

## The Male Gaze and the Portrayal of Natasha Romanoff throughout the Marvel Cinematic Universe

Since the debut of Natasha Romanoff—also known for her alias Black Widow—in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), her character has been heavily sexualized and been a mode of fan service for the male audience. The hyper-sexualization of Romanoff resulted in her objectification, reducing her mind and body to objects of sexual desire and lust; this hyper-sexualization in the MCU is a direct result of the narrative and cinematic convention called the “male gaze.” According to the Oxford University Press (n.d.), the male gaze upholds patriarchal values, as men are the subjects of the gaze and women are the objects to men’s gaze. However, though Romanoff’s character has always been written according to the male gaze in the MCU, Director Cate Shortland has recently removed this patriarchal convention in the making of the *Black Widow* (2021) movie. Instead, Shortland sheds light on Romanoff’s past, her strengths and skills set, her family, and her achievements—all without sexualizing her. Keeping Shortland’s changes to the MCU male gaze narratives in mind, this essay will explore the hyper-sexualization of Romanoff in the past, the effects of abandoning the male gaze to Romanoff’s portrayal, and the improvement of Romanoff’s character arc.

To begin, Romanoff was introduced to the MCU in the *Iron Man 2* (2010) movie and has since then made an appearance in nine MCU movies to date. Before her death in the MCU timeline, she was a highly-skilled assassin and a member of the Avengers, a group of superheroes assembled to protect people from the threats of the universe. Since her debut, Romanoff has always been presented in hyper-sexualized clothing and provocative positions on posters and within the movies. In *Iron Man 2* (2010), Romanoff is introduced as a secretary whose boss objectifies her and whose colleagues undermine her strength; in the same movie, she is later revealed to be an intelligent spy

working for the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division (S.H.I.E.L.D.). In *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) in which Romanoff makes her third MCU appearance, Romanoff is reduced from being an intelligent spy to a mere romantic interest to Steve Rogers, alias Captain America. Similarly, in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2014), her character's primary role is being Bruce Banner, the Hulk's, romantic interest, stunting her personal character growth yet again. The only movie that truly allows viewers to understand Romanoff's backstory and explore her strengths and accomplishments is Shortland's *Black Widow* (2021) which is released after Romanoff has already died in the MCU timeline, although the setting of the movie takes place before her death. Even in giving her a solo film, Marvel only does so after the character has passed and is no longer relevant to any existing plotlines. This demonstrates that little importance is given to Marvel's female characters in comparison to their male characters, seeing as most of Romanoff's male superhero colleagues have gotten their own solo movies and trilogies before she got hers.

Moreover, depriving Romanoff of in-depth character development and only portraying her as a supporting character and romantic interest conforms with the already existing notions that regard women as less important than men and only suitable as their caregivers (Gerard & Poepsel, 2018, p.33). In fact, the hyper-sexualization of female superheroines isn't uncommon in media, and this kind of portrayal of female superheroines reflects traditional roles for women (Pennell & Behm-Morawitz, 2015, p.212). According to Pennell and Behm-Morawitz (2015), superhero media delivers pre-existing gender stereotypes and transforms them into super-gendered stereotype because they show their male characters in a hyper-muscularized form and their female characters as hyper-sexualized (p.214). This portrayal of superheroines in a hyper-sexualized manner is very harmful, as it has a negative effect on the way people perceive women; "frequent

exposure to television's gender stereotypes is believed to activate stereotypical gender schemas, which may influence subsequent judgments and behaviors" (Ward & Grower, 2020, p.181). Viewers start adapting stereotypical opinions on women from consuming the falsely represented onscreen presentations of female characters, expecting women to act according to the gender notions society sets for them. These onscreen hyper-sexualized presentations of women are usually a result of incorporating the male gaze into the film's narrative, such as done with Romanoff's characters throughout the MCU.

To further understand the male gaze, Hollinger (2012) explains the male gaze narrative in films is a patriarchal underpinning of Hollywood; it unconsciously allows women to continually be oppressed without viewers even realizing the extent of that oppression (p.12). The male gaze allows female characters to be seen from an idolized male perspective to appeal to the male audience. Hollinger (2012) argues that the "deep-rooted nature of patriarchal ways of viewing narrative films [has an] intimate connection among the male gaze, the patriarchal unconscious and spectatorial pleasure." (p.11). In the MCU, the connection between the male gaze and the patriarchal unconsciousness is apparent, as the male gaze creates a patriarchal environment for Romanoff because she is continually reduced from a strong and intelligent assassin to a supporting character and romantic interest to multiple male superheroes. To add, the connection between the male gaze and spectatorial pleasure is also evident, as Romanoff is constantly presented in sexualized clothing and made to unnecessarily act in provocative manners for the pleasure of male viewers. It is only in the new *Black Widow* (2021) movie where Romanoff is not subjected to the male gaze, and the changes to her character after the removal of this convention are drastic compared to her representation in past MCU projects.

