

WHAT DO WOMEN SPEAK ABOUT: NARRATIVES OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN MAINSTREAM CINEMA

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Summary

The paper focuses on the language of female characters in the top thirty box office films with a leading female character (1999–2023). The research applies the narrative analysis to the turns of heroines to account for their archetypal representation. The paper proposes a view on female archetypal characters popular with large audiences around the globe and presents a typology of widely recognizable female narratives. The received framework reflects the contemporary vision of the female image and role in society. The study employs Jung's idea of the archetype as a repetitive image of the collective unconscious. Each archetype is governed by several constant motivations and needs, defining the characters' (verbal) behavior. Maslow's hierarchy of human needs serves as the basis for the delineation of archetypes. The moral valence of each character depends upon the satisfaction of her aspirations. Recognized and met wants predetermine the protagonist/heroic archetypes, while thwarted needs bring about antagonist/villainous archetypes. The research is based on Schmidt's typology of forty-five master characters. Among the overwhelming majority of traditional images of the Nurturer and Matriarch archetypes, there appear the representatives of the Female Messiah, Father's Daughter, and Amazon, respectively, pursuing the goals of improving society and finding self-identity and independence.

Key words: narrative analysis, archetype, psycholinguistic image, top box office films, qualitative analysis, gender linguistics, social linguistics.

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1. Introduction

There is nothing new left to say about the male protagonist out in search for life's meaning. Yet, the new breed of female authors, TV writers, directors, and producers... are now proposing shockingly fresh perspectives on the female protagonist; perspectives that are free from traditional presumptions of what it means and how it feels to be a woman, or what constitutes a female journey (*Bassil-Morozow, 2018: 115*). This new heroine gradually emerged in response to the changing perception of women's place in society. The woman was gradually becoming 'an individual', expected to have her own journey (*Bassil-Morozow, 2018: 116*).

Cinematic narratives employ archetypes as easily recognized images, having distinct motives and needs. The idea of the archetype rooted in the collective unconscious, as proposed by Jung (*Jung, 1968*), has been further developed by researchers in different fields of study. Several classifications of archetypes focusing on individuals' psychological characteristics have been proposed and applied since then (*Mark, & Pearson, 2001; Schmidt, 2007; Faber, & Mayer, 2009; Cowden, et al., 2013*). However, there has been no attempt to compose a typology of psycholinguistic archetypes to account for common narratives in the language

of definite archetypes. As narratives about an individual's life trajectory, including subjective descriptions of the past and the future, appear to be central to selfhood and identity (*Hirsh, & Peterson, 2009: 524*), the present paper proposes an overview of popular female archetypes in mainstream cinema and the framework of female narratives representing the archetypes.

The research employs the cinematic characters' language analysis. The material under investigation consists of the turns of over forty female characters featured in thirty box office English-language mass culture films (see Fig. 2 below). The leading female protagonists and their villainous counterparts represent clear-cut archetypes and demonstrate characteristic narratives. The research aims at establishing archetypes popular with a wide audience around the globe and recreating the collective female image and the common narratives that translate the heroines' needs and motivations.

2. Archetypal characters: needs and motivations

Film studies have recently begun to employ Jung's concept of archetypes as prototypical images, which play the role of blueprint in constructing clear-cut characters (*Han, 2019: 14*). Understanding the idea of archetypes as the repetitive image in the collective unconscious, Jung sees them not as inherited ideas, but as an inborn disposition to produce parallel thought-formations, or rather identical psychic structures common to all men (*Jung, 1968: 158*). However, in his works, Jung proposes only a few archetypes systematically, regarding them as 'fundamentally unobservable'. Among the archetypes, Jung distinguishes the hero, the mother, the child, God, death, power, and the wise old man. Later, his notion of repetitive images frequenting different tales irrespective of the country, region, time, or language has found multiple interpretations.

New typologies of archetypal characters have appeared since then to demonstrate the changes in the constantly evolving world of literature, theater, film, comics, and other forms of entertainment. Campbell, Hall & Lindzey, McAdams, Cowden & al., Schmidt, Mark & Pearson, among others, developed such generalized images as the Caregiver, the Creator, the Every Guy / Girl, the Explorer, the Hero, the Innocent, the Jester, the Lover, the Magician, the Outlaw, the Ruler, the Sage, and the Shadow (*see for details Faber & Mayer, 2009*). The archetypes respectively represent caring, innovation, ordinariness, discovery, courage, naivety, playfulness, passion, transformation, rebellion, power, wisdom, and darkness.

