, Tornados and Lightning all offer complex images of feminine power that can be both benevolent and dangerous or destructive. Oya, for instance, has been described as “the beautiful, violent, and fearless daughter of Yemoja (Goddess of the Sea) [...], a superhuman female warrior and horsewoman that wielded a saber and horsetail in one hand, while pulling down lightning with the other” (Omifunke). Despite her fierce appearance and destructive potential, she is also at the same time revered as a protectress of women.

Of the multiple goddesses and female deities from the Hindu tradition, the one that has probably been most often appropriated by women writers in the West is Kali. She can be found in the poetry of Lucille Clifton, Merlin Stone or May Sarton. She not only occupies a prominent place in critical studies such as *Devi: Goddesses of India* edited by John Stratton Lawley and Donna Marie Wulff (1996) but is also the subject of book-length studies such as *Kali: The Black Goddess of Dakshineswar* by Elizabeth U. Harding (1993) or *Encountering Kali: In the Margins, at the Centre, in the West* by Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey John Kripal (2003). In “Loving Paradoxes: A Feminist Reclamation of the Goddess Kali,” Vrinda Dalmiya claims that “The iconography of the Goddess Kali from India comes as a dramatic relief in our search for

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Nwapa’s heroine Efuru would certainly not be seen as positive (for instance, her acceptance of polygamy or the practice of circumcision), within the cultural context that she comes from, she is still a progressive character who strives to “live life fully” but realizes the necessity for “negotiation and compromise between tradition and modernity” in order to survive (Ghashmari).

alternative constructions of femininity and motherhood” (125). In the hymn quoted by Dalmiya, Kali is described as powerful, beautiful and at the same time terrifying:

Mother, incomparably arrayed,  
Hair flying, stripped down,  
You battle-dance on Shiva’s heart,  
A garland of heads that bounce off  
Your heavy hips, chopped-off hands  
For a belt, the bodies of infants  
For earrings, and the lips,  
The teeth like jasmine, the face  
A lotus blossomed, the laugh,  
And the dark body billowing up and out  
Like a storm cloud, and those feet  
Whose beauty is only deepened by blood.  
So Prasād cries: My mind is dancing! (125)

In this figure, the common categories of good and evil, beautiful and appalling, characteristic of Western binary thinking, are intermingled. Rosenberg uses the example of Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* as an inspiring illustration of how such “holistic goddesses who nurture and destroy,” can serve as “potent symbols” capable of subverting traditional Western notions about femininity. Like Kali, Jasmine from Mukherjee’s story is a complex figure, capable of serious transgressions, even murder, and yet she is a quintessential survivor who manages to retain the status of a positive feminine protagonist. Rosenberg contends:

Unlike Showalter's<sup>31</sup> passive and abused 1970s female characters, Jasmine demonstrates an effective Kali energy that liberates her from self-sacrificing duty and allows her a kind of heroic "recklessness" seen in Western male characters like Odysseus but usually punished in female counterparts. Furthermore, Jasmine's violent and transgressive actions do not alienate her from the greater American community since the novel ends with her romantic liaison . . . .

Despite her transgressions, Jasmine is not forced to walk into the sunset and leave her community behind, as most Western heroes, be it male or female, are. She may not be virtuous, as Mukherjee herself admits, at least not according to Judeo-Christian standards, but she is a fighter who finds inner strength by accessing the energies of Hindu gods, Kali in particular, and thus offers "an important archetype for action that makes no distinction between good and bad but is seen instead as a transformative cycle from birth to death to rebirth and renewal" (Rosenberg).

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<sup>31</sup> Here Rosenberg refers to Elaine Showalter's essay "Rethinking the Seventies: Women Writers and Violence" in which she claims that "women as a group are so conditioned to the victim's role, and so far from attempting any kind of violence, even in self-defense, that their expanded awareness of sex crimes only increases their sense of helplessness, vulnerability, and fear" (161). Having analyzed novels such as Diane Johnson's *The Shadow Knows* (1974), Gail Godwin's *The Odd Woman* (1974), Judith Rossner's *Looking for Mr Goodbar* (1975), Marilyn French's *The Woman's Room* (1977) and others, Showalter concludes that they are in fact studies in female vulnerability, powerlessness and victimization. "Literature and film offer women little support for fighting back and not much emotional catharsis," she stresses (170).



**Figure 30** The Hindu goddess Kali depicted in her victorious glory by Raja Ravi Varma. For the first time she appears in the *Devi-Mahatmya*, where she is born from the brow of the warrior Goddess Durga to help the divine forces defeat demons during a bloody battle. On the surface appalling and fearsome, Kali is a complex figure whose symbolism is often misunderstood as simply that of violence and death. Various traditions and interpretations put emphasis on different aspect of her personality, thus testifying to the possibility of reading the same figure in multiple ways. Representing “the inherent creative and destructive rhythms of the cosmos” (Kumar), she is at the same time wild, violent, fearsome and compassionate, loving and benevolent. As Nitin Kumar explains, “Kali may be frightening, the mad, forgetful mistress of a world spinning out of control, but she is, after all, the Mother of all. As such, she must be accepted by her children – accepted in wonder and awe, perhaps, but accepted nevertheless.”

In her now classic book, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1977), Maxine Hong Kingston observes:

When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talking-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen. Even if she had to rage across all China, a swordswoman got even with anybody who hurt her family. Perhaps women were once so dangerous that they had to have their feet bound (19).

In the “White Tigers” section of her book, Kingston recalls her childhood fantasies of greatness and heroism inspired by her mother’s bedtime “talking-story” and chants of the warrior woman Fa Mu Lan who “fought gloriously and returned alive from war to settle in the village” (20). Similarly, Rosenberg demonstrates how Chinese mythology can influence the female mind by referring to a Chinese-American critic Siew Hwa Beh,

who as a child also enjoyed her mother's stories of brave female heroes, especially of the swordswomen. While Beh does not see such mythologies as an immediate antidote to patriarchal oppression, she argues that "stories, like dreams, can serve to relieve unconscious pressures. Seeking the legacy of the warrior, women contribute to the creation and recreations of a positive female mythology. The building of a vocabulary of images is an essential element in our political revolution" (Rosenberg). Especially in the oppressive patriarchal Chinese culture, where, as Kingston points out, most women would grow up to fulfill subservient roles, such images can be seen as a source of comfort, strength and empowerment. The figure of a swordswoman has been extremely popular in a centuries-old, though for a long time critically disregarded, Chinese literary form called *xiaoshuo*. In "Heroic Daughters: Swordswomen in Traditional Chinese Literature," Jean Lukitsh quotes the example of Nie Yinniang character, dating back to the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD), who having being kidnapped as a child grows to be a trained assassin and bodyguard. Lukitsh stresses, "The story of Nie Yinniang is not just a thrilling action-packed adventure, it also manages to upend virtually every Confucian precept and orthodox stricture of feminine behavior." A very comprehensive study of the figure of the Chinese female knight can be found in Roland Altenburger's *The Sword or the Needle: The Female Knight-errant (xia) in Traditional Chinese Narrative* (2009). He points to the very ambiguous nature of these characters:

On the one hand they "are serving to re-establish social order in the face of supposed disorder,"<sup>32</sup> thus acting as defenders of an unquestioned patriarchal Confucian order; but on the other hand, by performing her role which involves gender bending and violence against men, the female xia herself is perceived as a disruption and threat to this very order. This

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<sup>32</sup> The quotation comes from Louise Edwards' article "Women Warriors and Amazons of the mid Qing Texts *Jinghua yuan* and *Honglou meng*."

inherent tension between order and disorder is at the basis of the ambiguity underlying the female knight-errant character (53).

Kingston's imagined warrior alter ego undergoes a fifteen-year-long training, builds an invincible army, overthrows the emperor, gets revenge for the wrongs done to her family and her fellow villagers only to return home to her husband and son with a promise to do farm work and housework and breed more sons. Although she may seem contained and domesticated, she has in fact fulfilled her life's heroic mission – leading her people to a victory and a better future, a prerogative of any true hero. Her reward is her family's love and respect, something that Kingston's real self desperately lacks. However, it is the swordswoman fantasy, the deeply felt need to “do something big and fine” that drives Kingston on her own quest for revenge – not with a sword but with words. “The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. ... The reporting is the vengeance – not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words” (Kingston 53). It is with words and stories that a modern female hero can reform her community.

Rosenberg's discussion of multicultural authors consciously employing empowering archetypes that can be found in the mythologies of their respective cultural traditions and backgrounds does not include Chicana writers, and that is an omission I wish to correct. Like those of Africa, India and Asia, the pre-Columbian native Mesoamerican civilizations offered a proliferation of powerful female archetypes, later suppressed, demonized or altered by the Christian missionaries. The numerous motherhood and fertility deities such as Coatlicue, Cihuacoatl, Xochiquetzal or the more ambiguous goddess of desire, dirt, lechery but also purification, Tlazolteotl, have been replaced by three main female archetypes – La Llorona, La Malinche and La Virgen de

Guadalupe.<sup>33</sup> Permeated to the core by the Catholic understanding of right and wrong, these three figures constitute a familiar guide to the oppressive social norms that Mexican women are supposed to comply with. Beginning in the 1970s, the Chicana feminist movement embarked on a project of rewriting and reconstructing these patriarchal, limiting and demeaning images in order to enable women to achieve independence and agency over their bodies and sexuality. Chicana writers started to consciously employ these female archetypes in their writing in order to inflect them with new meanings. An interesting analysis of this practice can be found in Debra J. Blake's book *Chicana Sexuality and Gender: Cultural Refiguring in Literature, Oral History, and Art* (2008). In her discussion of writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo and Alma Luz Villanueva, she uses the concept of "cultural refiguring," which she defines as follows:

I use "cultural refiguring" to imply agency, a conscious choice to think and act for oneself or in the interests of a community. Cultural refiguring identifies deficiencies and destructive images, ideas, symbols, and practices directed toward women and disenfranchised peoples. It attempts to replace denigratory concepts with constructive and affirmative understandings, representations, or actions that view women as complex, multifaceted human beings. (5)

This definition immediately brings to mind Ostriker's aforementioned revisionist mythmaking. In both cases, the aim is to fight with oppressive stereotypical

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<sup>33</sup> In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa actually argues that the fragmentation of female deities began already at the point of the Azteca-Mexica conquest. The complex, multifaceted supreme maternal deity Coatlicue was split into the benevolent mother goddess Tonantzin and the more sinful, darker Tlazoteotl and Cihuacoatl. The Spanish invasion and the Catholic Church pushed the process further. As Lee Bebout observes in *Mythohistorical Interventions: The Chicano Movement and Its Legacies* (2011), "Ultimately, this dissection resulted in models that represented the impossible ideal (La Virgen) and the abject (La Malinche and La Llorona)" (163).



representations of women by revising and refiguring the common cultural symbols and myths which perpetuate them.

In the introduction to her book *The Sacred Hoop*, a Native American critic and writer Paula Gunn Allen states, “American Indians are not merely doomed victims of western imperialism or progress; they are also the carriers of the dream that most activist movements in the Americas claim to be seeking” (2). To my mind, they can definitely be seen as the carriers of the dream that the feminist movement seems to be seeking – that is a redefinition of women’s role in the society that would free them from patriarchal oppression. What the above discussion was meant to demonstrate is that they are not alone on that mission. Women from various cultural backgrounds undertake the effort to reconnect with the long-lost, suppressed or demonized symbols of feminine power that could well change the essentialist patriarchal ideas inevitably placing women in a subjugated position within society and denying them equal access to many areas of life, heroism being one of them.

### **3.1. Native American Creation Stories and Myths: Tales of Female Power**

“In the beginning was thought, and her name was Woman.” This is how Paula Gunn Allen starts her discussion of the traditional ways of her people, the Keres Pueblos of the American Southwest, in *The Sacred Hoop* (11). What follows is a creation story permeated to the core with the sense of female power, omnipresence and omnipotence. “There is a spirit that pervades everything ...,” Allen continues (13). “Old Spider Woman is one name for this quintessential spirit, and Serpent Woman is another. Corn Woman is one aspect of her, and Earth Woman is another, and what they together have made is called Creation, Earth, creatures, plants, and light” (23). Together with her

sisters Uretsete and Naotsete, whom she sings into life, Thought Woman creates all people and all creatures in the universe by thinking them into existence. “Her variety and multiplicity testify to her complexity: she is the true creatrix for she is thought itself, from which all else is born” (Allen, *The Sacred Hoop* 14). She has many names, faces and aspects; she “is not a passive personage: her potentiality is dynamic and unimaginably powerful” (Allen, *The Sacred Hoop* 15). The Keres worship her in the mother goddess Iyatiku (Corn Woman) whose representative Irriaku (Corn Mother) empowers Keres religious leaders to govern (Allen, *The Sacred Hoop* 17). As Leslie Marmon Silko explains in *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*, in the universe created by Thought Woman and her sisters “there is no absolute good or absolute bad; there are only balances and harmonies that ebb and flow” (64).

