

Labour in Wonder Woman: A Marxist Feminist Reading

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Abstract

An Amazonian Goddess who was raised a warrior set in World War I, screams the impact of Marxism. Wonder Women (2017), produced by DC, has a nominal heroine who seems like an icon of Feminism but is instead the opposite in close observation. Though the character seems vigorously empowered, she is reduced to a commodity in the clutches of capitalism. Wonder Woman's labour was tried to fit into the domestic sphere. This paper would explore the film from the focal lenses of Marxist Feminism. The investigative questions revolve around 'cheap labour,' 'reserve labour,' and 'reproduction.' Also, the marginalized status of other proletariats is examined. How the character becomes a target of capitalism by pushing her into the domestic sphere and objectification is the paper's primary concern. The paper would use a qualitative approach to achieve the desired result. The analysis will be a subjective judgment based on the film text. The characters' cognitive behavior and the surrounding are a central element that will be explored through the narrative analysis. The research methodology will employ conceptualization and qualitative design and methodology.

Keywords: Marxist-Feminism, Labour, Domestic Labour, Reproduction, Bourgeois, Proletariat

Introduction

Marxist Feminism falls under the Gender reform feminism along with liberal, social, postcolonial, and Asian Feminism. During the 1970s, these forms of Feminism gained momentum owing to the inequality in the social order. This era of Feminism aimed to find a balance in genders and thus, stirred a reformation. Gender reform feminism has voiced out on various disturbing and nuanced discriminatory processes. They oppugned human anatomy, cognitive behaviours, and the system. The focus was on the capabilities of the two genders and maternal instincts. “Mothering was seen as women's strength and responsibility, so women were seen as mothers before, during, and after they were anything else” (Lober, 10). The labour done by women in the domestic sector was considered natural and not considered ‘labour.’

In his book *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), Frederick Engels discusses the family structure, idea of wealth, and social hierarchy. He begins his description by talking of the primitive society and its contrast in modern society. The glide in structure from matriarchy to patriarchy and vice-versa was a significant concern. He draws a dot to the ownership of cattle to the need to produce a male heir. The shift from barbarism to urbanization was salubrious for men and nocuous to women. The oppression of the female gender inside the frame of family and domestic servitude is a phenomenon Engels describes as something that led to the nuclear family's forming. This phenomenon was “the world-historical defeat of the female sex” (Horno, 22).

In *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx states, “The first division of labour is that between man and woman for the propagation of children” (Horno, 22). Engels, as a response to this, “within the family he (man) is the bourgeois, and the wife represents the proletariat” (Horno,22). Engels blames the power struggle enforced by the nuclear structure for the thralldom of women. As a prognosis, he states that working women in a future communist society will obtain freedom (Horno 21,22). However, in retrospection, do they get freedom? Are women free from the clutches of domestic ‘labour’? Labour here is more nuanced than just the work aspect. Labour as in production (domestic and professional labour) and reproduction (female uterus labour) is the focus of this paper.

Chaya Dhatar, in her thesis titled, *In search of feminist theory subordination of womens labour and environmental degradation*, (103,104) states that Marxist feminists usually focus on the gaps in Marxist theory. They formulated a theory of patriarchy with the basis of production and reproduction and its connections. This formulation started with a movement called ‘wages for housework’ started by ‘Lotta Feminista’ members who worked for the trade union and Mariarisa Dalla Costa, an Italian Academic. Selma James joined the movement later. Women as homemakers remain outside the sphere of ‘socially organized productive cycle.’ They also remain outside social productivity as their labour is considered ‘non-productive.’ As opposed to men who invariably contribute to the “surplus value in the accumulation of capital” (Dhatar, 104). In *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, domestic labour is the most necessary part of a capitalistic economy. In 1969 Margaret Benston, in her *The Political Economy of Women’s Liberation*, proposed a comprehension of domestic labour as ‘productive labour.’ (Vogel,19). Domestic labour is the source of more labour-power.

