

Masculinity Through Neytiri's Character in Avatar The Way of Water (2022)
Movie By James Cameroon

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Abstract

Most cinematic analyses tend to frame strong female characters through the lens of empowerment or feminism. While, this movie embodies traditionally masculine traits without forfeiting their femininity. Therefore, this research aims to find forms of masculinity that displayed by Neytiri's character in the movie Avatar The Way of Water, using Judith Halberstam's theory. Through a qualitative descriptive method, the study identifies two key expressions: Butch Femininity, shown in Neytiri's physical strength, emotional control, and leadership; and Performance of Masculinity, highlighted in battle scenes where she protects her family. The findings indicates that Neytiri challenges conventional gender norms by displaying resilience, bravery, and a strong protective instinct towards her family and community. Her character demonstrates that masculinity is not exclusively tied to men, but also can embodied by women. This study contributes to the growing discourse on gender fluidity in media by highlighting how female characters can embody alternative masculinities in ways that are empowering rather than reductive. By centering female masculinity within a blockbuster film, the narrative opens space for more inclusive and diverse representations of gender in popular culture.

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INTRODUCTION

In the past, men were primarily expected to be providers and warriors, while today masculinity is often associated with emotional, intelligence, shared parenting, and collaborative work. Some people said that masculinity refers to a set of traits, behaviors, roles, or characteristics that are socially seen as being exclusive or similar to men. However, according to Halberstam (1998) the definition of masculinity is not only limited to the biological or innate aspects of men, but is a social and cultural construction that can be different in each society or certain time. In other words, masculinity is not only exclusive to men and it can be also possessed by women. This indicates that masculinity is not static but dynamic.

The dynamic nature of masculinity is the rise of the "New Man" archetype. The "New Man" refers to a modern understanding of masculinity that moves away from traditional stereotypes (Kimmel, 2010) The "New Man"

archetype reflects a significant shift in how masculinity is understood and expressed. For example, Man takes an active role in family life, including parenting and household responsibilities. But this research defines "New Man" as a woman who took over man's power, behaviour, and characteristics.

The figure of masculinity could be found in any places or in literary works. One of the type of literary work included is Movie. Movie is a type of literary work in the form of audiovisual media and has the power to shape and reflect social norms, including gender representation. According to Nurul (2022) Movie are included in the type of literary work because all kinds of film presentation modes are in accordance with the features of literary texts and can also be explained within a textual framework. Klarer (2013) classifies film as a form of literature, along with prose, poetry, and drama. Klarer asserts that film has characteristics that can be analyzed using literary criticism methods, so that film can be understood as a movement from textual to visual mode.

Female masculinity is an important proposition to learning of masculinity that looking at female role in daily life without dealing with men. (Halberstam, 1998) argues that female masculinity is not just a complement that is not in accordance with the dominant gender configuration; but masculinity can be misunderstood unless female masculinity is taken into account. The important role played by women in the realm of masculinity is not recognized by the emergence of contemporary masculine formations. Empowering models of female masculinity have been ignored or misunderstood due to cultural intolerance of the gender ambiguity represented by masculine women. It can be said that the phenomenon of the female body carrying out performative masculinity is the existence of female masculinity. It is important to realize that a woman is free to act, behave, and look to express her inner masculinity. A woman can position herself to do something that is considered masculine, as in the Movie analyzed in this research.

The Movie "Avatar: The Way of Water," directed by James Cameron, is not only known for its visual innovation, but also for its narrative depth and character complexity. In this movie, the characters Neytiri showed unique perspectives on masculinity, shaped by her culture and identity, as a mother, also as a Na'vi princess and warrior, displays an aspect of masculinity. She demonstrated courage, resilience and leadership, which were not only related to gender, but also to responsibility towards her community. In many ways, Neytiri challenges traditional views of masculinity, showing that masculine traits can be adopted and expressed by women. Therefore, the research would like to define the masculinity of the character. Through in-depth analysis of Neytiri's character is hoped that this research can provide deeper insight into the representation of masculinity in the films. Previous studies have analyzed gender representation in film and literature, often focusing on strong female characters and the subversion of traditional gender roles. For example, studies like "Female Masculinity in Enola Holmes Mysteries" (Amrullah et al., 2024)