As even this brief description of the extremely complex Pueblo cosmology shows, their creation narratives are centered around multiple, mostly female, creators<sup>34</sup>. Such multiplicity and variety of creators is very characteristic of many Native American cosmologies. The Iroquois creation story, for example, features Sky Woman, who falls through a hole made in the bottom of Sky World after the Sky People are forced to uproot their sacred tree, Onodja. Pushed over by her cruel husband, envious of her dream-reading abilities, she tries to prevent her fall by grabbing Onodja’s roots. Thus, she falls to the Water World with the seeds of the Three Sisters – Corn, Beans and Squash – in her right hand, and tobacco seeds in the left one. She would have drowned had it not been for the animals who first catch her in her fall and then create dry land for her on the back of Great-grandmother Turtle. She becomes the First Woman of Earth. She plants the seeds and creates lakes and rivers with her urine. Soon she gives birth to a daughter, the Lynx, whom she conceived before her fall. Together they continue the

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<sup>34</sup> Uretsete transforms into male at some point in the creation story (Allen, *The Sacred Hoop* 19).

process of creation, naming plants and animals. They form the prototypical mother-daughter relationship, so cherished in the Iroquoian tradition. When the Lynx reaches maturity, she mates with North Wind. The union of Sky and Earth results in the conception of the Sacred Twins, Sapling and Flint who, unfortunately, bring about their mother's death during childbirth. Buried in the ground, the Lynx is worshipped by the Iroquois to this day as "Our Mother, the Earth" (Mann, *Land of the Three Miamis* 28). Raised by their Grandmother, the male Twins take over where the women left off, creating forests and mountains. Before her death, Sky Woman, now Grandmother, creates the Moon and the Milky Way Trail. Buried on the moon by her grandson Sapling, she is believed to live there now as Soika Gakwa, Grandmother, The Moon.<sup>35</sup>

Women, men, animals and even plants are all involved in creating life on Turtle Island in The First Epoch of Time. This involvement of so many varied creators and helpers is significant, for it illuminates the basic principles governing Iroquoian culture and tradition that will have a serious bearing on the discussion of positive archetypal patterns for feminine heroic action. Assuming that the two main prerequisites for heroism in the Western tradition identified in the first chapter were the hero's maleness and individualism, a pattern no doubt reinforced by the Christian creation story having at its center a lone male God who single-handedly creates the world for another male – Adam – to live in, then cosmologies placing Woman at the centre of creation as well as having multiple creators offer a completely new framework within which to look at gender relations and power relations in Native American communities. Discussing the content and structure of courses in Native American women's studies, Stephanie A. Sellers observes:

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<sup>35</sup> The summary of the Iroquois' creation story is mostly based on the very detailed accounts provided by Barbara Alice Mann's in *Land of the Three Miamis: A Traditional Narrative of the Iroquois in Ohio* and *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas*, as well as on accounts found in Stephanie A. Sellers' *Native American Women's Studies: A Primer* or Paula Gunn Allen's *The Sacred Hoop*.

... the women learn of another model for constructing beliefs about being women, and it redefines women's place in human systems that deeply honors them. There is no such model in western culture, and the women students are starved for meaningful examples of what being a woman means. Right at the beginning of class when students learn of Sky Woman and Spider Woman, they are stopped in their "patriarchal tracks." What occurs is the internalization of valuing women: women's bodily functions, women's psycho-spiritual experiences, women as political leaders, women safely moving in their own community, women as healers, women as the source of all manners of life. (3-4)

"Because the Creator is female, there is no stigma on being female; gender is not used to control behavior," Silko explains about the Pueblo cosmology (*Yellow Woman* 66). Unlike the Western religious systems centralizing males, the centralization of women in these Native creation stories is not done at the expense of men. Females, males, transgenders (Uretsete, for example) as well as animals, plants and various supernatural beings all contribute to the creation process, being a perfect illustration of "communal ethics," which, Seller maintains, is a "defining cultural practice of indigenous peoples that is absent in western culture and contemporary industrialized nations" (11). In *The Iroquoian Women: the Gantowisas*, Barbara Alice Mann stresses, "As this joint effort in creation suggests, the authentic perspective of Iroquoian culture values cooperation above all else" (89). "The Sky cycle therefore speaks to reciprocity, mutuality, interdependence, and the complementary parallels that form the naturally occurring structure of reality," she adds (*The Iroquoian Women* 90).

The necessity for cooperation and interdependence were two of the many objections frequently raised in Western feminist criticism of the female action hero,

discussed in the second chapter of this dissertation. The strategy of distributing power among many characters instead of concentrating it in one central figure, the aforementioned splitting, was believed to detract from the hero's power. Traditional conceptions of heroism demanded the hero to be a self-sufficient individualist. Consulting, sharing knowledge, depending on others for support, characteristic of epistemic negotiation, were seen as signs of weakness antithetical to true heroism. In cosmologies such as the ones of the Keres or Iroquois people, however, cooperation and sharing are the prescribed modes of behavior. It is precisely epistemic negotiation that the animals use in the Iroquoian creation story when they hold a council to decide how to best approach creating land for the Sky Woman. Together they are able to come up with the best solution. Having many different creators in no way weakens the female creatrixes, goddesses and deities. Their power is held as self-evident and unquestioned. Stephanie A. Sellers comments on the English literary tradition as follows:

Themes from these works like the hero, the savior, the adventurer, the conqueror, and the warrior are about pitting one man against other men, nature, or his own internal conflicts. These are fundamental literary components from the English tradition... What they all have in common is the centralization of men and, most importantly for this discussion, the individual human. Coupled with the individual focus is conflict, whether it be external or internal or both. (22)

Focus on conflict inevitably leads to attempts at resolving it by establishing the victorious individual's superiority and dominion over others. The social organization that results from this type of cultural philosophy is hierarchical. This stands in direct contrast to the communal ethics favoring cooperation, not competition; balance and harmony, not conflict; egalitarianism and complementarity, not hierarchy. This is not to

say that the individual preferences, rights and autonomy of particular members of Native American communities were not respected. In a chapter written as concluding remarks for a collection of essays entitled *Women and Power In Native North America*, Daniel Maltz and JoAllyn Archambault draw attention to the difference between the Western concept of individualism and the notion of autonomy, which they find more useful for discussing the relationship between gender and power in indigenous communities. To better illustrate the contrast between the two notions, they quote Anne S. Straus's analysis of Cheyenne ethnopsychology. She writes:

Individuality is by no means peculiar to modern Western society. ... But the meaning of individuality differs in different cultural contexts. In Western society the valued self is independent, internally driven, "self-actualizing"; the dependent, other-directed person is defined as having an unhealthy self. In Northern Cheyenne culture, individuality does occur and is respected unquestioned, but (as one woman stated it) "the individuals are like the poles of a tipi – each has his own attitude and appearance but all look to the same center [heart] and support the same cover." For Cheyennes, individuality supports a tribal purpose, a tribal identity. Individual freedom does not consist in distinguishing oneself from the group. Indeed, without the tribe there is no freedom; there is only being lost (245).

As stated in the first chapter, distinguishing oneself from the group is, in fact, a defining feature of a Western hero who must stand apart from the rest of society the better to assert his individualism and superiority over others. In the Introduction to *Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women*, Paula Gunn Allen states:

... singularity of consciousness is a central characteristic of modern Western fiction. ... But in the Indian way, singularity is antithetical to community. For Indians, relationships are based on commonalities of consciousness, reflected in thought and behavior; [...] In such a system, individualism (as distinct from autonomy or self-responsibility) becomes a negatively valued trait. (10)

Therefore, it is not the individualistic, isolated and self-contained male hero who would be considered truly heroic within such a system. On the contrary, the positive role model would be a hero employing epistemic negotiation as a primary strategy of knowledge building; a hero being flexible and interdependent – in other words, a female hero such as Xena.

The difference between the Western and indigenous worldviews becomes abundantly clear when one looks at how European-American observers have interpreted the Iroquoian story of the Sacred Twins. Superimposing the fundamentally Christian categories of good and evil, heaven and hell, God and devil on the story of the Twins results in reinterpreting Sapling as the good creator and Flint as the evil destroyer and turns their interaction into a battle. This is not how the story was understood by the Iroquois. Originally, before the traditional tales were tampered with under the influence of Christianization, the creation story presented two bonded pairs – that of the mother and the daughter and that of the two brothers. In no way were they in a conflict; rather they constituted equal elements of a balanced whole. The distortions of the original creation story are discussed at length by Mann in *Iroquoian Women*. She writes:

... the Euro-formed version of Sky tradition replicated the profoundly conflict-centered culture of the West which cannot see two without assuming that one must be the deadly enemy of the other. Recasting the

Twins as the Christian God and Devil was undoubtedly the most destructive manipulation of the Sky tradition, after the expulsion of women from Creation. Separating the Twins from one another to present them as enemies cruelly betrayed the true meaning of their bonded relationship, for Flint was not a “destroyer,” nor Sapling a lone “Creator.” Instead, *both* Twins were creators of life abundant – *as were their female elders before them*. (89)

Just as conflict and opposition seem to be the governing principles of Western thinking so in the Native world the governing principles are balance and complementarity. These principles permeate all social relationships, institutions and religious practices, gender relations included. Indeed, most studies dealing with the social structure of indigenous nations emphasize that despite the differences in how much real economic, political or religious power women enjoyed in the different communities, the majority had complementary gender systems. In the Introduction to *Women and Power in Native North America*, Laura F. Klein And Lilian A. Ackerman summarize the findings of the contributors, all based in anthropological studies, saying, “The authors in this volume conclude that the worlds of men and women were, and are, distinctly different but not generally perceived as hierarchical” (14). “While it is a truth of American jurisprudence that ‘separate but equal’ is intrinsically unequal, the radically different societies presented here seem to make ‘separate but equal’ work,” they add (14). In the concluding remarks for the volume, Maltz and Archambault reiterate this crucial point:

The major argument of this volume has been to demonstrate that for at least one world culture area, that of Native North America, “domination” and “inequality” are not the most useful concepts for examining the nature of gender or the relationship between gender and power, that



“autonomy,” “complementarity,” and even “egalitarianism” are more useful. (245)

The Keres and Iroquoian creation stories related above are by no means unique in their complementary take on gender roles. *Women and Power in Native North America* is a collection of essays on eleven different communities and while the gender arrangement and systems of beliefs vary from one community to another, there are also some striking similarities that differentiate them from the Western models. Maltz and Archambault identify gender balance inherent in indigenous religious beliefs to be one of the four major themes in the ethnological studies of Native North America, together with “the cultural notion of the self that stresses individual autonomy and relative freedom independent of one’s gender,” “a relative lack of social domination and submission in defining interpersonal relations, including relations between men and women,” and, finally, “a relative availability of positions of power to women as well as men” (245). They point out:

From Holy Woman of the Blackfoot and White Buffalo Calf Woman of the Lakota, both of the northern Plains, to Changing Woman, Spider Woman, and White Shell Woman of the Navajo in the Southwest, Native North American cultures are characterized by mythological images of women that are complementary rather than subordinate to those of men. Several contributors to this volume argue that male/female ideological dichotomies such as wolf/dog (Chipewyan), forest/clearing (Iroquois) and even lascivious and aggressive/chaste and compliant (Pomo) imply difference but need not imply hierarchy. (248)

Of gender balance and complementarity characteristic of indigenous nations, Stephanie A. Sellers writes, “There is no framework in western culture for this notion. Gender

conflict is embedded in western culture and perpetuated by its religions and social structures” (54). It is enough to reach for the Bible to find proof of the gulf between the western and indigenous understanding of the role of women in the creation story as well as how these religious beliefs translate into what kind of behaviors are prescribed for women in society. The famous passage 1 Timothy 2, makes the place and status of women in the Christian system of values very clear:

I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing – if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety. (New International Version)

No matter how much the meaning of this passage is now debated over by theologians to make it more congruent with the present-day reality, the overall message is very clear – a woman is inferior to man and must submit to him and his authority in silence. Despite many attempts to read these words as pertaining not to all women in all contexts, but rather to a specific situation that happened at a certain time and place, this fragment is used even today as an argument against allowing women to occupy certain positions of authority in the Church structures. Thus, words, a story, have a very real influence on the lives of real people. “Sexuality, personal empowerment, identity-shaping, opportunities for leadership, and social expressions are all based in cultural beliefs...,”

Sellers observes (14). When at the centre of those beliefs there is the conviction that women are inherently inferior to men, their access to leadership, power, authority as well as their autonomy and independence are seriously limited.