Among various post-Jungian typologies of psychological archetypes, the classification by Schmidt (*Schmidt, 2007*) stands apart. It distinguishes separately female and male archetypes, further dividing them into protagonist/antagonist forms. Among forty-five master characters, Schmidt distinguishes eight leading protagonist/antagonist female archetypes based on mythology. The duality of the character's nature is compatible with Maslow's idea of satisfied/thwarted human needs (*Maslow, 1943*), while different combinations of needs define a particular archetype. According to Schmidt, each archetype is represented in the protagonist and antagonist form: Aphrodite (the Seductive Muse / the Femme Fatale), Artemis (the Amazon / the Gorgon), Athena (the Father's Daughter / the Backstabber), Demeter (the Nurturer / the Overcontrolling Mother), Hera (the Matriarch / the Scorned Woman), Hestia (the Mystic / the Betrayer), Isis (the Female Messiah / the Destroyer), and Persephone (the Maiden / the Troubled Teen).

The life goal for the Aphrodite archetype is to love and be loved back; thus, her narratives are those on love, sex, seduction, affection, relationship, belongingness, and beauty. The Persephone needs to have fun and discover the world around her; it defines her narratives on having safety, protection, reassurance, stability, freedom, justice, fairness, and knowledge.

The Hestia archetype looks for self-development, focusing on self-actualization, self-fulfillment, connection to the divine, elements, mysticism, knowledge, balance, and solitude. The Hera's motive is to rule, defining her narratives as those on order, (self-)esteem, achievement, independence, appreciation, respect, affection, belongingness, self-actualization, and self-fulfillment. The Athena needs to fit in with some group, thus referring to the themes of comfort, dependence, safety, protection, reassurance, stability, love, affection, belongingness, (self-)esteem, achievement, independence, and appreciation. The Artemis' function is to fight, which presupposes her focus on truth, (self-)esteem, achievement, independence, appreciation, self-actualization, self-fulfillment, freedom, justice, and fairness. The Demeter's goal is to take care of someone, which defines her narratives about providing food, comfort, safety, protection and reassurance, dependence, stability, love, and affection. The role of the Isis is that of the teacher; she enlightens others and shows a way to the greater good. Her narratives are those of meaning, safety, protection, improvement, reassurance, stability, self-actualization, self-fulfillment, freedom, justice, fairness, knowledge, and balance (Berezhna, 2022: 47).

It should be noted that Schmidt delineates female and male archetypes as being only partly similar and thus governed by varying needs and aspirations. As for the three primal human motivations (power, affiliation, and achievement) Duncan, & Peterson claim to find very little evidence for consistent gender differences in the absolute levels of achievement and power motivation. Evidence exists, however, for gender differences in levels of affiliation–intimacy, as women tend to score higher on affiliation motivation than men (Duncan, & Peterson, 2010). The researched archetypes fall within a broadly-defined scheme based on three primal motivations (see Fig. 1 below).

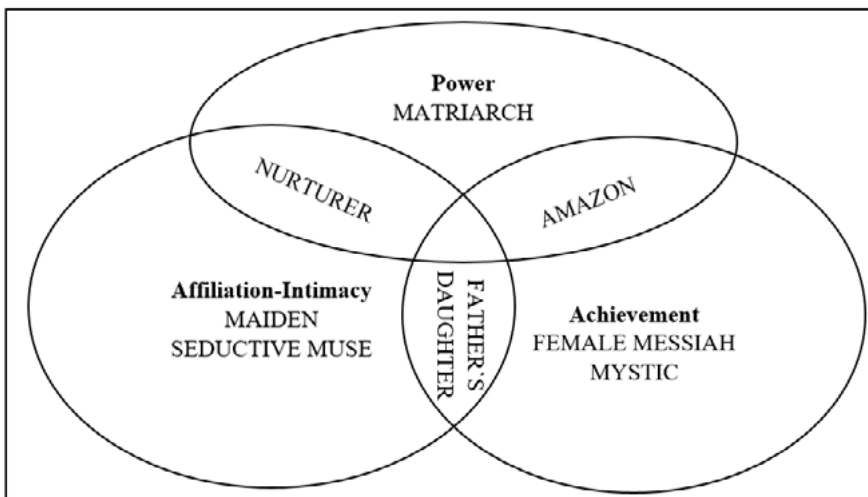


Fig. 1. Correspondence of motivations (power, affiliation, and achievement) and female archetypes