explore how female characters embody masculine traits within specific narratives. However, in the context of Avatar and science fiction films, these studies have not thoroughly applied Judith Halberstam's specific theoretical framework of female masculinity to analyze female characters. While some research recognizes strong female leads in sci-fi, they often lack an in-depth analysis of how these characters independently perform and embody masculinity, separate from male characters. A detailed analysis of Neytiri's character in Avatar: The Way of Water (2022) through the specific lens of Halberstam's female masculinity theory remains largely unexplored.

Literature Review

Female masculinity is a concept that explores the ways in which women can embody and express traits, behaviors, and identities traditionally associated with masculinity. It challenges the binary understanding of gender and highlights the fluidity of gender expression. Female masculinity refers to the expression of masculine traits by individuals who identify as female or women. This can include physical appearance, behavior, interests, and social roles that are typically associated with masculinity. Masculinity is not inherently tied to biological males; rather, it can be embodied by individuals of women. This perspective highlights the dynamic nature of masculinity, which evolves with societal changes (Halberstam, 1998).

Judith Halberstam (1998) introduces the concept of female masculinity, which examines how women can embody masculine traits without being defined in relation to men. This framework emphasizes that female masculinity is not merely a deviation from dominant gender norms but a legitimate expression of identity that deserves recognition. The presence of female characters exhibiting masculine traits challenges societal perceptions and expands the understanding of gender fluidity.

Female masculinity is often overlooked due to societal intolerance towards gender ambiguity. Female masculinity come in various types. Halberstam identifies various form of female masculinity which is, Butch Femininity and Performance of Masculinity.

1. Butch Femininity

One of the most recognizable forms of female masculinity is butch femininity, which is characterized by a rejection of traditional feminine traits and an embrace of more masculine presentation. Butch women often adopt styles and behaviors that align with societal expectations of masculinity. This form challenges the binary understanding of gender by asserting that women can embody masculine traits without losing their identity as women. According to Halberstam, there are two aspect that show butch femininity, they are :

a. Physical strength

Physical strength refers to physical strength that is usually associated with masculinity. According to Halberstam (1998), women who show physical strength in various situations reflect a form of female masculinity, where she maintains her identity as a woman, but with physical abilities that rival or even exceed those of men.

b. Physical Appearance

Physical appearance in the context of Female Masculinity by Halberstam refers to how women with masculinity choose to present themselves visually. A woman can still have feminine traits, even though they adopt physical elements that are usually associated with men, such as more practical clothing or a more assertive walk.

2. Performance of Masculinity

Another crucial aspect of female masculinity is the performance of masculinity, where women adopt behaviors and roles typically associated with men in order to assert their agency and challenge societal expectations. Halberstam emphasizes that this performance does not require a complete rejection of femininity, rather it allows for a coexistence of both identities. According to Halberstam there are three aspect that show performance of masculinity, they are :

a. Determination

Determination is one of the main aspects in the performance of masculinity according to Halberstam (1998). Masculine character is often associated with an attitude of never giving up, courage, and resilience in facing challenges.

b. Leadership and Protector

Leadership and the role as a protector are also included in the performance of masculinity according to Halberstam(1998). In traditional cultures, leadership is often associated with men because they are considered natural leaders in the family and society. However, Halberstam emphasizes that leadership is not only a male attribute, but can be played by women with masculine characters.

c. Aggressive

Aggressiveness is often considered as one of the main characteristics of masculinity. According to Halberstam (1998), aggression in the performance of masculinity does not only mean physical violence, but also the courage to take action without hesitation, even in risky situations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research used qualitative method. Qualitative research is a research that relies on verbal data and other non-numerical as the basis for analysis and problem solving are being studied, like content analysis, discourse analysis, and research naturalistic (Farkhan, 2011). Researcher uses qualitative method considering the possibility that the data obtained requires in-depth analysis. The population for this study took only one character, selected through purposive sampling because of their central role in exploring female masculinity.