The social and political systems of indigenous peoples whose creation stories are based on gender complementarity demonstrate that these principles were often reflected in the way those communities were organized. In the Blackfoot society of the northwestern Plains, for example, women's economic power and social status went hand in hand with the spiritual power ascribed to them in myth. Due to their reproductive functions, women were believed to be inherently more powerful than men. The Blackfoot Sundance ceremony was, and still is, led by the Holy Woman adorned in clothes given to her by the mythical Elk Woman and carrying a medicine bundle filled with objects representing another mythical female figure – Woman Who Married Morning Star. Human women are believed to have been agents in bringing to the people the two most powerful medicine bundles – the Beaver and the Thunder Pipe bundles. Thus, as Alice B. Kehoe states in "Blackfoot Persons," "Women are seen as the intermediary or means through which power has been granted to humans" (116). "Myths recount, one after another, how women bring blessings to the people," she continues (117). For example, in one Blackfoot myth, a woman saves her people from starving thanks to her communication with the spirit world (Kehoe 117-118). Similarly, the Navajo tell the story of a girl who turns into a deer and thus gains knowledge she is able to pass down to her four brothers who accidentally hunt her down. She teaches them the four traditional, proper ways to hunt: the Game Way, the Corral Way; the Wolf Way, and the Hunting Way of Talking-god (Shepardson 165). In both these myths, women teach their communities essential survival skills saving them from hunger. Being able to defend one's own community as well as enhance their well-being

is one of the already mentioned features of a positive female hero. Interestingly, in the Blackfoot myths we can also observe the reversal of the Western stereotypes about silly women who have to forever struggle to gain the respect and authority granted to men a priori simply on the basis of their sex. A popular character of the Blackfoot tales is an Old Man, Napi. According to Kehoe:

Napi is always a man and in only a few stories is accompanied by a woman. He personifies the foolishness in human nature, and it is significant that this quality is shown as especially dominant in a man. There is no comparable corpus of stories about a foolish woman. Thus although men and women are normally paired, engaged in the complementary tasks of procuring and processing, men must strive harder to become respected adults. (121)

In the West it is exactly the other way round. For centuries women were believed to be intellectually inferior to men, prone to emotional reactions and naïveté. After all, “... Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner,” to quote the Bible again.

Another interesting example of a culture historically characterized by egalitarianism is the Plateau culture. While the traditional Plateau societies had gender systems that offered complementary but different access to various social spheres of life for men and women<sup>36</sup>, they have evolved into egalitarian communities where both genders have identical opportunities and access in all spheres of life. Women occupy positions at every level of the tribal structure and, as Lillian A. Ackerman observes, “work is equally valued, jobs are less gender typed, and women managers have no

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<sup>36</sup> According to Lillian A. Ackerman, anthropologist specializing in the Plateau culture, women and men had “different but balanced access ... to the economic, domestic, political, religious, and other social spheres” (97). Their access to the religious sphere was in fact identical. Men were slightly privileged in the political sphere, while women had more say in the domestic matters. But overall, both the etic and emic evidence suggests that men and women enjoyed equality in the Plateau societies (Ackerman 97).

status problems with male employees” (98). Unlike their Western “sisters,” who often have difficulties achieving respect and asserting authority in a male working environment, Plateau women’s authority is not questioned and their opinions are valued and taken seriously. The example of Plateau culture is instrumental in casting doubt on the claim that only identical access to all spheres of life guarantees equality. Ackerman comments:

Some investigators argue that complementary access to social spheres is not equality at all and that identical access for both genders is needed to achieve equality (Lamphere 1977:613). However, if a culture with complementary access evolves to one in which both sexes have identical access in all social spheres, then there is a strong suggestion that gender equality exists in that culture in both phases of history. That is exactly what has happened in Plateau culture. (98)

This is significant in so far as it reinforces arguments put forward by many indigenous scholars that having different gender roles does not deprive women of equal status. This point is often very difficult to grasp and come to terms with for cultural outsiders raised in a system that not only for centuries denied women access to most spheres of life except the domestic one, but even there limited their authority, autonomy and power by placing them under the thumb of the male head of the household, and defining the domestic sphere as inferior to the public one. Discussing how power and authority are believed to be distributed in society according to performed gender roles, Sue-Ellen Jacobs contends that, “The theoretical models used for studies of the above questions invariably place greater value on the roles and work of men and a greater value on activities carried out in the public as opposed to the domestic and private spheres,” (180). She goes on to ask:

... who is assigning the value to roles and work of women and men, and who is placing the value on domestic and public spheres or domains? Admittedly, it may be true that in some societies, a higher valuation for men's work and for work performed in the public domain is assigned emically (i.e., by the individuals living therein) and this according to the ideological requirements of those societies. However, one must wonder if such reported values are not assigned etically by outside researchers who come from Western traditions where this valuation is a norm based on ideological requirements of many Western societies, and these therefore do not reflect the "on-the-ground" or emic perspective. This question has been raised and the premise tested in recent years and found to be the case. (180)

In order to avoid serious distortions and misunderstandings, it is therefore crucial for non-Native scholars to try and analyze complementary gender systems in Native American societies within their cultural context, consciously avoiding filtering the information through the Western lens. As I have stated towards the end of the previous chapter, such a fresh perspective is exactly what is needed in Western feminist criticism if we want to remove the "inferior" tag from specifically female experiences and stop judging women, and by the same token the female hero, using the patriarchal definitions of role and status.

To cover within the space of one chapter, or even one dissertation, the different ways in which particular indigenous nations were organized is virtually impossible. Therefore, I would like to limit the discussion at hand to two more examples: the Navajo and Iroquois. The Navajo Indians are currently the largest indigenous nation in the United States; the Iroquois were the most powerful American Indian group with

considerable influence on the colonial policy-making in the Northeast; both are well-known for their complementary gender systems in which women enjoy high status and both have come under the scrutiny of Native and non-Native scholars debating how high this status really was and is. The Navajos are a particularly interesting example of a nation which offers its women rather contradictory patterns of behavior. On the one hand, they celebrate female power in myths such as that of the Changing Woman; on the other, even to this day, many quote “tradition” as a reason why women should not occupy leadership positions. Navajo cosmology is populated with powerful females. The aforementioned Changing Woman is probably the most revered one since it was her who created the four original Navajo clans and gave the people the Earth bundle, central to the Navajo most important rite – the Blessingway. However, this powerful mother goddess and creatrix is not an exception. As Mary Shepardson observes:

There are many female figures among the Holy People – Spider Woman, who taught weaving, Earth Woman, Salt Woman, White Shell Woman, and Water Woman. There are male/female cooperating pairs such as Dawn Boy/Dawn Girl, Holy Boy/Holy Girl, and Rock Crystal Boy/Rock Crystal Girl. They emphasize the principle of sharing or complementarity. (171)

The most important principle in Navajo philosophy is hozho – the principle of balance and beauty celebrated in the Blessingway. It therefore seems weird, that a nation putting so much emphasis on balance, harmony and complementarity in all other spheres of life would to this day so firmly insist on the exclusion of women from the leadership roles. Most of those who do so quote “Separation of the Sexes” story in the Origin Myth as the source of their conviction that having a woman as a leader would result in disharmony and a possible disaster for the entire nation. In her essay “The Gender

Status of Navajo Women,” Mary Shephardson relates one version of this story in which First Woman’s adultery leads to a quarrel as a result of which her mother, Woman Chief, offends men saying women can do without them. The men move to the other side of the river and make a good living for themselves with the help of a hermaphrodite skilled in both men’s and women’s work. The women, on the other hand, have difficulties surviving on subsistence agriculture, no to mention satisfying their sexual cravings. They resort to masturbating with stones and thus bring male monsters into the world. Deeply repentant, they finally manage to convince men to return; however, it comes with a price – a promise that only men would be leaders (172). Shephardson comments, “I, as the outsider, see in this a negative factor in the rights of women. I am too sharply reminded of another myth about a man, a rib, a woman, a serpent, a tree, and an apple. Events are different, but the message is the same: women brought evil into the world” (172). As a proof that the story still affects people’s opinions on the subject of female leadership, she quotes two “prominent” contemporary Navajo members, one woman and one man, who believe the message from the story to be still valid (172). More examples of such statements can be found in Lloyd L. Lee’s article “Gender, Navajo Leadership and ‘Retrospective Falsification,’” where he discusses how such beliefs influenced the way people voted in different presidential elections deciding against female candidates. He suggests, however, that the “tradition” those people invoke to justify their choices may not be a genuine Navajo tradition at all. The fact is that there exist at least several different versions of the “Separation of the Sexes” story, most of which were written down by Non-Diné (Non-Navajo) male scholars, using male translators and male informants.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps too many males. Lee writes:

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<sup>37</sup> When Professor Jerrold E. Levy analyzed eight different versions of the Navajo creation scripture and journey narratives, he found that only one of them was specific about only men being leaders (Lee 282).



These stories reflect a part of a Diné way of life where politics of tradition are gender specific. This is in contrast to many other areas of a Diné way of life and philosophy. For instance, Sá'áh Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhóón (SNBH) is a primary life path for Diné to follow and SNBH comes from both male and female energies. These energies help individuals maintain happiness and wellness. The energies are intertwined and never separated. SNBH is a reflection of all things in life. Where and how did the Diné people begin to interpret SNBH to espouse only men can be leaders and a woman President would bring chaos and disaster? (282)

Lee believes that the change from an egalitarian approach reflecting the quintessential Navajo philosophy of Hózhó to one of discrimination against women took place as late as the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a result of the Western influence on Diné culture (284). He suggests that stories such as “Separation of the Sexes” might in fact be cases of “retrospective falsification,” a term coined by Kluckhohn and described by Diné scholar Andrew Curly as a device which, in Lee’s words, can be used “strategically to conform the history of the people with existent forms of governance to balance inconsistencies between traditional and contemporary politics” (284). The inconsistencies between the otherwise egalitarian Navajo worldview and the “tradition” promoted by “Separation of the Sexes” story are significant enough to raise suspicions. Lee believes that Western values, especially Christian values, inculcated into children in boarding schools, for example, according to which a woman’s proper place is at home not in politics, are now replicated in Diné culture. He concludes:

Diné narratives and teachings do not exclude women. Both women and men are needed for life. Diné narratives have been mistranslated and

misrepresented by both non-Diné and Diné people. “Tradition” has to be analyzed in a way where Diné people recognize the impact of American thought and colonialism on the people themselves and the stories. In Diné, this approach is reflected in the word Hózhó, a balanced nature of life viewed in a beautiful and harmonious lens. This lens is distinctly Diné and can be helpful in analyzing the “separation of the sexes story” and “tradition.” While the lens of Hózhó incorporates various perspectives, Hózhó does not follow a path of discrimination, prejudice, and other ills in life to dictate or justify limitations on others. (287)

Therefore, Lee believes that, “Diné women face the challenge of overcoming social, economic and political conditions undermining an egalitarian Navajo Nation” (287). Luckily, they have sources of strength available to them in their tradition that they can draw from on that mission. After all, most traditional Navajo female names end in –baa meaning “warrior.” In an essay entitled “Native Women and Leadership: An Ethics of Culture and Relationship,” Rebecca Tsosie quotes a Diné anthropologist Dr. Jennie Joe who comments on women’s “perceptions of the appropriate role for themselves” saying, “This concept includes the role of a warrior. ... As a female warrior, she is expected to fight off whatever poses a threat to the well-being of her family and home” (33). Having a powerful deity – Changing Woman – as a positive role model, Navajo women are aware of their worth as women, and continue to assert their authority in various spheres of life, politics included. While calling the Navajo society a matriarchy may be something of an overstatement, Navajo women certainly enjoy high status in their society and are determined to claim their rightful place in the government. To quote Jennifer Denetdale, “Asked if they think that a Navajo woman will someday be elected

to the highest office in Navajo land, Navajo women's responses are a resounding 'Yes!'" (qtd. in Lee 287).

Among indigenous authors who undertake the task of filtering the often scant written records through their traditional knowledge passed down from generation to generation in order to rid the written sources of the patriarchal bias is Barbara Alice Mann. Her *Iroquoian Women: the Gantowisas*, over five hundred pages long, is recommended by Stephanie A. Sellers as "a reference tool par excellence" due to its scope, depth and impressive bibliography including many non-Native primary sources (37). While Mann's *Land of the Three Miamis* "strives for orality in both its style and atmosphere" (Barden 7) and reads like a beautifully woven tale not so much written as told to her Granddaughter, *Iroquoian Women* is an extremely well-researched, well-documented, "dense, formidable text" (Sellers 37). Mann herself writes of the difficulties involved in such a project in the following words, "Not only must I resurrect long neglected oral traditions, but I must decode the antique European record, which, because the concept of powerful women never occurred to its authors, submerged the fact of powerful women in a welter of culturally crossed lines of mis/communication" (119). She approaches this project methodically, diligently and convincingly. Thus, while I am fully aware that some of her assertions may be considered by some white and even Native American scholars to be "the fantasy of an aboriginal matriarchy, a world in which women are the centers of the universe, controlling all power and resources [which] focuses on a romanticized version of the Iroquois polity, popularized by such writers as Paula Gunn Allen<sup>38</sup>," (Maltz and Archambault 243), I shall nevertheless rely on Mann's account of the Iroquoian social and political structure

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<sup>38</sup> Paula Gunn Allen is in fact the author of the Foreword to *Iroquoian Women*.

whenever I feel her assertions are reasonably well documented or at least equally probable as other accounts.