It is imperative to note is that all previous MCU projects involving Romanoff before *Black Widow* (2021) were directed by men. When Shortland took on the project, she removed the male gaze completely, showing the importance of women in the film industry and the positive changes they can help bring to the way women are represented in the media. It is also important to involve female creatives when intending to present women in media to make sure the characters are delivered with precision and without the influence of gender stereotypes. Hohenstein and Thalmann (2019) point out that contemporary media has begun to shift towards more accurate and positive representations of women, challenging the stereotypical and traditional portrayal of women (p.109). This is because more women are being allowed in directing positions and have the advantage, now more than before, to write their own female characters and be in control of the narrative. Women themselves need to be at the forefront of bringing healthy changes to the portrayal of women because they have a better grasp on identifying with female characters; this is evident in the example of Romanoff's character when examining how male directors have poorly written her compared to Shortland, a female director. Shortland adapting this change by focusing on Romanoff's achievements and abandoning any elements of sexualization found in past representations of her character also goes to show how having more women in charge in the film industry helps defeat the traditional and stereotypical notions set for women by the media itself.

To elaborate on the changes Shortland brings by removing patriarchal conventions and sexualization in the making of *Black Widow* (2021), one of the issues Shortland focuses on is shedding light on the problem revolving around the trafficking of women and young girls. Shortland addresses this important issue and gives meaning to the work that Romanoff does by exploring her mission in which she liberates the trafficked women from their oppressor with the help of her family. Related to the issue of trafficking, in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2014), Romanoff

refers to herself as a monster because of what she was made to do when she was trafficked as a young girl; in *Black Widow* (2021) Romanoff recognizes that what happened to her was not her fault and learns to not blame herself, rather, Romanoff accepts her past and works towards protecting other young girls that may fall into the same position as she had. Another detail Shortland changes is that she brings attention towards Romanoff's family; in the past MCU movies, it is believed that Romanoff does not have a family and that the Avengers are her only companions; however, *Black Widow* (2021) shows us that Romanoff is not just a romantic interest who doubles as a highly-skilled spy, rather she is more than a one-dimensional character and that she does, in fact, have a family. However, this element of her character was never explored in the past movies because previous directors had not prioritized exploring Romanoff's backstory as they did with Marvel's male characters. To add to the list of changes Shortland brings by removing the male gaze is that unlike in past movies where Romanoff is shown to have no feelings, *Black Widow* (2021) shows us her sensitive and compassionate side, debunking the established theories that assume Romanoff to be a heartless assassin. Shortland's version of Romanoff displays her emotions positively and not in the stereotypical manner in which women's sensitivity is mistaken for weakness. These changes to Romanoff's character bring huge improvements to how she is presented as a woman in the MCU.

In summary, Shortland's *Black Widow* (2021) is an example of how removing the male gaze narrative from films can bring positive changes to female characters. In this movie, Romanoff is no longer subjected to the hyper-sexualization which objectified her mind and body in past MCU projects, instead, viewers can focus on and understand her past, her strengths, and her achievements. *Black Widow* (2021) allowed viewers to understand that Romanoff did not choose to become an assassin but instead she was forced to as a result of women trafficking and that she

reclaimed her skills and strengths to bring change in the world by abolishing the organization that was responsible for trafficking her and hundreds of other women around the world. The removal of the male gaze and hyper-sexualization also allowed viewers to enjoy a film in which they were able to see Romanoff's sensitivity displayed as a positive thing; Shortland did not stereotype Romanoff's emotions but instead showed us that having compassion is one of Romanoff's strengths because it is due to her kind heart that she took on the mission to liberate the trafficked women from their oppressor, even if it meant facing the man who was responsible for her traumatized past. Shortland gave depth to a character who was otherwise very one-dimensional; Romanoff had not received any character development in the past because her growth would always be stunted, as Romanoff would continually be written as a romantic interest to her superhero colleagues. *Black Widow* (2021) shows us how hyper-sexualization and the male gaze narrative are harmful and that removing them can bring precision and accuracy to the way women are presented in media and perceived by the audience.

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