The primary data source for this research is the Movie "Avatar: The Way of Water" (2022) directed by James Cameron. The movie serves as the primary text for analysis, providing raw material for identifying and interpreting examples of masculinity in the character of Neytiri as defined by Halberstam's theory. Judith Halberstam's theory of female masculinity (1998) was chosen because it specifically addresses how women can embody and perform masculinity independently of men, challenging binary gender norms and expanding the understanding of gender expression. Halberstam's model is particularly relevant for analyzing characters like Neytiri, whose masculinity is not defined in relation to male characters but as an intrinsic aspect of her identity and cultural role. As Halberstam (1998) argues, female masculinity is not merely a deviation from dominant gender norms but a legitimate expression of identity that deserves recognition.

There will be several steps in collecting the data. First is to watch the movie multiple times. Second is to identify the masculinity from Neytiri's character. Third is to make a list of all forms of masculinity that are found from Neytiri's character in the movie. In this study, analyzing the data will be also taking several steps. First is to put all form of masculinity that are found, then put them into form of masculinity according to Judith Halberstam's theory. Second is to explain each form of masculinity that are found according to the context scene and dialogue from the character of Neytiri and explain why it's masculinity.

After collecting the relevant scenes and dialogues, the data were coded based on Judith Halberstam's theory of female masculinity. Each identified trait was categorized into either Butch Femininity or Performance of Masculinity. The selection of scenes was guided by specific criteria. First, Neytiri's actions or dialogue demonstrate traditionally masculine traits such as strength, leadership, aggression, or emotional control. Second, the scene contributes to the narrative depiction of gender roles. Third, the scene includes clear visual or verbal cues relevant to Halberstam's framework.

To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher engaged in reflexivity, acknowledging personal interpretations and perspectives that may influence the analysis. Transparency was maintained by clearly documenting the coding

process and criteria for selecting scenes and dialogues. Additionally, supporting theories and scholarly references were used to triangulate the analysis and reinforce the validity of the interpretation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The form of female masculinity that are found within the movie are divided into two various type according to Judith Halberstam. Inside Butch Femininity is Physical strength and Physical appearance. Inside performance of masculinity is determination, leadership and protector, and also aggressive.

1. Butch Femininity
 - a. Physical strength



Image 1. Neytiri uses a bow to fight the RDA

In this scene (00.13.29 - 00.13.39), Neytiri shows extraordinary skills in battle against RDA (Resource Development Administration) troops who seeks to exploit natural resource in Pandora. In the picture, Neytiri uses a typical Na'vi bow to launch a powerful arrow, targeting one of the RDA helicopters. So that the arrow released by Neytiri, managed to penetrate the pilot glass so that the helicopter lost control and finally fell and was destroyed.



Image 2. Neytiri uses a bow to fight the RDA in the last battle

In another scene (02.22.16 - 02.22.25), during the final battle against the RDA troops in the middle of the sea, Neytiri once again managed to shoot down two helicopters that were trying to shoot the Metkayina tribe who were trying to dive into the water. This shows that Neytiri's physical strength and skill in combat are not seen as traditionally feminine traits and this behavior challenges traditional

expectations about women being gentle or passive, but still maintaining their female identity.

Physical strength is an important factor in how women's strength is perceived in social contexts, which also suggests a biological component to the link between strength and masculinity (Windhager et al., 2011). In the context of Neytiri, she uses her physical strength as a way to demonstrate her dominance, both in battle and in protecting her community. This is in line with the concept of Butch Femininity in Halberstam's (1998) theory, which emphasizes that women can adopt masculine elements, such as physical strength.

b. Physical Appearance



Image 3. Neytiri defeat several RDA troops

In this scene (02.41.09 - 02.41.11), shows although Neytiri maintains a "feminine" appearance in some ways (such as her slender body), she does not hesitate to show off her body and strength when fighting with the RDA troops and take them all down. This is a hallmark of butch femininity, where the female identity is not compromised by the expression of masculine strength and skill. Butch femininity does not necessarily mean eliminating all aspects of femininity. Rather, it is often about combining masculine elements with feminine appearance and identity

Fink et al. (2007) stated that women often view male body posture as a sign of physical strength, indicating that strength and masculinity are closely related in social perception. This concept can be reversed in Butch Femininity, where women with masculine expressions, such as the physical strength displayed by Neytiri, can use these attributes to assert their presence. She still has a feminine face, or has a slender body but her actions, such as fighting with a bow and arrow and fighting in close combat, shape the image of masculinity in her identity.