In an essay entitled “First Among Equals? The Changing Status of Seneca Women,” Joy Bilharz observes:

The status of Iroquois women has been debated from 1851, when Lewis Henry Morgan ... claimed they were “the inferior, the dependent, and the servant of man,” to the present when Paula Gunn Allen (1986) argues that women were fundamental in shaping the League ... and that Iroquois society prior to the nineteenth century is most accurately described as a gynocracy. (102)

Later studies have successfully exposed the first claim as a fallacy – Morgan obviously superimposed his western patriarchal perspective on the Iroquois gender system inevitably interpreting women’s domestic duties and agricultural work as a sign of their inferiority and subservient position. Indeed, how could he not if he was raised in a society where women were systematically disenfranchised and it was lowly peasants or slaves who did the farm work. Little did he think that Iroquoian women took pride in their work seeing it as a tradition started by Sky Woman rather than drudgery. Also, unlike European peasants and American slaves, who had little or no rights to the land they farmed and the products of their work, Iroquoian women controlled both the production and distribution of the main source of sustenance, thus concentrating in their hands the economic power that Western women could only dream of. According to Mann, “For the most part, however, this distribution of the means of production has been disregarded by Euro-American scholars who have simplistically perceived it as a sexual division of labor, with men cast in the role of Mighty Hunter, and women confined to an even more microscopic position, that of Suzy Homemaker” (187). This is

an important point since in Western feminist thought, there is still the tendency to view domestic work as demeaning. The domestic sphere is generally seen as less prestigious since traditionally all power was located elsewhere. Therefore, from this perspective, female heroes who at the end of their heroic journey settle down and enjoy family life, such as Maxine Hong Kingston's warrior alter-ego from *The Warrior Woman*, are seen as domesticated, contained and therefore less powerful. Is death or loneliness the only possible end for a true hero, male or female? Is death or loneliness preferable to settling down?

In the Iroquois tradition, the domestic sphere was not without power or authority – it was “understood to be local politics ... not housecleaning and dishes!” to use Sellers' phrase (64). Although Iroquois did indeed have a gendered division of labor, it did not mean that one group was deprived of any serious influence on the politics of the whole nation. Quite the contrary, decision-making took place with communal ethics in mind and a system of checks and balances was in place. Whether the Iroquois system was a matriarchy, or a gynocracy, as authors such as Paula Gunn Allen or Barbara Alice Mann suggest, will probably never be known beyond a shadow of doubt. However, there is enough evidence to prove that women did actively participate in politics and did enjoy more authority than the Western observes could either comprehend or digest. While miscomprehension often led to the misinterpretation and distortion of certain facts and situations, Iroquoian customs often caused enough perplexity or even outrage for the white men, be it missionaries or colonists, to take notice and acknowledge them in written form. Mann quotes such records time and time again in *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas*. One such study was completed in 1884 by “an honest if sometimes baffled scholar” (Mann, *Iroquoian Women* 259) Lucien Carr who grappled with what he called the Iroquois “peculiar laws of marriage” that did not allow a son to inherit his

father's property and title upon his death (Mann, *Iroquoian Women* 259). So intrigued was he by the idea of matrilineal descent that in his report he stressed:

It is believed to furnish the key to the study of their whole social organization. In fact there is no other way of accounting for many of their institutions, and notably for that singular phase of society in which woman, by virtue of her functions as wife and mother, exercised an influence but little short of despotic, not only in the wigwam but also around the council fire. (qtd. in Mann 259)

Mann goes on to notice that "Carr was absolutely correct in his surmise, if patriarchal in his diction" (259). The Iroquoian society was matrilineal and matrilocal, organized into clans headed by Clan Mothers. Both men and women held their own councils – Men's Grand Council and Clan Mothers' Council – and, due to etiquette, communicated with each other through specially appointed speakers<sup>39</sup>. Mann emphasizes the crucial role the women's council, and gantowisas (women) in general, had in the process of decision-making:

The gantowisas enjoyed sweeping political powers, which ranged from the administrative and legislative to the judicial. The gantowisas ran the local clan councils. They held all the lineage wampum, nomination belts, and titles. They ran the funerals. They retained exclusive rights over naming, i.e. the creation of new citizens and the installation of public officials. They nominated all male sachems as well as all Clan Mothers to office and retained the power to impeach wrongdoers. They appointed warriors, declared war, negotiated peace, and mediated disputes.

(*Iroquoian Women* 116-117)

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<sup>39</sup> Mann notes that the women-appointed speakers caused outrage and confusion among the Euro-American observers since they would go to the Grand Council dressed in women's skirts (*Iroquoian Women* 123).

Other sources are more skeptical, however. Joy Bilharz, for example, doubts whether women really held enough power to initiate armed combat or remove a misbehaving chief (105-106). The trouble is that to back up her assertions, she keeps quoting from the Newhouse version of the Constitution of the Five Nations, which was written down in a political context that may raise suspicions as to its real agenda. J.N.B Hewitt criticized it for its “untrustworthy character” (qtd. in Porter 86) and even Bilharz herself admits that “more likely it reflects Newhouse’s politically motivated attempt to strengthen the voice of council at the expense of the matrons...” (106). Although the truth may never be known, it is crucial to note that in Bilharz’s account of the Iroquoian political system and how it came into being, one essential element is missing – the figure of *Jigonsaseh*, whom Mann believes to be “the most politically powerful woman depicted in all of tradition” (*Iroquoian Women* 124).

According to Mann’s version of the founding of the League of the Five Nations, presented both in *Iroquoian Women: the Gantowisas* and in *Land of the Three Miamis* the original *Jigonsaseh* was a reincarnation of the Lynx, who returned to her people in time of need to help them end a bloody war between the so-called Cultivators, promoting an egalitarian model of a society with farming as the main source of sustenance; and Cannibals, led by an insane shaman *Adodaroh*, who put emphasis on hierarchy and hunting:

Incarnating as the Head Clan Mother of the Attiwendaronks, The Lynx became the primary Emissary of Peace. Known as the Corn Woman, and the Peace Queen, she forcefully trod the grounds south of the Long-Tailed Cat and the Sparkling Water Lake to spread the Corn Way. [...] Because the priesthood was forcing the issue she became a Woman Warrior, fearlessly standing up to them. (*Land of the Three Miamis* 59)

In Mann's account women's efforts are at some point joined by the Peacemaker – a reincarnation of Sapling, the Lynx's son. Sent by his Grandmother, Sky Woman, he seeks out the Jigonsaseh because he knows she will be a powerful ally. Together they manage to create a satisfactory version of the Great Law of Peace, that would later become the Constitution of the Five Nations, and recruit more allies, the most important being *Ayonwantha*, *Adodaroh*'s trusted speaker. Through their joint efforts, they eventually bring about peace between the conflicted nations until it is only *Adodaroh* who remains to be defeated. When the Peacemaker and *Ayonwantha* fail twice to approach the island where *Adodaroh* is hiding behind his magic, it is *Jigonsaseh* who employs her powerful medicine and teaches Peacemaker and *Ayonwantha* the Six Songs of Peace. With them, they manage to break the spell and defeat *Adodaroh*. To ensure the peace will be permanent, they offer him the office of the first chairman of the Men's Grand Council (*Land of the Three Miamis* 49-70). Thus the League of the Haudenosaunee is formed through the communal effort of both men and women. However, in this version, it was the women who first initiated the transformation from the hierarchical rule of priests, very much like the Western patriarchy, to the egalitarian rule of Clan Mothers. Unlike most western heroic tales and contemporary action movies, here it was the woman who defeated the main villain. Without *Jigonsaseh*, the men would have failed. A politician, activist, Peace Queen, and a Warrior when need be, *Jigonsaseh* is a personification of a positive female hero.

Unfortunately, as Mann observes, both among Native Americans and non-Native scholars, hardly anyone has heard of *Jigonsaseh*. Mann puts forward a theory that the reason for her absence is precisely her high status and power. "Given her political importance, it is perhaps not surprising that most western scholars still remain determinedly deaf to the *Jigonsaseh*'s story," she declares (*Iroquoian Women: the*



*Gantowisas* 125)<sup>40</sup>. Earlier in *Iroquoian Women: the Gantowisas* she advances a similar argument saying:

The “matriarchy” (actually matrilineal society) documented by Lewis Henry Morgan and his unacknowledged co-author, Ely S. Parker, in their 1851 *League of Haudenosaunee*, or Iroquois was roundly denounced as fantasy by nineteenth-century scholars still in the grip of the same stark terror the earliest missionaries felt at the thought of powerful women. Their hysteria was accelerated not a little by the fact that the militant suffragettes of the mid-nineteenth century had seized upon the example of the *gantowisas* in their own bid for liberation. (26)

Indeed, the relationship between early feminist thought and Iroquoian social system has since then been well documented and acknowledged, at least in some circles. Paula Gunn Allen’s essay “Who is Your Mother: Red Roots of White Feminism” is one example, but there are even book-length studies on the subject such as Sally Roesch Wagner’s *Sisters in Spirit: Iroquois Influence on Early Feminists* where she discusses in detail how living next to the Haudenosaunee nation taught early feminists to believe that women’s subordinate role in the Western society need not be a “natural” condition universal of all societies. Studying the works of early United States suffragettes such as Matilda Joslyn Gage or Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Wagner herself experienced a sort of revelation:

Then it dawned on me. I had been skimming over the source of their vision without even noticing it. My own stunningly deep-seated presumption of white supremacy had kept me from recognizing what

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<sup>40</sup> As for Mann’s sources on Jigonsaseh, she explains, “It is the Iroquois to whom I must turn for her tradition, twentieth-century scholars including Pete Jamison (Seneca), John Mohawk (Seneca), Arthur Parker (Seneca), and J.N.B. Hewitt (Tuscarora), as well as old-time Keepers including Parker’s own great-grandmother, Elizabeth Parker (Seneca-Wyandot), Elias Johnson (Tuscarora), David Cusick (Tuscarora) and Arthur Gibson (Obondaga)” (*Iroquoian Women: the Gantowisas* 125).

these prototypical feminists kept insisting in their writings. They believed women's liberation was possible because they knew liberated women, women who possessed rights beyond their wildest imagination: Haudenosaunee women. (Kindle Locations 564-567).

Since at that point, gaining voting rights seemed to be of the utmost importance, the focus of the feminist movement was on making inroads into the political sphere. Now that this battle is won, perhaps the time has come to again learn something new from the centuries-old tradition of female empowerment and reclaim other spheres of life, the domestic one included. In her book entitled *Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism*, Devon Abbott Mishesuah emphasizes:

... unlike modern whites (and blacks who are unaware of their African tribe[s]), who do not have the same history to point to, Native women traditionally played a primary role in their tribe's creation stories and, therefore, in the tribes' religious traditions. Historically, Native women also played important political and economic roles that ensured tribal survival. Modern Native women have strong role models and powerful sources of religious strength to draw on, often more so than males. Provided that a Native female has access to information about these social and political roles, she has some basis for formulating her identity.

(85)

Indeed, those powerful role models have inspired generations of women to act, to persist, to struggle and never give up.

### 3.2. Native American Women Warriors

It is not only the empowering myths of ancient goddesses that serve as inspiration for contemporary Native American women writers, and women in general, but also real historical figures who were raised within the tradition of female agency, autonomy and power and lived up to those images. The role of a warrior may not have been a typically female occupation, since bearing and raising children often required being close to home, but it was certainly available. In *“The Old Lady Trill, the Victory Yell”*: *The Power of Women in Native American Literature*, Patrice E. M. Hollrah stresses that while Native communities assigned roles based on gender, there were many variations and exceptions. She writes, “... because people could act with autonomy, making decisions about their own conduct, women could choose to engage in male-gendered behaviors, for example, as warrior women, and not seem atypical” (2). In the Introduction to *Sifters: Native American Women’s Lives*, Theda Perdue argues in a similar vein, “Despite the centrality of community to most Native women’s lives, cultural norms did not force women into social straitjackets from which Euro-American contact released them. Many Native societies institutionalized exceptionalism. Women warriors ... provide perhaps the best example of the flexibility of Native gender roles” (5-6). Dire circumstances, special skills or simply personal preferences could all propel women to warriorhood. Whatever the reasons, the crucial point is that in each case their heroism earned them respect and authority in their communities not ostracism and ridicule for breaking the norms. In *“Fight the Power: 100 Heroes of Native Resistance, Women Warriors,”* Vincent Schilling emphasizes, “Too often the battles fought by our American Indian warriors in history involve the acts of valor committed by men.