Achievement motivation is defined as a concern for standards of excellence and doing well on tasks (Duncan, & Peterson, 2010: 41). Winter defines that in female language, achievement motivation is revealed with adjectives evaluating successes and good performance; nouns and verbs marking well-done jobs, accomplished activities, individual progress, and winning competitions; lexis to express negative emotions in the case of failure (Winter, 1991).

Power motivation involves a heightened concern about having an impact or influence over other people (Duncan, & Peterson, 2010: 41). According to Winter, key markers denoting power motivation include strong, vigorous actions that necessarily impact others, behaviors that arouse strong emotions in another person, attempts to influence or control others, mentions of prestige or fame, and giving help without prior request (Winter, 1991).

The affiliation–intimacy motive is a concern for establishing, maintaining, and repairing friendly relationships as well as experiencing warm and close interactions with others (Duncan, & Peterson, 2010: 41). Key imagery includes companionate activities; nurturant acts; expressions of warm, positive, friendly feelings toward other people; and negative affect about the disruption of friendly relationships (Winter, 1991).

Interestingly, Affiliation motivation seems to be negatively correlated with popularity among peers. Probably, a fear of rejection often underlies the behaviors and actions of people high in affiliation. That is, highly affiliative people (especially under stress) may try too hard to establish connections and avoid rejection, which can lead other people to move away from them (Duncan, & Peterson, 2010: 41). The present research supports the idea as the Overcontrolling Mother, Troubled Teen, and Backstabber archetypes tend to impose their love, care, and attention onto their loved ones, excessively demanding to be appreciated and valued back. They need to be ‘central and indispensable in the lives of those they love’ (Cowden, et al., 2013, p. 92).

3. Female characters in cinema

The tendency of the last twenty-five years observed in the top box office internationally released films demonstrates several main traits. First, it is the gradual growth in the number of top-grossing films featuring a leading/titular female character. In the period from 1999 to 2004, the highest-grossing film with a leading female character was the Australian romantic drama

