

THE REGRESSING FEMALE REPRESENTATIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTER OF RACHAEL DAWES IN CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S BATMAN MOVIES

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Abstract: The over representation of men in movies and the undermining role of women on screen has not been manifested as an atypical practice since the inception phase of movies. The prime objective of any media is to disseminate information and to inculcate the value system held by the then society. Though Hollywood has tried in imparting feministic ideologies in the latest decades, the inherent molecules of patriarchy still retains and regrettably the effects of feministic ideals were never visibly put to the screen. Nolan's Batman Trilogy emerged as a remake of the DC comic character - Batman. A revival of the Batman character had been endeavored by many a directors in the past years. The critical acclaim that Nolan received through the success of *Batman Begins* ensured the necessity of its sequel. The most prominent woman character in the Batman series stand to bear the testimony of Nolan's recurring habit of refrigerating his female characters. Multiple researches have been done with regard to female presence in cinema in various contexts. American mainstream cinema or Hollywood had always been a timid enterprise that followed the trajectories of existing formulas and genres. Though Hollywood had tried many bold revisions of the old archetypes and powerful new generation women, they have somehow trodden into some gray areas in contradictory arrays and they remain disgustingly monochromatic. A change is inevitable and the question remains as to who would begin with this Hollywood revolution. Only such a strong revolution can replace these weak models of women manifestations with powerful female characterizations.

Keywords: female ,representation, character ,movies,etc

The over representation of men in movies and the undermining role of women on screen has not been manifested as an atypical practice since the inception phase of movies. The abundance of the provocative skin that is paraded on and the powerlessness of the supporting characters braced by women have always pushed them into poor light. This peculiar phenomena is not just something that happens in Hollywood cinema but a repetitive cycle that occurs unequivocally on a universal basis. The prime objective of any media is to disseminate information and to inculcate the value system held by the then society. Though Hollywood has tried in imparting feministic ideologies in the latest decades, the inherent molecules of patriarchy still retains and regrettably the effects of feministic ideals were never visibly put to the screen.

Women representations can indeed have a strong social effect on the upcoming generation thereby teaching them that a man is always superior to a woman in his physical strength as well as his charismatic mental valor. Superhero movies have in a way contributed to this imbalance in perceiving male and female characters. According to the senior Vice President of Marvel, Tom Brevoort, "It's not that you can't have a successful or well-written female superhero, but in general, historically, proportionately, we just haven't had as many" (Murphy 2016).

Nolan's Batman Trilogy emerged as a remake of the DC comic character - Batman. A revival of the Batman character had been endeavored by many a directors in the past years. But unluckily, the majority of these rebooted films on Batman failed to supplement enough chances towards the levels of box office hits. However, Nolan's take on Batman was different and he portrayed him through a psychological subversion juxtaposing his real identity as well as his identity as the Batman. This parallel schema succeeded and created a loud applause among the audience globally and his series on Batman became a blockbuster hit.

Despite Nolan's auteur persona, his Batman trilogy thunderously delineates the typical Hollywood archetypes. Rather than putting his ideas to reconstruct and revamp the existing social order, he has followed and established the hitherto traditional gender archetypes through his movies. Instead of demolishing this archaic concept of women as the dependent soul on men, he constructs his women in the same subservient framework.

The appalling female deaths in Nolan's movies are equally disappointing as the unachievable beauty standards set on screen. The celebrated physical appearance of the heroine actually meant to invoke visual pleasure for the male spectator can damagingly intensify the harmful concept of the benchmark of what feminine beauty and fashion should be. These paramours of beauty while appeasing men, can be a threat to the existing ordinary women community in our society. The failure to achieve this filmic standard of beauty can trigger the feathers of shame in the internal psyche of a woman which can obviously motivate her to attain the unattainable.

The critical acclaim that Nolan received through the success of *Batman Begins* ensured the necessity of its sequel. The long three years that Nolan worked on for the creation

of the second part triggered an unfathomable curiosity in Nolan fans as well as Batman fans who were eagerly waiting to see how Nolan would outdo the original first part. The stunning performance of the Batman and the villain - the Joker in the second part was a real boon and triggered political as well as ethical questions towards an evolving society. It was during George Bush's war on terror that Nolan worked on the second part, and the expanded authorities that functioned beyond original law systems had ample similarities with the vigilante in Batman. Thus *The Dark Knight* was released in the year 2008 with great expectations on a bombarded budget. However, the movie indeed outdid the first part and even scored multiple awards and recognitions apart from its gross collection in the year 2008.

Though the movie pushed itself to a set of new ethical and social questions disturbing the set pattern of the system of law enforcement, the most important realm which required a change remained stagnant in Nolan's hands. Though Nolan uses the same set of characters in his trilogy, he introduces his innovation in the villains he creates in each of his movies associated with Batman. The women in his movies however never see light and the pattern echoes continuously even in the second part.