However, these same types of acts performed by the women warriors of the past hold no less merit.”

Certainly, such a positive female hero whose community rewarded her heroic deeds was Nan-ye-hi, later known as Nancy Ward. She was only seventeen when her husband fell in the battle of Taliwa, yet she had enough courage to grab his rifle and lead the warriors to victory. For that act she was honored by the Cherokee with the title of *Ghigau*, the War Woman, which would change to the Beloved Woman as she aged. That gave her considerable power and authority in the community, for she not only led the women’s council but also took part in council meetings with both the peace and the war chiefs, had a final say in the manner of dealing with the war captives and was indispensable in many ceremonies and rituals. During her life, she gained respect and authority not only among her own people, but also among the white settlers, traders and the military, who valued her advice and treated her seriously during negotiations. As the resident of Chota, a white town of peace, she did her best to prevent further bloodshed between the Cherokee and the settlers, even if it meant warning the whites of the planned Cherokee attacks or saving a white woman from being burned at the stake by the Cherokee warriors. Such actions have gained her the reputation of “the Pocahontas of Tennessee” and have made some historians doubt her true loyalties, but as other scholars, such as Clara Sue Kidwell or Laura E. Donaldson, explain, she in fact performed the role assigned to her by her community – that of “an advocate for peace but also for women” ( Donaldson 46).

Another example of a woman turned warrior in the time of need was the Jigonsaseh of 1687-1690, who led the Haudenonaunee army to victory against the French. According to Barbara Alice Mann<sup>41</sup>, she was the *Kieuneka*, the “Fire Woman”

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<sup>41</sup> There exist many different versions of how the confrontation came about. As I have already stated, whenever I feel that the Native account is equally probable and equally well documented as the “white”

of the Attiwendaronks, directly descended from the first *Jigonsaseh*, the Peace Queen. After the Attinwendaronks were adopted by the Haudenonsaunee, *Kieuneka* came to be regarded as the *Jigonsaseh* of the League. Towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the League was involved in an ever intensifying conflict with the French. Determined to put an end to it with little risk to his men, Governor of New France, the Marquis de Denonville, decided to resort to treachery. He invited representatives of the League to a peace conference in Cataracouy, Fort Fontenac. When the delegation arrived, he had all the sachems of the men's Grand Council arrested and eventually sent to France to serve as slaves in the galleys. Denonville hoped that by depriving the League of its leaders he would effectively destroy the Haudenosaunee army's ability to act and defend themselves against the planned attacks. He was wrong, though. The initial confusion and chaos were soon brought under control, for while the men's council were imprisoned, the majority of the Women's Council, with *Jigonsaseh* in charge, were left unharmed. Since appointing warriors was the task of *gantowisas*, they soon managed to rebuild the army. Mann relates:

This being a national emergency, Seneca-Wyandot *gantowisas* also took on roles as warriors, standing armed beside the men. The *Jigonsaseh* of 1687 temporarily assumed military power, filling in as both the civilian and military leader of her people.

She proved to have been a formidable opponent, rallying the flagging spirits of the refugees, pulling the army back together, and mounting a massive retaliatory strike against the French invaders that drove Denonville back out of Seneca at break-neck speed. (150)

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one, I choose to give voice to the Native perspective. In this case, I draw mostly from Mann's *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas*, whose account is based not only on the oral tradition but is carefully referenced using many written sources, including the "white" records.

Eventually, the Haudenosaunee army approached Montreal forcing the French to surrender and free 13 of the enslaved sachems, who managed to survive the imprisonment. Mann emphasizes that “the Jigonsaseh of 1687 – 1690 ... is remembered by the Haudenonsaunee as a great heroine of League history and with reason, for as John Mohawk noted, she defeated ‘the largest European force ever assembled in North America’ up to that time” (151).

Both Nan-ye-hi and the Jigonsaseh, acted not only as warrior women, fighting on the battlefield alongside men, but also had considerable political influence and authority in their nations. Another Native American woman who enjoyed such authority was an Apache warrior woman Lozen. Apache women are known to have followed warriors on raiding parties, not only as helpers with everyday necessities or as nurses; they also fought when need be, offered counsel both in war strategy and peace negotiations as well as acted in the capacity of shamans offering spiritual guidance. Although Lozen is probably the “best known”<sup>42</sup> among the Apache female warriors, and I would like to pay more attention to her, she was not an exception. There are accounts of a woman called Gouyen (“Wise Woman”) who took revenge for her husband’s death by stealing into the enemy’s camp, seducing the Comanche chief who killed her husband away from the victory dance around the fire, killing him and taking his scalp, like he took her husband’s. She then returned triumphant to her people who admired, and still respect and admire, her for this heroic deed. She remarried but it did not stop her from engaging in the warrior ways. She fought alongside her husband Kaytennae, and her bravery and skills with a rifle were recorded by Eve Ball who interviewed Gouyen’s son for her book *In the Days of Victorio: Recollections of a Warm Springs Apache* (Sharp). Another Apache female warrior was Dahteste, famous not only for her

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<sup>42</sup> “Best known” in inverted commas, for the accounts of her life are scant and incomplete.

beauty but also for her incredible skill in the battlefield. A wife and a mother, she nevertheless led the life of a warrior, following her husband, Anandia, on war expeditions against Mexicans and Americans. Fluent in English, she is said to have been the one who together with Lozen negotiated the final surrender of Geronimo's band. Her strength allowed her to survive years of imprisonment and disease until she was able to join her people on the Mescalero Apache Reservation where she died of old age.

Unlike Gouyen and Dahteste, Lozen never married. Since all Apache girls were expected to be physically fit in order to be able to defend themselves and escape the enemy when necessity arose, as children they participated in races and played with boys. During puberty, most girls and boys went separate ways and were actually allowed to spend time together only within certain limits. For some reason, Lozen continued to lead a "boy's" life even after puberty. Her exceptional hunting skills as well as her way with horses probably convinced her relatives that becoming an apprentice warrior was the right path for her. She trained with men and soon became not only an excellent warrior woman but also her brother's trusted advisor, who reportedly called her "[his] right hand. ... Strong as a man, braver than most, and cunning in strategy. ... a shield to her people" (Moore 93). In her article "Lozen: An Apache Woman Warrior," Laura Jane Moore observes:

Lozen's choice to opt out of the roles typically adopted by Apache women, however, did not lead to her marginalization or degradation within her Apache community. Rather, she became one of the most revered Apache warriors of the late nineteenth century. As a woman warrior, she possessed qualities that Apaches associated with both men and women that, in their eyes, made her especially powerful. Convinced that she was responsible for much of their success against their enemies,

her comrades and kin celebrated her spiritual power and physical prowess. (92-93)

As a powerful shaman, Lozen was believed to possess a unique power enabling her to locate the enemy. She would stand with arms outstretched and move in a circle chanting a prayer to Ussen, the life-giver. The tingling in her palms would tell her where and how far the enemy was. Victorio's and later Geronimo's bands are believed to have successfully avoided capture precisely because they knew when to move and where to hide. The fact that she was away, escorting a mother and her new-born baby, when Victorio fell into a deadly trap, only reinforced the belief in her supernatural abilities. Charlie Smith, an Apache elder, talked of her with the highest respect, "... to us she was a Holy Woman and she was regarded and treated as one. White Painted Woman herself was not more respected" (qtd. in Moore 100). Time and time again, she saved her people and performed heroic deeds with the fearlessness and confidence that inspired awe and admiration. A child at the time, James Kaywaykla, recalled a trying moment when Apache women and children on the run from the cavalry had to cross the dangerous waters of The Rio Grande. "I saw a magnificent woman on a beautiful horse – Lozen, sister of Victorio. Lozen, the woman warrior! ... High above her head she held her rifle. There was a glitter as her right foot lifted and struck the shoulder of her horse. He reared, then plunged into the torrent. She turned his head upstream, and he began swimming" (Sharp). Encouraged by her example and trusting her judgment, the others followed. "The success of this escape," Moore writes, "relied on Lozen's skill with horses, her physical strength, the trust that the other Apaches placed in her, and her ability to move between the worlds of women and warriors" (100). Having escorted the women and children safely to the other bank, Lozen left Kaywaykla's grandmother in charge and returned to the warriors.



Although there are almost no written records of Lozen's life, her memory is kept alive in the Apache oral tradition. As I will demonstrate, she has continued to inspire not only her people but also the White Eyes (Apache term for the white men) who keep her alive in their art, thus defying the unjust death of tuberculosis that put an end to her heroic life somewhere in the white men's prison. Like other Native American Women Warriors, those discussed here and those who for reasons of space were not mentioned, she has left a legacy of female agency, autonomy and power that helps Native American women fight with oppressive stereotypes imposed by the colonizers and disseminate positive images of what it means to be a heroic woman.

### **3.3. Native American Word and Image Warriors**

In the Introduction to *Reckonings: Contemporary Short Fiction by Native American Women*, its editors, Hertha D. Sweet Wong, Lauren Stuart Muller and Jana Sequoya Magdaleno insist that, "The stories we hear and tell, those we inherit and those we generate, all shape who we are and who we might become" (xiii). As I have tried to demonstrate, traditional indigenous stories both of mythical and historical female figures which have been inherited by and which have shaped generations of Native American women are permeated with the sense of female power and agency. Power generates power. Strength generates strength. It is therefore no surprise that Native American literature is populated with strong female characters – survivors – who employ whatever means are necessary and stand their ground even in the face of poverty, deprivation and despair. It is no wonder that the fight against what many have termed cultural genocide continues, only no longer with the use of blades and rifles but rather with ink, camera, the paint brush or on stage.

In her memoir *The Woman Who Watches Over The World*, which, as she herself writes, started out as a story of pain but turned out to be “a book about love, ... healing, history, and survival” (16), Linda Hogan recounts the story of Lozen as that of a great warrior, but more importantly a great diviner and dreamer. As a result of an illness called fibromyalgia, Hogan herself has lost the ability to dream. Having been a dreamer all her life, the loss of dreams was a blow to her no less devastating than the constant pain. “There is grief I have felt in the decades since my own loss of dreams,” she writes (142). Yet, despite it all, she has been able to find comfort. “I think of Lozen often, with water shining all around her, entering the river, saving her people for yet a little longer. I am not like Lozen, able to divine. I am ordinary and broken, but I know that we, as Native people, are awake and have survived. We have become something” (142). In her physical weakness and psychological pain, Hogan finds comfort in the heroic image of a physically strong, courageous woman who was invaluable to her people.

The legacy of warrior women like Lozen can be found in many Native American stories, both traditional and contemporary. As Paula Gunn Allen observes in the Introduction to *Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women*, “War stories seem ... to capture all the traditional themes of Indian women's narratives: the themes of love and separation, loss, and most of all, of continuance” (21). In fact, every collection that I have worked with has stories or whole sections devoted to women warriors. Thus, in *Spider Woman's Web: Traditional Native American Tales About Women's Power* by Susan Hazen-Hammond, we find a traditional Tewa Pueblo tale “The Women Warriors,” which tells the story of two women forced to go to war after they refuse to marry. Even though they do not follow the path prescribed to them by tradition, with the help of Spider Woman they become the bravest warriors and respected members of their community whose return

from the battlefield is celebrated with a feast. “It may have been then, if not long before that, that the saying began which we all use today, when we want to help people have courage, or find the wisdom that is inside them: ‘Be a woman. Be a man,’” the story concludes (125). In *Sister Nations: Native American Women Writers on Community* edited by Heid E. Erdrich and Laura Tohe the second section is entitled “Strong Hearts” after one of the Dakota warrior societies. As Laura Tohe explains in the Introduction, “the poems and prose here show Indian women enduring with love: defending with fierce judgment, reaching out across history to protect the people” (xvi). Lorena Fuerta honors Anna Mae Pictou-Aquash, a murdered Native American activist, in her poem “Anna Ghostdancer.” “They must have been afraid of you/to mutilate you so,” she wonders (78). Indeed, it was male jealousy, insecurity, fear and hatred in the face of Anna’s courage, strength and determination that brought about her untimely demise. Laura Tohe’s “In Dinétah,” on the other hand, celebrates the legacy of White Shell Woman and Spider Woman. “We are the children of White Shell Woman ... / We are female warriors and male warriors.../ We are the sons and daughters of activists and other / unsung heroes .../ In Beauty it was begun./ In Beauty it continues” (103-104). Finally, there is Paula Gunn Allen’s *Spider Woman’s Granddaughters*, divided into three sections: The Warriors, The Casualties and The Resistance. Allen explains her choice of material for the volume saying:

The stories I have chosen are women’s war stories or woman-warrior stories. They are about women who have entered battle, and have suffered defeat and captivity. They are about women who have resisted even though all hope, all chance of survival, of dignity, of happiness and liberty to live in their chosen way seemed lost. They are about women who do not give up hope, even when they are dying, their children are

stolen, they are subject to emotional and physical battery; who continue to resist when all the forces of a wealthy, powerful, arrogant, ignorant, and uncaring nation are mustered to coerce their capitulation. (21)

Yet, capitulate they will not! Even the middle section, though tackling themes of loss and despair, at the same time celebrates the ability to endure by staying true to the old ways.