2. Performance of Masculinity

a. Determination

In *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022), Neytiri shows her determination through dialogue that reflect her strength, and commitment to her family and people. Here are the dialogue that highlight Neytiri's determination.

Quaritch : *Why don't you come on out Mrs. Sully?. You and I, we got some unfinished business.*

Kiri : *Spider, come!*

Neytiri : *Demon! I will kill you as many times as I have to! (00.39.34 – 00.39.40)*

This dialogue is spoken by Neytiri to Colonel Quaritch in the film, after she managed to free her children from Colonel Quaritch's troops, who had held them hostage. This statement shows her determination to protect her family and Pandora, even if it means facing the same enemy over and over again. This reflects her unwavering courage and determination in the face of a great threat.

Conell & Messerschmidt (2005) states that masculinity is not only about being a man, but also about maintaining a dominant position in society. In the context of female masculinity, women who demonstrate determination can be seen as individuals who challenge traditional gender power structures. By demonstrating their determination and ability to achieve their goals, they prove that women are also capable of showing their strength and commitment through determination.

Determination is a way for women to show their strength and commitment to a cause they believe in. It goes beyond mere desire, it is a concrete action that shows that they will not give up despite the obstacles. In the context of Neytiri, this means that women use determination as a way to assert their identity, demonstrate their abilities.

b. Leadership and Protector

Neytiri also shows her leadership and the responsibility that must be carried out to protect her family and her community through the dialogue in the movie.

Neytiri : *I cannot. You cannot ask this . I cannot leave my people. I will not.*

Jake Sully : *He's hunting us. He's targeting our family.*

Neytiri : You cannot ask this! The children. Everything they've ever known. The forest. This is our home!

Jake Sully : He had our children . He had 'em under his knife!

Neytiri : My father gave me this bow as he lay dying. And he said protect the people. (00.43.03 – 00.43.39).

From the dialogue above, When Jake asks their family to leave the forest to avoid danger, Neytiri quickly rejects the idea because she does not want to leave her homeland and her people. Neytiri also reminds Jake Sully of the bow her father gave her on his deathbed, and tells him to continue protecting her people. This dialogue shows Neytiri's courage in carrying out her duties as the protector of the Na'vi people and her family, while also stating that she will not abandon her responsibilities even in difficult situations. Neytiri not only acts as a warrior, but also as a strong leader for her family and community.

Female masculinity extends to the protective roles women can adopt. By embodying traits associated with male protectiveness, women assert their authority and challenge existing gender role paradigms in leadership contexts. While specific studies that directly measure perceptions of female leaders as guardians are limited, the overall notion that women who present with more 'masculine' characteristics can be perceived as stronger authority figures is increasingly recognized (Lefevre & Lewis, 2014).

c. Aggressive

Neytiri's aggressive nature is also shown in the movie through dialogue and scenes.

Jake : Did they kill anybody?

Tonowari : Not yet. They threaten. But the villagers will not tell them where you are. By my order.

Neytiri : We must hunt this demon. Trap him. Kill him. (01.46.41 – 01.47.04).

From this dialogue, shows Neytiri's aggressive attitude towards the threat posed by Quaritch and the RDA forces. He did not hesitate to take direct action to protect her family and community. Neytiri's aggressiveness stands out when compared to the other characters in the scene. Jake asks about the casualties, showing a broader concern. Tonowari is focused on protecting the villagers. Neytiri, on the other hand, immediately jumps to a violent solution, as her past

experiences with the RDA, including the loss and destruction they caused, have shaped her to be merciless towards her enemies.