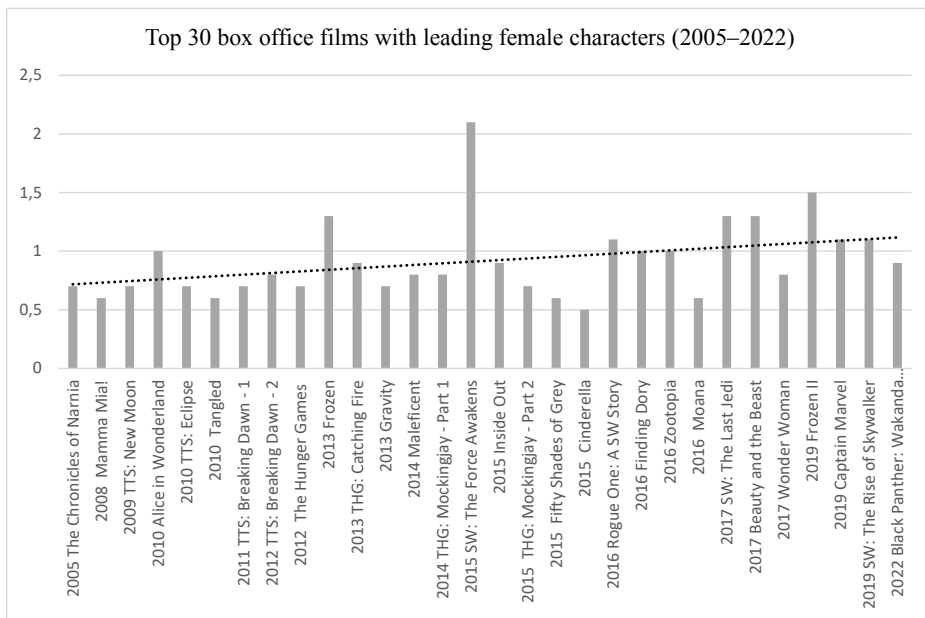


Fig. 2

Japanese Story (2003). The film failed to cover the expenses as its budget was \$0.5 billion, while the box office comprised \$0.4 billion. However, between 2005 and 2022, the top thirty box office films with a main female character were released. The expectation of wide public recognition and commercial success is similarly high for *The Marvels* (November 2023), featuring three leading female characters. The trend began in 2005 with the film *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by Andrew Adamson (see Fig. 2 below).

Second, the genres of the films have diversified from musical fantasy (*Mamma Mia!*, *Frozen*, *Moana*), romance (*The Twilight Saga*, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*), and computer-animated films (*Inside Out*, *Finding Dory*, *Zootopia*) to adventure fantasy (*The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Tangled*, *The Hunger Games*, *Maleficent*), epic space opera (*Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*), science fiction thriller (*Gravity*) and superhero films (*Wonder Woman*, *Captain Marvel*, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*).

It is worth mentioning that six of the researched films (*Beauty and the Beast*, *The Twilight Saga*, and *Fifty Shades of Grey*) present a clichéd love story of ‘the vulnerable virgin heroine and the aloof, dark and handsome hero locked in a cat and mouse pursuit of an intermittent love/hate relationship that culminates in a denouement of reconciliation and happily-ever-after’ (Al-Mahadin, 2013, p. 567). The films targeting diverse age audiences propose different variations of the ‘virgin-beast trope,’ a common patriarchal heterosexual relationship model with a passive female (virgin/beauty) and an aggressive male (beast) who must be tamed (Maas & Bonomi, 2021: 512).

Twelve films are released by Walt Disney Pictures. Five of them present fairy tale narratives largely set in a mythical past and containing princess protagonists who have a goal and subsequently set out on an adventure to achieve their dreams. They have a confrontation with an antagonist, which results in the vanquishing of evil and finding her happily-ever-after (Mollet, 2020: 9). Seven of the twelve films present a story of a heterosexual romance. However, despite Disney’s renewed interest in fairy tales, numerous films resumed the tradition of the post-feminist heroine whose happiness was not ‘contingent on finding a mate’ (Hefner et al., 2017: 513). Several characters are too young to be concerned with romantic relationships (Lucy Pevensie in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Riley in *Inside Out*), some look for their identity (Rapunzel in *Tangled*, Dory in *Finding Dory*, Elsa in *Frozen II*) and strive for self-development (Elsa in *Frozen*), and some even fight for equal rights and independent existence (Judy Hopps in *Zootopia*, Alice in *Wonderland*).

A tendency to depict a female character as a (super)heroine in an action film starts with Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* and Rey Skywalker in *Star Wars* sequel. Their commercial success and popularity with the wide public prompted the production of leading-female-character blockbusters based on comics. Arriving in theaters in May 2017, *Wonder Woman*, directed by Patty Jenkins, was only the second DC adapted movie (among thirty-one films in 1941-2017) to have a woman in the lead role, the first being thirteen years earlier with the release of *Catwoman* (Curtis, 2020: 928). With regard to *Captain Marvel*, only one of the forty-eight *Marvel*-related films since Bryan Singer’s *X-Men* in 2000 had a woman lead (*Elektra* from 2005), and since *Marvel Studios* began the official *Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU)* in 2008 with Jon Favreau’s *Iron Man*, there have been no women-led films at all (Curtis, 2020: 928). In this context, both films were seen to be clear but long overdue challenges to overt sexism and patriarchal bias within the industry (Curtis, 2020: 928).

Black Panther: Wakanda Forever (2022) is the 30th film in the *Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU)*, presenting a plethora of diverse female characters, led by the superheroine Shuri / Black Panther. The female characters are presented not only in traditional roles of mothers

and wives (Ramona, Nakia) but also as technical geniuses (Riri, Shuri) and warriors (Okoye, Ayo, Aneka, Namora). The correlation of female and male characters (3:1), the opposition of a female protagonist against a male villain, and the predominance of non-white actors make the film revolutionary in more than one aspect.