Of more than twenty stories selected by Allen, Zitkala-Ša's "Warrior's Daughter" is the most intriguing, for it raises many of the questions and doubts surrounding western action heroines discussed in the second chapter. The female hero of Zitkala-Ša's story, Tusee, is the beloved daughter of a great warrior. With her "finely penciled eyebrows and slightly extended nostrils" (36), she is a real beauty. In a scenario that sounds all too familiar to medieval knightly tales, Tusee's father requires her potential suitor to prove himself in battle. And so the fair maiden bids goodbye to her lover and promises to await his return. But this is where the similarities end. Unlike many a slender princess awaiting her suitor's return over the needlework back in the castle, Tusee's sturdy form can be seen on her father's "wild-eyed" warhorse following the war party together with other women who carry provisions (38). As the raid on the enemy's camp ends in the death of two warriors and a third one being taken captive, the war party leaves under the cover of the night. But Tusee stays behind, for the captive is her lover. She steals into the enemy's camp, and, much like Gouyen, with sweet words and smiles, seduces the warrior who captured her lover away from the celebrations. To drag him further away, she flees and he gives chase. "Pray tell me, are you a woman or an evil spirit to lure me away?" he asks breathless when she finally stops. "Turning on heels firmly planted in the earth, the woman gives a wild spring forward, like a panther for its prey. In a husky voice she hisses between her teeth, 'I am a Dakota woman!'"

(41). And all hell breaks loose. Having dispatched her enemy with the use of “her unerring long knife” (41) she masquerades as a harmless old woman carrying a grandchild and manages to free the young warrior while the camp is asleep. In a true reversal of the damsel in distress scenario, she carries his body on her shoulders when he is too weak to walk. She is Robin to his Marion. “The sight of his weakness makes her strong. A mighty power thrills her body. Stooping beneath his outstretched arms grasping at the air for support, Tusee lifts him upon her broad shoulders. With half-running, triumphant steps she carries him away into the open night” (42). True to its promise, “Warrior’s Daughter” is a story of a hero who proves his acumen, strength and courage to win his lover’s hand. Only this hero turns out to be a “she.” Still, if we recall objections raised against western action heroines within the white feminist criticism, she would be found wanting for at least three reasons: the presence of a father figure, the use of her body and feminine wiles to manipulate the enemy and finally the romantic reasons for her heroism. While it is true that before she sets out on the rescue mission, she prays to the Great Spirit to “grant [her] [her] warrior-father’s heart” (39), it is also true that the decision to follow the war party and then stay was made totally on her own and without a moment of doubt or hesitation. Her own heart was strong and courageous enough to risk her life to save the young man. With “set teeth” (38) she plans revenge just as other warriors did before they left on their mission. Her exclamation “I am a Dakota woman!” suggests that Tusee is not an oddity or a single exception but rather that such traits are characteristic of all women from her nation. As for the decision to use her feminine charms to lure the enemy away, it is obviously a successful strategy showing her good judgment. Entering the camp Rambo-like with only her knife as a weapon would be suicide. A cunning strategist, she is able to perform the rescue operation with minimum risk to her or her captured friend. “Zitkala-Ša’s story ...

depicts a powerful woman whose beauty, desirability, and femininity cannot lessen her warrior devotion, loyalty, and honor. Tusee may look like a beauty queen, but she is a fearless, respectful, prayerful warrior nonetheless,” Allen stresses (34). Whether she and the rescued boy “lived happily ever after” cannot be certain, but even if they do, her heroic deed certainly places her on equal or even superior terms in that relationship. Commenting on the way Zitkala-Ša constructed her female hero, Patrice E. M. Hollrah observes:

Tusee’s schemes consist of the identities of a young sexual woman, a harmless old woman, and a strong warrior woman. To achieve her goals, she must draw on all her available resources, both feminine and masculine behaviors. Within her own personality the female and male complement each other. Zitkala-Ša creates a heroine who performs superhuman feats in the face of overwhelming odds, not unlike she herself accomplishes in her own lifetime. (34)

Tusee is a complex character with many different faces. She is not merely a pretty girl whose only asset is her good looks – her courage is equal to her beauty. She does not simply usurp male power or male behaviors – she is powerful in her own right. Her strength, her courage but also ferocity and ability to turn violent are an integral part of who she is as a Dakota woman.

Discussing how archetypes found in Native American traditional stories can serve as an inspiration for contemporary writers, Roberta Rosenberg stresses that, “The Yellow Woman, Changing Bear Maiden, Spider Woman, and especially White Buffalo Maiden narratives all contain archetypal women who commit violent or transgressive actions, often for the benefit of their people.” Kochinnenako (Yellow Woman), for

example, often violates social norms and behaves in atypical ways; however, as Paula Gunn Allen points out:

The stories do not necessarily imply that difference is punishable; on the contrary, it is often her very difference that makes her special adventures possible, and these adventures often have happy outcomes for Kochinnenako and for her people. ... It suggests that the behavior of women, at least at certain times or under certain circumstances, must be improper or nonconformist for the greater good of the whole. (*The Sacred Hoop* 227)

The type of character that emerges from this tradition is in Rosenberg's words "neither all good nor evil, but a cyclical, holistic combination." She believes that the best illustration of these archetypes at work is Louise Erdrich's fiction. "This holistic nature of the feminine – both creative and destructive, passive and combative – is portrayed in the character of Eleanor, in Erdrich's *Tales of Burning Love*," she writes. Both compassionate and cruel, tender and tough, passionate and calculating, intelligent and irrational, self-destructive and yet capable of self-rescue, Eleanor is a complex character who defies stereotypes and is full of contradictions. Having seduced another man, this time her underage student, whom she doesn't even find attractive, she deliberates on her life soaking in a bathtub:

Eleanor had told herself for many years that she lived according to certain principles. Even when she violated her codes, they were her codes. Her commandments. Now she seemed to operate in a space beyond morality where loss drove her, need drove her, anxiety and sorrow. *My life is intolerable*, she thought, at peace. (36)

Although it might seem she is punished for her promiscuity and errant ways when she gets fired from her teaching position, she herself describes her “resignation” as being “set free” (37) and, after a period of self-imposed seclusion at the convent, she is fully capable of resuming her life and enjoying a satisfying, if unconventional, romantic relationship with the man she has desired all along. Her sexual greed might in fact be interpreted as a feature characteristic of a trickster. As Catherine M. Catt observes, traditional Ojibwe trickster tales abound in sexual adventures and the trickster’s ability to survive death makes him a “metaphor for endurance and survival” (qtd. in Hollrah 106). She writes:

His lawless and anti-social behavior prohibits Trickster from belonging to the society of man, and although he propagates life, he is not a god in the sense of original creator. Because he is neither god nor man and may change shapes several times in the course of a story, Trickster’s character will always remain ambiguous and paradoxical. His acts make all things possible – both good and evil; he will never represent only one thing to his observers. (qtd. in Hollrah 107)

Erdrich’s characters such as Eleanor and Marlis from *Tales of Burning Love* or Lulu from *Love Medicine* exhibit precisely such ambiguous, often anti-social behaviors and yet, at the end of the day, seem none the worse for it. Patrice E. M. Hollrah cites Catt’s discussion of the Trickster in her analysis of Lulu’s character. Even though Lulu is symbolically punished for her multiple affairs with married men when she loses her hair in a fire started by one of the unfaithful husbands, at the same time, her sexual conduct gives her considerable power over the men who father her children. “Lulu’s social story deals with two images: the loose woman, or whore, and the traditional earth mother who bears children,” Hollrah observes (112). “From a white perspective, Lulu may seem to



be promiscuous and to have no redeeming qualities. However, that would oversimplify her character because as an Earth mother, she perpetuates the race, an action that involves continuance and survival for the Ojibwe tribe,” she stresses (112-113). Also, with time, Lulu is able to undergo a transformation and through her activism and role as an elder gains respect and authority characteristic of matriarchal communities.

True to the Native American tradition, Erdrich certainly is a writer who centralizes women in her works. Although on the surface, *Tales of Burning Love* might seem to be centered around a man, since the different female characters are all connected through their relationship to Jack Mauser, Erdrich manages to give each female character a chance to speak for herself and have an autonomous identity. They are all complex characters, performing different roles and experiencing their womanhood in different ways as professional women, mothers, daughters, wives, lovers, heterosexuals or lesbians. In one way or another, all of them are survivors. In a chapter entitled “‘Women Are Strong, Strong, Terribly Strong’: Female Intellectual Sovereignty in the Works of Louise Erdrich,” Patrice E.M. Hollrah observes that, “The power, strength, and autonomy of the women remain constant throughout Erdrich’s works” (89). In fact, in *Tales of Burning Love*, there is not a single female character that could be characterized as incompetent and weak. When they feel threatened or hurt, they will stop at nothing to fight their way through. Even minor characters such as Mrs. Kroshus, the nanny looking after Jack’s baby, prove heroic. Believing Jack to be a kidnapper, she puts up a fight Jack will long feel and remember. “Lithe and calculating as a trained Ninja” (262) and armed with a pneumatic staple gun, she fights like a “wildcat” (263) and inflicts considerable damage before she is finally overpowered. Even then she exudes power – “Formidable! A tiger!” (263) Jack muses not daring to remove the staple from under his eye. “You’re dangerous,” he justifies the need to leave

her tied up even as he obediently follows her careful instructions on how to best take care of the baby (264). This woman commands respect.

It is not only Mrs. Kroshus who is capable of violent acts. Eleanor manages to exact revenge on Jack for, unintentional as it might have been, breaking up her parents marriage and uses him in a successful scheme in order to make them reconcile. As she presses Jack's hand into the shards of glass from the vase she intentionally dropped, she experiences a surge of satisfaction and power:

It was as though I were another person suddenly, as though I inhabited my old skin but was bursting out my personality with surprising power. A vigilante thrill trickled down the center of my chest and then the icicle lodged there, crooked and gleaming. I had never caused another person intentional suffering. What I was doing was so bold and strange it wasn't even forbidden by the Ten Commandments. (232)

She finds Jack guilty, and metes out punishment. "I adapt to life, to other people, develop coping mechanisms. Sadism was a coping mechanism" (232) she explains to Jack's other ex-wives. At that point, sadism allows her to feel in control. A similar mechanism can be seen at work in the case of Jack's fourth wife, Marlis. She finds Jack guilty of not wanting his own baby. After he first ignores and then bullies her having learned that she is pregnant, something in her snaps. As the memories of childhood abuse come back, in her fear, sorrow and finally anger she decides to teach him a lesson about what it means to be a woman. "It hurts to be a girl," (333) she informs him as he wakes up bound to his bed, just before she plucks his eyebrows, waxes his legs, pierces his ears and leaves him to "sleep" with prickly curlers in his hair and red stilettos glued to his feet. Yet revenge is bittersweet for, at that point at least, she fails to get from him what she wants – reciprocated love for her and the baby. Being pregnant is a sort of

revelation for Marlis, “It is me who calms me down. Me who says, *You are something. You are a protector. You are a mother. Giving life is sexier than fucking Jack. Live it, baby, live it!*” (324). Marlis feels – knows – that being a mother should command respect and appreciation and Jack’s refusal to show them really hurts.