There is only one major female character that Nolan delineates in *Batman Begins*. Rachael Dawes played by Katie Holmes is depicted as Bruce's childhood friend and love interest. She serves her role as the Assistant District Attorney at Gotham city. This movie undoubtedly seals the very fate of refrigeration of females within its frame of the plot. The character of Rachael Dawes had been appreciated and applauded many a time by many critics. A preliminary glance at the character of Rachael Dawes gives us a deceiving impression that she had been sketched in full vigour with all the necessary sensibilities pertaining to her character. But an extensive study on her characterization offers us with more insight to understand that she is in no way different from Nolan's quintessential female characters. It is only when we watch the sequels to this movie that we understand that Rachael Dawes had been created only to transmit the smoldering wrath of the protagonist when she gets killed in the second part of Batman Trilogy. Nolan keeps her alive in the first part as Bruce Wayne already had an effective reason to keep his fury burning through the death of his father and mother. His quest for revenge and his enthusiasm to settle the score is already set in motion in this first part with the death of his parents.

Being the only prominent female characterization that pervades through the movie, Rachael Dawes had been constructed and demolished by Nolan only to manipulate the trajectory of his male hero. She could be easily read from her two different perspectives in the movie - her personal as well as her professional perspectives. She is a childhood friend as well as a confidante of Bruce Wayne. In one of the initial scenes where Bruce laments his inefficiency in avenging the death of his parents, she turns out to be a paramour, inculcating values in her boyfriend. Beyond the dialogues, Nolan was indeed trying to extend his ideology of the subtle values that should be inherent in a woman but not entirely expected from a man. Dawes teaches him about love, compassion and brotherhood. She just

automatically becomes an epitome of the delicate feelings which could only be generated in a female psyche.

Nolan himself has stated that Dawes is portrayed with tremendous warmth and a great emotional appeal. She becomes a true nurturer for Bruce - representing a mother figure for him. While the Batman undertakes his solitary battle for justice in Gotham, whatever Rachael does just escapes into void. Throughout the movie, Batman/Bruce Wayne remains as the hero with his unshakable quest for justice and his staunch commitment towards the society. Dawes appears for a while with her filling physical presence and indeed provides a soothing pleasure for the male spectators as well as the hero in the movie. On the contrary, the protagonist is only assessed in terms of awe and power and each of his movements are appreciated by the spectators as well as the minor characters within the filmic canvas.

There is no doubt that Christopher Nolan's Batman has amused the avid fans as well as thrill-seekers of the era. Nolan landed at the film world in the late nineties when there was a considerable change in the process of filmmaking. His earlier movies were noted for their intricate way of narration and the complex technicalities. But unfortunately, the message imparted to the society is nothing but male supremacy. As Nolan had gone to unimaginable heights in sketching the character of his protagonist, the heroine just wrinkles out in oblivion. She appears to be a pure alien in the film and the plot would have plodded easily to its endpoint even without her presence.

To magnify the physical presence of Dawes, she is seen in close-up scenes. Nolan has used strong close-up scenes with his male characters to augment their characterization on a whole. But very often Nolan uses close-up scenes with his females and this is mostly to enhance their physical beauty and not to emphasize their significant inner power. Her face dominates the object of vision of the male hero as well as the spectator. Mary Ann Doane discusses the complexity of such a shot in this way.

The face, more than any other bodily part, is for the other. It is the most articulate sector of the body, but it is mute without the other's reading. In the cinema, this is evidenced in the pause, the meaningful moment of the close up, for the spectator, the scale of the close up corresponding less than other shots to the dictates of perspective realism. And this being-for-the-gaze-of-the-other is of course, most adequate as a description of the female subject, locked within the mirror of narcissism. (47)

Despite her powerful position, she is showcased as requiring the help of the Batman in every attempt that she makes as a part of her social commitment. When she gets exposed to a fear inducing hallucinogen by Dr. Crane and turns incapacitated, Batman comes to her rescue. She is portrayed as wanting man's help in spite of being bold and powerful. He comes like a whirlwind and swoops down and lifts her up. His actions make him a superhero and the character of the Batman unwittingly gets glued to our memory list. Nevertheless, the incapacitated, weak, unconscious Rachael Dawes waits for the hero's arrival for her impending rescue operation. The superhero even evades the Police force and administers an

antidote for her and rescues her and leaves her in her bed chamber at her home. The protagonist who turns to be the savior for the heroine is essentially a symbol of a traditional and conventional pattern that retains the hegemonic structural presence and this masculine symbol of strength, independence and dominance is reiterated in many scenes by Nolan. She is rescued again in the last scene by the very same Batman. Nolan's titular hero serves to be the reincarnation of the heroic warrior in the primordial period. When a man rescues a woman, the agenda behind such performance is definitely to depict the heroine as meek, powerless, dependent and undistinguished.