Jacquilyn Weeks, in her paper, discusses the target of a Marxist feminist as corroboration of (un)-productive labour and fights against it. However, she notices a slippage in the term ‘productive- labour’. She argues that Marx himself uses language with words like ‘tainted,’ ‘customarily immoral’ in defining a woman working outside the domestic

threshold. Her paper gives a close reading of Marx’s usage of the word ‘reproduction’ and ‘prostitution.’ She quotes Hartman, who draws the control of female reproduction as an essential part of control in a patriarchal school. He elaborates that rearing children is beneficial to the husband (Weeks,39). Labour force must be reproduced in number, just as it is replenished via domestic labour.

The objective of this paper:

1. It will look at both domestic labour and reproductive labour.
2. To see the objectification of the Protagonist in the film *Wonder Woman* (2017).
3. How her labour is used for the patriarchal benefits and her realization of the same.

The research statement and investigative questions are as follows:

Though the character seems vigorously empowered, she is reduced to a commodity in capitalism’s clutches through the various forms of labour.

1. Is *Wonder Woman* an empowered character?
2. What aspects of labour is seen in the character?
3. How is the doubly marginalized status of a proletariat presented in the film?

Methodology

The paper will employ qualitative analysis based on textual evidence. These evidences will be read with the focal lenses of Marxist Feminism. The analysis will be a subjective judgment based on the film text. The characters’ cognitive behaviour and the surrounding are a central element that will be explored through the narrative analysis. Based on the text, there will be a broader understanding of the framework and the theory.

Analysis

The film starts with an introduction to *Wonder Woman’s* genesis. Diana, the princess of Themyscira, Daughter of Hypolyta, the queen of Amazons. Her introduction seems to astoundingly empowering. In a world where reproduction is beneficial only to the father, and the production of a male heir is considered the essential aspect as stated by Engels is subverted by an Amazonian Princess whose lineage

is maternal. She comes from an island where they live only women. Her mother, who narrates the past to her, tells her how Zeus created 'Mankind.' It is evident to notice that he created 'Mankind,' and the word is a pun to the dichotomy of Amazonians, who are all women. They are created to save 'Mankind' from the corruption of Ares, the War God.

"Hypolyta: God created us the Amazonians to influence men's hearts with love and restore peace to the earth" (2017). On the outset, it sounds empowering to see Zeus chose Women to bring peace; however, the statement made by Hypolyta speaks otherwise. These Amazonian women who are built warriors are created to restore peace with love by manipulating a man's heart. Comparing this to the Marxist idea of women being confined to the household is brought out on a subtle level. Women were confined in the household before the war. War demanded them to work due to a lack of human resources. It was after the war that they were sent back into the sphere of the household again. The Amazonians being a warrior clan, made to fight expected to bring peace via love. Also, Hypolyta not wanting Dianna to fight shows the 'mothering' aspect above all in her. The warrior in her dies the minute she has a daughter, and the mother is born.

It is her aunt Antiope who finishes the story for Dianna. 'Mankind' enslaved these Amazonians who were their saviour. "Amazonian queen (Hypolyta) fought to free them from enslavement" (2017). They feared that 'Mankind' would destroy themselves and the Amazonians. Antiope wishes Diana to call a spade as it is, "A scorpion must sting, a wolf must hunt" (2017). She does not paint a euphoric picture of war, and at the same time, she made sure she prepared Diana to face the worst-case scenario. She tells Diana the worst of 'Mankind,' yet insists she sticks to her journey. This act is because she is not a 'mother' like Hypolyta, who once was the fiercest warrior. Antiope expects her labour to be (socially) productive and not go unpaid. On the contrary, Hypolyta is okay to sacrifice everything for her daughter's safety. This act is evident when she refuses to tell the truth to Diana even when she leaves Themyscira.

On meeting Steve, Diana is sure that Ares is on the loose and is again corrupting 'mankind.' She wishes

to save them as she feels that is her destiny. When the Protagonist meets Steve while he bathes, she is amused by his phallus. However, the amusement is because she has never met the opposite gender. She naively asks him if he would be an example of 'his kind.' This naivety has a deeper meaning; he can be read as the embodiment of 'mankind.' She looks at his watch and questions its purpose. When he says it says time and tells him what to do, she is confused. "you let this little thing tell you what to do?" she smirks. Though the question here is direct, the viewer can understand a more profound sense of how 'Mankind' can be controlled by the little (materialistic) things which are external and not a necessity. In contrast, later in the text, when she tries to give her opinion during a meeting conducted by officers of the war, she was shut right away as she was a 'woman.' Marxism, which is all about materialism, shows the value a watch has compared to a woman.