In Erdrich’s fiction, motherhood does not detract from women’s strength. Quite the opposite – it provides venue for true heroism. When Eleanor’s mother climbs to the top of a tree and then in an acrobatic feat jumps to the roof of the house in order to save Eleanor from the fire, she is nothing but the epitome of strength and courage. She acts instantaneously and confidently. “I was not surprised to see her, she was so matter-of-fact,” Eleanor recalls the sight of her mother “hanging by her toes and feet from the new gutter ... and ... smiling” (216). It is her competence and authority that make Eleanor “forget fear” (216). Her heroic deed, performed in front of the stunned firemen, neighbors and Eleanor’s father earns her the status of “an admirable woman” (220). In the social reality of the time, however, it is not her but Eleanor’s father who joins the fire department and soon becomes chief. Anna is forced to realize her heroic potential by raising money for noble causes and writing articles about “housewives’ legitimate fears of botulism in their canning” (220). “She did too much, took her failures hard. ... There was a military passion to her domesticity. It was as though the precision and athleticism of her performances as a Kuklenski were transferred into the mundane,” Eleanor relates (220-221). To her, it is clear that her mother was not happy in this arrangement. Indeed, Anne’s true nature could not be cheated for too long. As her husband is unsuccessfully battling both a blazing fire and biting frost, which turns the fire engines useless, Anna saves yet another life – this time Jack’s. “Attempting to make a hero of himself,” Jack, “an overeager volunteer” (217) gets soaked through and nearly freezes to death. Once again, Anna rises to the challenge and when nothing else helps,

puts him in her bed and warms him with her own body. This time, however, it is not admiration and respect that she receives for her successful rescue operation. Petty male jealousy and presumption make her husband disown her and ruin her reputation with grossly exaggerated stories of unfaithfulness and promiscuity. While on the surface, such a course of events might seem to prove the aforementioned claim that female assertiveness is more likely to harm instead of help the protagonist, the experience in fact turns out to be liberating. “By saving Jack my mother erased the past. She was herself again, her original self, and to my surprise it was already apparent that she was extravagant, messy, had an awful, loud, unmelodic voice and knew the words to dozens of songs” (224). When she learns of her husband’s unfair accusations and treatment of her, she leaves with Eleanor and what could be packed in the car. Deprived of all her savings, reduced to living in deplorable conditions, she nevertheless proudly makes do. And, in fact, freed from the “admirable” duties of a prominent man’s wife, she thrives. As Eleanor explains:

No girl scouts were allowed within a mile of her, and that was alright, for she realized that, except for her own daughter, she detested the face of every middle-class girl-child raised in Fargo, and most of their mothers, and fathers too, and in this hatred there was something so satisfactory and liberating that she was transformed from an attractively kept, rather solid, nice-looking, middle-aged woman, to a creature completely stunning in certain lights.

What made her so was that there was complete truth in what people said about her. She had no shame. Perhaps she was the only woman in North Dakota in that state of grace. (228)

Indeed, she has no shame, for she has nothing to be ashamed of, unlike Jack, who leaves before she wakes up without so much as a “thank you” or a word of explanation that could counter her husband’s false accusations; and unlike her husband, who so easily assumes the worst of a person he supposedly loves. Anna is a quintessential survivor, a heroic figure capable of saving herself – her agility and quick thinking save her life in a trapeze act gone bad – and of repeatedly saving others.

Another quintessential survivor in *Tales of Burning Love* is Candice. As a result of a perforated uterus and infection caused by a Dalkon shield, she ends up sterile. A successful lawsuit allows her to finance the beginning of her medical career. As she herself says, “I made do, turned calamity to opportunity. That’s who I am – I don’t get beaten, I keep going. I have never stopped, not for loss or tragedy or sickness or embarrassment, not for Jack, not for anyone. ... I talk about survival like it’s easy just to do it, but of course it’s the world’s toughest assignment” (273). And yet she succeeds. Work, alcohol, therapy, travels – she employs whatever means are necessary to cope with her loss. Unable to bear a child herself, she nevertheless manages to experience the joy of motherhood as she first tries to convince Marlis to let her adopt the baby, and eventually enters a lesbian relationship with her, raising the child together. This unlikely relationship is another occasion for Erdrich to comment on the uselessness of trying to impose clear-cut distinctions on reality. “While making love, it did not occur to Marlis, at least, that they were doing anything that fit a category, anything that had a name. Her body seemed so powerful it was like a physical shock to her” (360). While Candice admits the idea of making love to a woman once seemed “absurd, foreign, freakish” (360) to her, neither she nor Marlis is ostracized because of their relationship.

Finally, there is the current wife – Dot. Rebellious since her childhood, she can never stay out of trouble for too long. She gets romantically involved with an escaped

prisoner Gerry Nanapush, whom she eventually marries and has a daughter, Shawn, with. Since Gerry is away most of the time, either in prison or on the run, she looks for intimacy and pleasure elsewhere – first in a short sexual liaison with a phony Caryl Moon, then in a short and hasty marriage to Jack. Like Eleanor, Marlis or the nanny, she is capable of going violent and reckless when crossed. “She scared him [Jack] with her fierce threats, her independence, her sudden gusts of temper” (40). Disappointed and then angered by Caryl’s manipulative treatment of her, she responds to his forced “affections” with kicks and punches. His silly explanations earn him a hard bite on the hand accompanied with an assurance, “That was a joke, too” (92). When on top of that she gets fired by Jack for trying to “make [Caryl] look useful” and tampering with the records, she sees red. As she leaves the company in her small, compact car, she spots Caryl driving a Mack truck and decides to play chicken. “You can drive me past a limit too,” she explains to Eleanor over a cup of coffee:

This feeling has been building in me the past two days, a fever that makes me throw things at the wall and slam the door of the refrigerator so hard the seal pops. Now everything feels right. It is the moment, I decide. Caryl Moon has had things too easy in life so far. ... I keep my hands steady on the wheel, lock my ankle, and just like I know he will, Caryl takes the ditch with a full load of gravel. (93)

Dot’s satisfaction with what she has done cannot be denied. Neither does she feel any remorse post factum. When Eleanor expresses her outrage at the fact that “a grown woman with a dependent child ... decide[s] to play chicken, in a compact car, with a Mack truck,” and calls Dot “nuts,” her only answer is, “Yeah, I guess” (93). Her reckless behavior not only does not bother or harm her; it actually has a positive outcome – her first date with Jack, who is more intrigued with her than furious over the

damage to the truck and his precious Cadillac crushed in an unsuccessful attempt to save the truck.

Eleanor, Marlis, Lulu, Mrs Kroshus, Anna, Candice and Dot are only a few in Erdrich's rich gallery of strong female characters. Dot's daughter, Shawn, just like her grandmother Lulu is able to outsmart the officers looking for Gerry; Old Tallow from *The Birchbark House* is "the epitome of an independent woman, living alone and providing for all her needs in the traditional Ojibwe lifestyle" (Hollrah 94); Fleur Pillager from *Tracks* is "a respected and feared medicine woman" (Hollrah 96), there is Zelda Kashpaw from *Love Medicine* of whom Erdrich writes, "When women age into their power, no wind can upset them, no hand turn aside their knowledge; no fact can deflect their point of view" (qtd. in Hollrah 119); there is Agnes, aka Father Damien Modeste, from *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* whose androgyny throws traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity into question. And there are many more. What all of these women have in common is that unlike the victimized heroines from the western literature of the 70s as described by Showalter, they are all case studies on how to fight back, how to survive and their stories certainly offer possibilities of emotional catharsis for those who care to listen. Neither all good nor all bad, they are complex characters full of contradictions who despite their weaknesses and sometimes violent or reckless behavior, manage to enjoy meaningful relationships with other people and realize their heroic potential in times of need. "Whether the woman is a widowed mother such as Lulu Lamartine or a Catholic priest such as Father Damien," Hollrah concludes, "the political implications are that women can live autonomous lives and succeed in whatever kind of work they choose. Erdrich creates no limitations that strong women cannot overcome ..." (131). The possibilities are boundless.

A very interesting site of struggle over the image and status of Native American women is Native drama. As Shari M. Huhndorf explains in her text “Indigenous Feminism, Performance, and the Politics of Memory in the Plays of Monique Mojica”:

From the beginning, theatre and politics were closely tied, and because most Native drama groups were products of urban settings and pan-tribal educational institutions, they tended to tackle urban experiences and other issues that cut across tribal affiliations. In so doing, they broaden the parameters of Native identities and experiences as they deal with political issues, such as feminism, that extend beyond tribal boundaries.

(188)

The oldest among such groups is the New York-based Spiderwoman Theatre, founded in 1975 by Lisa Mayo, Gloria Miguel and Muriel Miguel as a result, among others things, of their disappointment with the sexist behaviors and attitudes of the male members of AIM. They objected to being relegated to the roles of secretaries and cleaning ladies while all the decision-making and negotiations were conducted by men. In their plays, they promote Native activism that is based on traditional Indigenous concepts of collective action and collaboration without marginalizing one group or another. From the perspective of this discussion, a particularly interesting example of successful collective female action, this time directed against sexual violence, can be found in the “Rape Story” section of *Power Pipes*. The rape scene is reenacted three times, each time with the same beginning but a different result. The first time round the heroine, She Who Opens Hearts, falls victim to a gang rape on the subway because she refuses to listen to her inner voice warning her of danger and because a female witness, Mesi Tuli Omai, withdraws instead of offering help. In the second reenactment, Mesi Tuli Omai decides to intervene and the two women manage to fend off the attackers



together. In the last reenactment, the heroine's inner warning is joined by the voices of four deities. "With the deities alongside her, offering their protection and power, She Who Opens Hearts springs at her attackers verbally and physically, ably defending herself against the rape," writes Katherine Young Evans in her text "'Our Lives Will Be Different Now': The Indigenous Feminist Performances of Spiderwoman Theater" (273). Thus, both She Who Opens Hearts and Mesi Tuli Omai become positive female heroes capable of self-rescue.

The tradition of activism in Native drama is continued by Gloria Miguel's daughter Monique Mojica, who cofounded Native Earth Performing Arts in Toronto. In her plays, she attempts to dismantle racist and sexist colonial myths and stereotypes about Native women and place women's concerns and women's activism in the centre of attention after years of near obliteration. Stories of well-known figures such as Sacajawea, La Malinche or Pocahontas, who, unlike male chiefs and warriors, in the American mass consciousness represent collaboration with the colonizers, are rewritten anew to fight "the corrosive stereotype of Native women as promiscuous, passive and disloyal" (Evans 270) and object to the popular perception of Native political resistance as the province of Native men. Monique Mojica's radio play *Birdwoman and the Suffragettes: A Story of Sacajewea* is a perfect illustration of how the same figure can be read in different ways – not as a servile collaborator loyal to the white man and a traitor to her people, but "as a revered Shoshone leader, multilingual interpreter, negotiator of treaties, and a spokesperson on behalf of her nation (not incidentally, roles typically imagined as male)" (Huhndorf 182). In *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots*, Mojica constructs her heroine, Princess Buttered-On-Both-Sides, as a trickster figure capable of transformation who "embodies stereotypical gendered images to subject them to

scrutiny, and ... ultimately subverts them” (Huhndorf 192). Huhndorf writes of these transformations in the following way:

The play is structured as a series of thirteen scenes labeled “transformations” that recast the political significance of Native women’s stories. In one kind of transformation that revises conventional histories, the play shows that colonization involved the systematic disempowerment of Indigenous women in the intersecting realms of culture, politics, and representation. “Let me tell you how I became a virgin,” a female deity chronicles: “I was the warrior woman / rebel woman / creator / destroyer / womb of the earth / mother of all / - married to none / but the sun himself / or maybe the Lord of the underworld / ... Of my membranes muscle blood and bone I / birthed a continent / – because I thought - / and the creation came to be.” But as Christianity displaced Indigenous traditions, these powerful roles gave way to notions of women as fallen, degenerate, and weak: “Separated from myself my balance destroyed, / scrubbed clean / made lighter, non threatening / chaste barren. / No longer allied with the darkness of moon tides / but twisted and misaligned / with the darkness of evil / the invaders [sic] sinful apple / in my hand! / ... without power.” (192)

The quoted fragment shows the stark contrast between the traditional Indigenous associations of femininity with strength, creativity and complexity; and the Christian associations of femininity with weakness, corruption and subjugation. The play features female activists who, let down by their men, continue the struggle for autonomy on their own. They draw on the Indigenous tradition to reverse the negative influence of colonization and reclaim authority and power that they used to enjoy. Towards the end

of the play, one of the characters, named “Contemporary Woman,” issues a call to arms for “word warriors,” the “guerrillas,” (qtd. in Huhndorf 194) whom she expects to take up struggle on the political arena as writers and activists.