4. Heroines and villains: female narratives

Correspondingly, a significant shift in exploited archetypes has taken place. Such traditional female archetypes as the Nurturer (Bella Swan in *The Twilight Saga*, Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games*, Joy in *Inside Out*), Maiden (Lucy Pevensie in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Riley in *Inside Out*, Anna in *Frozen*), and Matriarch (Donna in *Mamma Mia!*, Maleficent) had to make some room for the Father's Daughter (Rey Skywalker, Sophie in *Mamma Mia!*), Amazon (*Alice in Wonderland*), Mystic (Elsa in *Frozen*, Captain Marvel), and Female Messiah (Wonder Woman, Judy Hopps in *Zootopia*, Shuri in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*).

Out of four types of affective processing within personality change stories, namely positive valence, negative valence, redemption, and contamination (Lodi-Smith, et al., 2009: 680), the researched material demonstrates the prevalence of positive valence for the leading female characters. A few stories reveal a temporary lapse of the heroine from the positive valence into the antagonist form. For instance, Maleficent (*Maleficent*) and Shuri (*Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*) are consumed by vengeance; Joy (*Inside Out*) smothers Riley with overprotectiveness; Bella Swan (*The Twilight Saga: New Moon*) is unable to cope with emotional trauma; and Elsa (*Frozen*) is overwhelmed by fears and inability to control her powers. It helps to develop the character's arc along the redemption line, progressing from a negative beginning to a positive ending, telling the story of personal growth and transformation.

For every hero, there is a villain, and for every villain there should be a story. However, the female villain has rarely been the central focus of academic study (Le Clue, & Vermaak-Griessel, 2022: 1). As the Great Mother / Caregiver / Nurturer archetype (Mark, & Pearson, 2001; Schmidt, 2007; Faber, & Mayer, 2009; Cowden, et al., 2013), which is distinguished by care, protectiveness, devotion, and sacrifice stays the most essential and frequently exploited protagonist archetype in mass culture cinema, its antagonist counterpart (the Overcontrolling Mother) keeps its position as well.

When woman is represented as monstrous, it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions. These faces are: the archaic mother; the monstrous womb; the witch; the vampire; and the possessed woman (Creed, 2007: 7). The motherhood narrative differentiates between mothers and other women in a way that legitimate mothers are valorized and put in a position not only as different from, but also as superior to other women. The position of legitimate mothers can also serve for loathing other women, as in the case of adulteresses (illegitimate mothers), murderous midwives, barren or childless women, and bad mothers. These are 'other' women who represent the dark side of the feminine and the fears of women related to motherhood (Önal, 2011: 87). Disney fairy tales, with a renewal of interest in princess narratives, also see the return of the evil woman (Mollet, 2020: 120). The maternal figure in the films is often split into two opposites: the entirely wicked witch or stepmother and the perfectly pure good witch or fairy godmother (Mark, & Pearson, 2001: 210).

In the researched films, the adulteresses, illegitimate mothers, and childless women are represented by the Scorned Woman archetype (Elena Lincoln in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Donna in *Mamma Mia!*, Rosalie in *The Twilight Saga*); evil step-mothers can behave as the Overcontrolling Mother (Mother Gothel in *Tangled*) or Scorned Woman (Lady Tremaine in *Cinderella*); while witches embody the Betrayer archetype (the White Witch in *The Chronicles of Narnia*).

In general, the female villains within the cinematic stories keep negative valence and represent antagonist forms of archetypes: the Betrayer (the White Witch in *The Chronicles of Narnia*), Overcontrolling Mother (Mother Gothel in *Tangled*, Supreme Intelligence in *Captain Marvel*), Destroyer (Alma Coin in *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay*), Backstabber (Dawn Bellwether in *Zootopia*), Gorgon (Captain Phasma in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, Dr. Isabel Maru in *Wonder Woman*, the Red Queen in *Alice in Wonderland*), and Scorned Woman (Lady Tremaine in *Cinderella*, Te Kā in *Moana*, Victoria in *The Twilight Saga*).