Image 4. Neytiri threatens Quaritch back by uses Spider as a hostage

From the scene above (02.42.36 - 02.43.16), Neytiri shows her aggressive nature when her daughter, Kiri, is taken hostage by Colonel Quaritch, but Neytiri swiftly holds Spider (Miles Socorro) as her prisoner and threatens Colonel Quaritch back. Colonel Quaritch then releases Kiri. This shows Neytiri's aggressive nature, when protecting her family even though she has to use violence. Masculinity often associates aggression with being assertive, competitive, and willing to use force to achieve goals. It can be seen as a way to protect themselves and those they care about. However, when taken to an extreme, it can manifest as “toxic masculinity”, where aggression becomes a tool for domination and control (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2017).

Judith Halberstam defines female masculinity as the expression of masculine traits that are not limited to the male body, but can also be manifested by women through action, courage, and leadership. The complexities of gender norms indicate that aggression is not inherently a male trait instead, it can be integrated into female leadership when contextually appropriate (Reidy et al., 2009), In the context of Neytiri, she displays extreme courage, physical strength, and skill in the battle against the RDA, which is a performance of masculinity. Halberstam also highlights that the performance of masculinity is often associated with leadership roles and responsibilities. Neytiri takes an active role in protecting her family and community, demonstrating strong leadership traits. She not only supports Jake Sully but also acts as the primary protector through her courage and skill in battle.

Neytiri's embodiment of masculinity in *Avatar: The Way of Water* offers a critical intervention in how gender roles are constructed and represented in contemporary cinema. Rather than simply adopting masculine traits, Neytiri's character demonstrates how female masculinity, as theorized by Halberstam (1998), disrupts binary gender

expectations and broadens the possibilities for female agency and leadership in film narratives. Neytiri's masculinity is significant in the larger context of gender roles in both cinema and society. Traditionally, Hollywood and mainstream media have relegated women to roles that emphasize passivity, nurturing, or dependence. Neytiri, however, is depicted as a warrior, leader, and protector roles historically coded as masculine. Her actions, such as leading her people in battle and making strategic decisions for her family's survival, challenge the assumption that such traits are inherently male. This challenges viewers to reconsider the association between masculinity and biological maleness, supporting Halberstam's argument that masculinity is a dynamic, socially constructed identity accessible to all genders.

Neytiri's character is not merely a collection of masculine scenes, her narrative arc directly engages with broader sociocultural issues. For instance, her refusal to abandon her people despite personal risk (00.43.03-00.43.39) is not just a display of leadership, but a critique of gendered expectations that women should prioritize family over community or self-sacrifice over agency. This aligns with Halberstam's notion that female masculinity is often marginalized because it exposes the arbitrariness of gender hierarchies. Neytiri's aggression and assertiveness are not portrayed as flaws but as essential qualities for survival and justice, reframing these traits as virtues rather than deviations from femininity.

The portrayal of Neytiri's female masculinity signals a shift in Hollywood's approach to gender representation. Rather than presenting strong female characters as exceptions or figures, *Avatar: The Way of Water* normalizes the presence of women who embody traditionally masculine traits without sacrificing their femininity or cultural identity. This reflects a broader trend in contemporary sci-fi and fantasy narratives, where gender roles are increasingly fluid and multidimensional. Such representations challenge audiences to question rigid gender binaries and open up new possibilities for identification, empathy, and empowerment

CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of Neytiri's character in the movie "Avatar: The Way of Water", this research identified elements of female masculinity that are divided into two main categories, namely Butch Femininity and Performance of Masculinity. In the Butch Femininity category, Neytiri's physical strength and physical appearance show how she adopts masculine attributes without losing

her identity as a woman. Meanwhile, in Performance of Masculinity, Neytiri's determination, leadership, role as a protector, and aggressiveness illustrate how she plays roles that are traditionally associated with men, but still maintains her identity and cultural values as a Na'vi.

This research explains that masculinity is not only limited to men, but can also be expressed by women in various ways. The character of Neytiri in "Avatar: The Way of Water" is a powerful example of how women can show strength, leadership, and determination without losing their femininity. This analysis provides deeper insight into the complexity of gender representation in movie.

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