It could be said that this call is answered by a group of five contemporary Native American women whose fight to preserve their culture through their art and everyday lives is documented in a 41-minute documentary film titled *Apache Chronicle*. The idea for the project was born in Nanna Dalunde’s head, who then managed to convince Douglas Miles from Apache Skateboards that despite the fact that she was Swedish, the document about the female skateboarders belonging to his skate crew would present the women from Native American perspective. Thus, viewers have a chance to meet Melissa Cody (Navajo), Razelle Benally (Navajo/Lakota), Lynnette Haozous (San Carlos/Chiricahua Apache), Rebekah Miles (San Carlos Apache/Navajo) and Tasha Hastings (White Mountain Apache). Textile artists, painters, poets, actresses and film makers, these women consciously undertake the task of keeping the heritage alive while at the same time living the lives of contemporary young Native American women. In “Young, Gifted, Native and Female: The Warrior Women of Apache Chronicle,” Jessica R. Metcalfe writes about the film and its heroines, “We see the process of how they gained voice, how they began to realize the power in being a woman, in being an artist, in being Native American, and in being positive. Indeed, positivity reigns supreme for this group, and they promote a PMA: positive mental attitude.” As we learn halfway through the film, for Miles and Haozous the positive and powerful role model, source of strength and inspiration, is none other than Lozen. Through their art, they keep the memory and legacy of this female hero alive. As we watch Haozous, dressed in historical clothes and armed, recite the poem written in collaboration with Miles specifically for the documentary, this legacy becomes crystal clear:

I must avenge my people  
I must fight  
We all must continue to fight  
We must fight against them  
With everything we have  
Our guns, our knives,  
Our hands, our minds  
...  
I will be your worst enemy  
Because, I am Apache  
I am a warrior.  
I am Lozen.

## - CONCLUSIONS -

“The search and need for heroes is inherent in human history,” Marshall W. Fishwick claims in the introduction to *The Hero In Transition* (9). That fact is reflected in the apparent need to glorify individuals capable of heroic deeds in real life as well as the awe, breathless admiration and fascination induced in the readers and audiences by the heroic figures of fiction. Sadly, with few exceptions, these awe-inspiring figures have mostly been men. In 2003, two years after the cancellation of *Xena: Warrior Princess*, Lucy Lawless hosted a documentary series on the lives of five women warriors, among them none other than Lozen. Mounted on a horse, the most iconic female warrior of the small screen recounts:

The lives of Victorio’s and Geronimo’s struck terror into the hearts of the US army and made headlines all across America. The Apache leaders, outnumbered and on the run, managed to outwit the forces of Manifest Destiny. But as so often happens, history worships its fighting heroes and neglects to even mention its heroines. While Victorio and Geronimo were getting all the praise, the story of Lozen, the equal to any man when it came to war was left in the dust.

It seems that the stereotypical hero in the American popular imagination was and still is a male individualist – a strong, tough, courageous, combative man who is a self-sufficient, autonomous, defiant and laconic loner. Judged against this masculine epitome of individualistic heroism, female action figures have often been found inferior in a number of ways by feminist critics. Reduced to the status of a sex symbol and eye candy; lacking physical strength, stoicism and authority of a truly tough hero; or, alternatively, possessing a muscular physique that earns them a tag of a man in drag and

accusations of being too unrealistic; finally, doomed to a tragic end that will neutralize the threat posed to the patriarchal order by an assertive, violent woman – somehow the female heroes can never get it quite right. Within this framework, based on the already-mentioned “established standard of gender traits employed in social science research” which assumes that being “*affectionate, submissive, emotional, sympathetic, talkative, and gentle*” is feminine, and being “*dominant, aggressive, competitive, independent, ambitious, self-confident, adventurous, and decisive*” is masculine (Gilpatric 735), a positive female hero indeed is an impossible figure. The defining features of heroism identified in the first chapter seem to be all reserved for men. The female hero is left with only two options available – she can either be a failure or a usurper masquerading as a man. Neither outcome is positive.

The question that in a way connects all of the chapters is what constitutes positive heroism. Should female action heroes conform to the masculine, individualistic ethos of heroism promoted and sustained in western patriarchal cultures or should the notion of heroism be redefined and expanded so that women’s achievements are no longer judged according to the criteria established by men? In light of the gathered facts and discussed arguments, this dissertation proposes that to make the figure of a positive female hero possible, two patriarchal assumptions need to be dismantled: first, that heroic features such as strength, toughness, assertiveness, aggressiveness and authority are “naturally” masculine not feminine; and second, that supposedly feminine features such as being emotional, affectionate but also cooperative, flexible and communicative are antithetical to heroism. To do so, it reaches beyond the western feminist criticism which, unfortunately, in many respects seems saturated with the patriarchal definitions of role and status. To find alternative images as well as an alternative critical lens through which to view them, it reaches to the Native American tradition where female

assertiveness, strength, agency, and authority have never been questioned, thus proving they are equally “natural” in a woman as they are in a man; and where the cooperation, emotional knowledge and sharing that grow out of communal ethics are the prescribed modes of behavior, not signs of weakness. Unlike their western counterparts, creation stories, myths and traditional tales of many indigenous nations are populated with empowering female archetypes that complicate the simplistic western representations of womanhood. Powerful creatrices and deities such as Thought Woman, Sky Woman or Changing Woman offer complex, multifaceted role models and the respect they enjoy translates to the respect granted in those societies to women and their experiences, such as being a mother. Thus, while western feminists consider motherhood to be a tactic subverting the female hero’s power, in the indigenous system of values it is precisely its source. The ability to create new life can hardly be seen as disempowering, at least not in cultures where marrying and bearing children never meant being disenfranchised. Because in the indigenous systems favoring gender complementarity, gender roles were different but not perceived as hierarchical, the domestic sphere was not devalued in the way it was in western societies. Therefore, female heroes who are compassionate, who love, who choose to marry and/or have children are not perceived as less powerful. Examples of real-life women warriors such as Nan-ye-hi, Jigonsaseh, Gouyen or Lozen, some of whom were wives and mothers, point to the flexibility of Native gender roles and prove that female agency and violence is not an aberration that needs to be contained and punished. On the contrary, capable of the transformative violence that benefits their communities, these female heroes enjoy respect and admiration and their heroism is celebrated not punished. Within this tradition, female agency, power and heroism are not questioned, for they have never been associated with masculinity only. Characters such as Zitkala-Ša’s Tusee, who would be criticized within the western

feminist framework for resorting to the “inferior” feminine tactics of seduction instead of relying only on the “superior” masculine strong-arm methods, within the indigenous framework, will be celebrated as positive heroic figures capable of rescuing themselves and their loved ones using whatever methods they find most sensible. They leave the battlefield alive and triumphant and despite their violent acts are accepted back in their communities where they enjoy authority and respect. This framework makes it possible to rewrite the traditional western patriarchal ending so that the rubber band effect and the republican compromise, so destructive to the idea of positive female heroism, are no longer inevitable or necessary.



## - STRESZCZENIE PRACY W JĘZYKU POLSKIM -

W ostatnich dwóch dekadach byliśmy świadkami stale rosnącej liczby silnych postaci kobiecych pojawiających się w popularnych mediach. Można by rzec, że zapanowała moda na agresywne, waleczne kobiety. Za tą modą podążyła rosnąca liczba opracowań naukowych skupiających się – w przeciwieństwie do starszych pozycji traktujących o heroizmie – nie tylko na męskich, lecz również kobiecych postawach heroicznych. Niemal wszystkie te publikacje zdają się zgadzać, że dzisiejsze bohaterki są twardsze, silniejsze i bardziej agresywne niż ich poprzedniczki, ale zwracają one jednocześnie uwagę, że w większości trudno jest uznać je za naprawdę wywrotowe. Ich pozycja, autorytet i autonomia zdają się być w dużym stopniu ograniczone przez tradycyjny zachodni scenariusz, który ukazuje kobiecą siłę, agresję i przemoc jako coś groźnego, antyspołecznego lub wręcz patologicznego – coś, co należy ukarać lub przynajmniej w pewien sposób okiełznać i ograniczyć.

Długa lista zastrzeżeń kierowanych w stronę bohaterek kina akcji przez krytykę feministyczną nasuwa liczne pytania: Czy możliwe jest znalezienie przykładów *pozytywnego kobiecego heroizmu* we współczesnych zachodnich narracjach? Jakie są główne cechy pozytywnych kobiecych postaw heroicznych i czym różnią się one od tradycyjnych wyobrażeń na temat (zwykle męskiego) heroizmu? Czy brutalne bohaterki współczesnych filmów akcji mogą być postrzegane jako naprawdę heroiczne i silne? Jeśli nie, jakie są tego przyczyny i gdzie możemy szukać alternatywnych wzorców takich postaw, które pozwoliłyby na wyjście ze ślepego zaułka, w którym kobieta, niezależnie od tego, czy jest silna czy słaba, tkwi uwięziona w patriarchalnej wizji świata uznającej męskość za normę, a wszelkie roszczenia kobiet do siły i władzy za akt uzurpatorstwa? Ambicją tej pracy jest udowodnienie, że takie wyjście istnieje.

By to uczynić, w pierwszej kolejności należy przyjrzeć się cechom i postawom tradycyjnie uznawanym za heroiczne, gdyż to właśnie one służą za kryteria, według których oceniane są kobiece bohaterki. Z tego powodu pierwszy rozdział pracy poświęcony jest próbie ukazania istoty heroizmu w tradycyjnym zachodnim rozumieniu tego zjawiska. Podczas gdy niewątpliwie heroiczny ideał podlegał transformacjom na przestrzeni wieków, pewne cechy zdają się być nierozzerwalnie utożsamiane z heroizmem, zarówno w Starożytności, Nowym Świecie jak i w Fabryce Snów. Wydaje się, iż w amerykańskiej wyobraźni masowej stereotypowy bohater nadal jest męskim indywidualistą – silnym, twardym, odważnym i bojowym mężczyzną; samowystarczalnym, niezależnym, buntowniczym i lakonicznym samotnikiem. Bohaterki kina akcji niejednokrotnie wydają się pod wieloma względami nie dorastać do tego ideału lub, jeśli kryteria te spełniają, są oskarżane o uzurpatorstwo i maskulinizację. Zarówno jeden jak i drugi rezultat trudno nazwać pozytywnym.

Rozdział drugi przedstawia i poddaje analizie najważniejsze oskarżenia sformułowane przez krytykę feministyczną w ciągu wieloletniej debaty toczącej się wokół bohaterek kina akcji, usiłując jednocześnie odpowiedzieć na pytanie, czy powinny one dostosować się do męskiego, indywidualistycznego etosu heroizmu promowanego i podtrzymywanego w zachodnich kulturach patriarchalnych, czy też może koncepcja heroizmu powinna zostać zredefiniowana i poszerzona tak, aby kobiety nie były już oceniane według kryteriów ustanowionych przez mężczyzn.

Głównym celem tej pracy jest udowodnienie, iż *pozytywny kobiecy heroizm* jest możliwy pod warunkiem, że zakwestionuje się dwa patriarchalne założenia: po pierwsze, że heroiczne cechy takie jak siła, asertywność, agresja czy autorytet są cechami naturalnie „męskimi”; po drugie, że rzekomo „kobiece” cechy takie jak emocjonalność, czułość, kooperatywność czy komunikatywność stoją w sprzeczności z

heroizmem. By to uczynić i umożliwić zupełnie nowy sposób konstruowania jak również nowy sposób interpretacji heroicznych postaci kobiecych w filmie, należy wyjść poza zachodnią krytykę feministyczną, która, niestety, pod wieloma względami zdaje się być przesiąknięta patriarchalną terminologią oraz patriarchalnymi definicjami ról i statusu.

Alternatywnych wzorców jak również alternatywnej perspektywy krytycznej rozprawa ta poszukuje w tradycji rdzennych Amerykanów. W kulturach tych, niejednokrotnie gynocentrycznych, kobieca asertywność, siła, autonomia i niezależność nigdy nie były tak bezwzględnie kwestionowane, stanowiąc namacalny dowód na to, że są one równie „naturalne” dla kobiet jak i dla mężczyzn. Ponadto, w systemie wartości wielu rdzennych społeczności, cechy takie jak kooperatywność czy otwartość na pomoc i radę ze strony innych wynikające z etyki wspólnot są zalecanymi wzorcami zachowań, a nie oznakami słabości dyskwalifikującymi bohaterkę/bohatera.

Poprzez analizę postaci mitologicznych, historycznych jak również fikcyjnych pochodzących z wybranych tekstów autorstwa kobiet wywodzących się z tradycji plemiennych, rozdział trzeci pragnie wykazać, że wierzenia, tradycje i sztuka rdzennych Amerykanów obfitują w heroiczne postaci kobiece, które z powodzeniem mogą stanowić alternatywę dla tkwiących w ślepym zaułku zachodnich bohaterek. Losem tych heroicznych jednostek nie jest wyszydzenie, ostracyzm czy śmierć. Nie są sprowadzone do statusu seks symbolu, nie odmawia im się autorytetu, nie kwestionuje się ich autonomii i niezależności. Odwołanie się do alternatywnych dla kultury zachodniej archetypów kobiet pozwala wyjść poza tradycyjne zachodnie narracje i interpretacje, tak aby *pozytywny kobiecy heroizm* stał się możliwy.

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