Due to their life span and is created for the protection of 'mankind', the Amazonian knows hundreds of languages. When Steve brings Dr. Maru's journal, she immediately identifies it to be Ottoman and Sumerian. None of the other 'men' in the room knew it. This aspect insults the officer who immediately questions her identity. Steve barges in and hesitates before he could answer, he finally stated that she is his secretary. Her knowledge was sidelined, and her statement was accepted when she was under the leadership of 'a man.' Men are confused and refuse to continue with their meetings when Diana enters the room. Diana, however, is interested in political affairs. She even has a better strategy and ethics than the officers who are supposed to save the 'world.' However, she is shushed and expected to get into her domestic sphere. 'Mankind' makes sure that no women enter the productive social sector.

In comparison, Diana's encounter with Steve's secretary gives a clear understanding of 'labour' associated with women.

"Etta: I am his secretary... I do what he asks me to do and go where he tells me to go. Diana: From where I come from, that is slavery" (2017).

Etta has accepted her labour can be productive only if she is under the umbrella of a man. To Diana, all of this is new. Etta can be a symbol of Cheap

labour which is a crucial component of Marxist Feminism. When Diana questions how women fight with such dainty clothing, Etta laughs it off. “We use our principles (to fight). I mean, that is how we are going to vote.” The plot is set during World War I; this statement reflects the agitation and rise of feminist movements, Marxist movement, and other movements that rose and fought for rights. The revolution of the time is reflected in this simple statement made by Etta. Ironically, Wonder Woman’s clothing is no armour either. In the comic this plot is set during World War II, however, the movie chose the backdrop of World War I. This can also be read as the conscious effort of the Movie makers to place the problematic plot in the point when it all started to converge.

Even though Dianna is a princess of an empowered all-women community and is well educated, she is considered the weaker sex. Ironically, she is the only person who is strong enough to face a bullet and is a better strategist. Wonder Woman walks into gunpoint situations as a warrior. On the mirror effect of this statement, she walked into the battlefield to save the hungry and the deprived. The maternal instinct in a woman kicks into her. Although she seems empowered in the outset, Steve takes over the steering wheel the minute she steps into London. He dresses her up the way he feels is acceptable and gives away her sword as it is not expected of a woman to carry armoury. To think the entire story is placed during the war, carrying a weapon should not have raised eyebrows—the fact it did show the vulnerability of women during the time. In closer appreciation of Diana, one can say she is an example of reserve labour. Steve agreed to take her to Ares, only because he did not have a choice. However, he made sure he made all choices for her.

Sexuality is a significant element of subverting Feminism in this film. When Diana and Steve return to London, she asks him to sleep next to her. Sleeping near a man is not perverse as she is brought up in an island filled with women and she understands sexuality. He, on the other hand, refuses. When she looked confused, he said, “Yes, I do sleep with women, but within the confines of marriage” (2017). Marriage is an essential tool to push women into the domestic sphere. The whole notion of

women ‘mothering’ the spouse and the children are represented through this scene. She clarifies that she knows about ‘the pleasures of the flesh’ as she has read Clío’s treatises of Bodily pleasure. She quotes, “Men are essential for procreation but when it comes to pleasure... unnecessary” (2017). Steve’s facial expression immediately changes; it is evident that he is hurt. However, she is unapologetic and candid. Women do not appreciate enforcement of the institution or at least are expected to; marriage institutionalizes them and expects them to be the primary caregiver rather than the breadwinner.

The representation of the marginalized is brought out through the character of The Chief. The Chief is a Red-Indian who does not support any parties in the war but still participates in war. When confronted, his behaviour confuses Diana; he elaborates that his home and family are taken away by the previous war. Oblivious, she asks who took away his sense of belonging, for which he points out to Steve, denoting the Americans. In war, there is no good and evil; there are only Victors and the victims. The Victor eulogizes the cause, whereas the victim laments over it. In a Marxist understanding, the Victor, by default, becomes the bourgeoisie and the victim of the proletariat.