Rachael Dawes continues her presence in *The Dark Knight* until she gets murdered brutally by the schizophrenic villain - the Joker. Her portrayal as a meek, passive woman continues even in the second part though the role is handled by a different actress this time, Maggie Gyllenhaal. She occupies a very shadowy role and serves to be the same childhood sweetheart in the mind of Bruce. But surprisingly, she is depicted as dating Harvey Dent played by Aaron Eckhart, the new District Attorney of Gotham. She is a strong inspiration for Bruce and her dialogue in the ultimate scene of the first part pushes Bruce to think again to drop his Batman mask and to forge a romantic relationship with her in *The Dark Knight*.

Rachael Dawes : I never stopped thinking about you. About us. And when I heard you were back, I started to hope. But then I found about your mask.

Bruce Wayne : Batman is just a symbol, Rachael

Rachael Dawes : No, this is your mask. Your real face is the one that criminals

never now fear. The man I loved..the man who vanished..he

somewhere came back at all. But maybe he's still out there

Maybe someday when Gotham no longer needs a Batman,

I'll see him again. (The Dark Knight)

Rachael's death would seem to be a psychological inspiration for her two sweethearts Bruce Wayne as well as Harvey Dent. However, the heroes are glorified in their own mechanisms while Rachael becomes washed out embracing death. Rachael Dawes had been an innovation that Nolan tried out beyond the characters in DC comics and it had been one of the characters who had been raised to superlative degrees to the equivalent of a Saint. The methodological catapulting by which she turns out to be a worshipping statue, becoming an embodiment of everything good was one logical way through which Nolan tried to suppress her very character. Rachel Dawes is also defined with the innate vacillation of a woman. She herself seems confused at her freedom of choice between Bruce Wayne and Harvey Dent. She requests Bruce Wayne to cast off his mask of Batman for her to continue her relationship

with him. Contrary to this, we see her dating Harvey Dent in the second part *The Dark Knight*.

Racahel Dawes : Harvey called. He said Batman is gonna turn himself in

Bruce Wayne : I have no choice

Racahel Dawes : You honestly think that's going to keep the Joker from killing people ?

Bruce Wayne : May be not, but I have enough blood on my hands. And I have

seen now what I would have to become to stop men like him. You once told me that if the day came when I was finished, that we would be together.

Rachael Dawes : Bruce, don't make me your one hope for a normal life.

Bruce Wayne : Did you mean it ?

Rachael Dawes : Yes. If you turn yourself in, they are not gonna let us be together. (The Dark Knight)

She gives enough hope to Wayne and at the same time keeps her relation in tact with Dent. However, in her last scene, before her death, she openly declares her love for Dent which is clearly understood by the spectators. "Harvey, just in case, I want to tell you something, okay. I don't want to live without you. And I do have an answer for you. And my answer is yes" (The Dark Knight).Rachael thus gives an answer to Harvey's proposal before she dies.Through his usual trajectory, Nolan has portrayed very strong male characters even in this second series. The protagonist as well as the Antagonists has been roped in with almost equal mettle and the question remains still debatable as to who is more powerful within the movie. The villain in the piece, the Joker, is in fact a beefy presence and his manifestation in the movie is of high signification both visually as well as through dialogue delivery. It is persistently disappointing that a movie which portrays a strong villainous character fails tremendously to represent a strong woman character. Nolan's Joker has been praised to lengths and the women characters just turn out to be mere shadows and revenants. Nolan's Joker played by Heath Ledger has bagged the most coveted Academy award for the best supporting actor in the year 2008.

The villain of the piece, the Joker has been pushed in with an equal sturdiness along with the hero of the story. They compete with each other throughout and the audience understand that the antagonist is in no way a lesser target than the hero. The Joker's identity is not mentioned nor his intentions. The ethical reasons behind his evil incarnation too aren't mentioned in the storyline. However, all that is understood is that though he is diabolic in his intentions and his will, he is a powerful equivalent to the protagonist of the story. Though malicious in his nature, he is meticulous in his calculations and determined about his intentions. Nolan had given a very strong character sketch for him and no wonder Heath Ledger who played the role won the award posthumously. With the death of Rachael Dawes and the police detective officer Ann Ramirez in *The Dark Knight*, the female presence almost comes to a halt except for Gordon's wife who survives as she gets rescued by the Batman

from the hands of Dent. The loss of women is a persistent preoccupation that we find with Nolan's directorial artistry and this particular trend which has been set to roll still continues, wrecking damage to all female characters he had created.

The most prominent woman character in the Batman series stand to bear the testimony of Nolan's recurring habit of refrigerating his female characters. Multiple researches have been done with regard to female presence in cinema in various contexts. American mainstream cinema or Hollywood had always been a timid enterprise that followed the trajectories of existing formulas and genres. Though Hollywood had tried many bold revisions of the old archetypes and powerful new generation women, they have somehow trodden into some gray areas in contradictory arrays and they remain disgustingly monochromatic. A change is inevitable and the question remains as to who would begin with this Hollywood revolution. Only such a strong revolution can replace these weak models of women manifestations with powerful female characterizations.

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