Finally, female narratives in mass culture films have also evolved. Narrative descriptions exhibit human activity as purposeful engagement in the world and draw together diverse events, happenings, and actions of human lives into thematically unified goal-directed processes (Polkinghorne, 1995: 5). The traditional and ever-lasting narratives of the leading female characters are about:

- taking care and protecting loved ones (Bella Swan in *Twilight*, Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, Joy in *Inside Out*, Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*, Anastasia Steele in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Anna in *Frozen II*),
- being overprotective and smothering her loved ones (Joy in *Inside Out*), manipulating and oppressing children (Mother Gothel in *Tangled*, Lady Tremaine in *Cinderella*, Supreme Intelligence in *Captain Marvel*),
- overcoming the trauma of the loss (Dr. Ryan Stone in *Gravity*) or surviving a break-up (Bella in *The Twilight Saga: New Moon*),
- seeking and finding love (Donna in *Mamma Mia!*, *Maleficent*),
- being hurt by males (Donna in *Mamma Mia!*, Rosalie in *The Twilight Saga*, *Maleficent*) and seeking revenge (Victoria and Rosalie in *The Twilight Saga*, *Maleficent*)
- getting married (Donna in *Mamma Mia!*) and having children (Bella Swan in *The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn – Part 1* and *Part 2*),
- discovering the world around and having fun (Lucy Pevensie in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Ella in *Cinderella*, Anna in *Frozen*, Riley in *Inside Out*, Aurora in *Maleficent*),
- bettering her appearance (Mother Gothel in *Tangled*) and magic (the White Witch in *The Chronicles of Narnia*).

The comparatively new and gaining popularity female narratives are about:

- (re)discovering her identity (Elsa in *Frozen II*, Rapunzel in *Tangled*, Rey Skywalker in *The Star Wars* sequel, Jyn Erso in *Rogue One*, Sophie in *Mamma Mia!*) and place in the community (Dory in *Finding Dory*, Rey Skywalker in *The Star Wars* sequel),
- fighting for her rights and (self-)respect (Alice in *Wonderland*, Judy Hopps in *Zootopia*),
- exercising control and enjoying violence (Jane in *The Twilight Saga*, Dr. Isabel Maru in *Wonder Woman*, Captain Phasma in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*),
- being underappreciated and underestimated (Dawn Bellwether in *Zootopia*),
- finding her inner force (Captain Marvel) and connection to the divine (Rey Skywalker in *The Star Wars* sequel, Elsa in *Frozen* and *Frozen II*),
- fighting for the greater good (Shuri in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*) and ‘making the world a better place’ (*Wonder Woman*, *Moana*, Judy Hopps in *Zootopia*).

5. Conclusions

Contemporary cinema is a complex construct, an intersection of social, psychological, cultural, and linguistic patterns that serve not only to entertain the public but also to reflect and influence society. Women in films are often depicted as the incarnation of the Great Mother

archetype – caring, protective, and nurturing. Still, their representation has been gradually changing to include such archetypes as the Father's Daughter, Amazon, and Female Messiah to account for new social roles and attitudes.

Correspondingly, female characters have gradually been pictured as more active, outspoken, independent, and strong. Their roles have changed from girls-next-door (Sophie in *Mamma Mia!*, Bella Swan in *The Twilight Saga*, Anastasia in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Ella in *Cinderella*, Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*, Riley in *Inside Out*) and/or princesses (Lucy Pevensie/Queen Lucy the Valiant in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, princesses Anna and Elsa in *Frozen*, the daughter of a village chief in *Moana*, lost princess Rapunzel in *Tangled*) to police officers (Judy Hopps in *Zootopia*), rebels (Jyn Erso in *Rogue One*), Jedi (Rey Skywalker in *The Star Wars* sequel trilogy), warriors (Okoye and Namora *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*; Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games*, Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*), astronauts (Dr. Ryan Stone in *Gravity*) and superheroes (Shuri in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel).

Though traditional narratives about providing care, finding love, and having family and children stay frequent, new narratives connected to female social status appear. The new heroines speak about fighting for their rights, being accepted and appreciated, finding a rightful place in society, and changing the world for the better.

Further research might focus on the composition of narrative typology, delineating female cinematic characters of basic archetypes from their male counterparts. Being based on the highest-grossing English-language films of the 21st century, the typology might reflect the global vision of women and men in the modern world.

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