Similarly, Sameer, who wanted to be an actor, is forced to be a soldier. “But I am the wrong colour” (2017), says Sameer showing the marginalization he suffers. Women who are considered the proletariat in a marriage (Engles) thus share a shared space with the victim. The Chief explains, “everyone is fighting their own battle Diana, just as you are fighting yours.” If women by gender are the proletariat, characters like the Chief and Sameer are pushed down due to other discriminations. These characters show a comparison of the similarities between Marxism and Marxist Feminism.

Diana’s realization that Ares was not the entire cause of evil in humans puts her in a frenzy. The Goddess who so long wished to save ‘mankind,’ goes in a frenzy to destroy ‘mankind.’ However, Steve’s (the representation of ‘mankind’) last words makes her understand that humans are capable of goodness. Her final words during the battle, “you’re wrong about them. They are everything you say but so much more.” (2017) shows her trust in the dominant

class – ‘Mankind’ again. However, when Ares tries to manipulate Diana, He brings in Dr. Maru. She is a woman representing the dominant class. This aspect of the film can be read as an element that transcends the stereotypes of Marxist Feminism and represents her as a product of social production. However, even this is portrayed negatively. If a women forcibly steps out of her domestic sphere she should be the ‘evil’ the world does not need.

Reproduction is another vital element of Marxist Feminism. The sexual encounter between Diana and Steve can be looked at as an act of reproduction. Diana, who was so clear about the Bodily pleasures and spoke of men in procreation, indulges in a sexual encounter with Steve. Thus, the sexual connection can mean that she has fallen in love and is willing to procreate with him; this, like Hypolita, can push her into the domestic space. However, the martyrdom of Steve in the end, though portrayed as redemption to ‘mankind,’ can also be read as Diana’s redemption. If he had lived, she would have been a ‘mother’ above all. The story’s end shows Diana seeing a picture of them taken in Germany and is happy; she found her love again. However, only because she lost him, she is a professional in a socially productive sphere and saves the world instead of saving her family. Steve’s death thus, empowers the weak Wonder Woman.

Conclusion

The aspect of Cheap labour and reserve labour is brought out by characters in the film. No matter how strong they are, women are reduced to the domestic sphere just because they have a uterus. Engles’ idea on t women oppressed by men due to their superiority in the past (Horno, 22) shows the vulnerability of the ‘dominant gender.’ Men do everything within their power in a falling economy to victimize women. Sadly, the falling of the economy itself is due to the lack of perseverance that men hold. If Diana was heard and given due respect in the meetings, they might have figured a different solution. This arrogance of ‘mankind’ is what Ares means: “Mankind is an evil creation by my father” (2017). The paper does not seek to make women sound all perfect; however, equality can bring newer ideas and solutions to the table. Doing so will reduce the dominance of a man. Marx himself used language to

shade his idea regarding gender division and labour in the other gender.

Engles and Marx speak of women being oppressed, but they never concentrated on how and why. Turning a blind eye to this is a significant concern that the Marxist feminists took over. This movie becomes a textbook example of how women are pushed into the margin without even realizing it. Even when they train themselves, the labour they produce is domestic and not socially productive. If mothering is biology, shouldn’t fathering be considered biology too. Why is the father figure always associated with the statement of ‘boys will be boys’? Characters like Chief and Sameer face marginalization; they are proletariats. However, they did not fight to get into the fight. They were not allowed to choose their lives and professions, but they were allowed to be a part of socially productive labour. Wonder Woman, on the other hand, had to do wonders and still sneak into the fight. This act shows the doubly marginalized plight of women in any environment.

In the present day, there are no significant changes. Even in this COVID-2019 situation, women are expected to be primary caregivers. Several narratives like memes, statistics, so on and so forth present the mother in the family work twice fold as the social production shifted to the domestic sphere. It is the woman’s responsibility to keep a necessary environment for others to labour. So, her labour is both domestic and productive. Engles believed communism would liberate women, but women are still confined in their kitchens as the caregiver. Adding to that, they have to aid the family and the country (Social production) financially and domestically.

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