

# Representation of American Women Spirit of 21st Century Through the Character of Agent Peggy Carter From Television Series *Marvel Agent's: Carter* (ABC, 2015 - 2016)

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## ABSTRACT

This research is written to analyze the representation of Agent Peggy Carter in television series *Marvel Agent's: Carter* (ABC, 2015 – 2016). Agent Peggy Carter is an agent turns into secretary who works in secret division of Strategic Scientific Reserve. Agent Peggy Carter tried to fight against sexism from her male counterparts in the workplace. The television series was planned to be produced into three seasons. However, due to the low rating in the second season, the production cancelled the plan to make the third season. The series highlight Agent Carter's struggle against sexism. The research used female action hero theory to analyze about Agent Carter representation as female action hero and Semiotic film theory. The result shows that Agent Carter representing female action hero and how Agent Carter representing the spirit of American women in twenty first century.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years' female heroine characters have increasingly appeared as main characters in films, television series, video games, or comic books. Back in the days, there are several iconic female heroes who appear both in the film and television series as the main character such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer, La Femme Nikita, Xena: The Warrior Princess, and Wonder Women.

Meanwhile, Hollywood cinema industry likely produces superhero movies with male as the main characters. The male hero in the movies usually described as a brave man who is good at fighting, good at using weapons, quite smart with strong looks (Knight, 2010). However, the same formula is not applied to female hero in action film genre. The traditional gender stereotype of female heroes is only regarded as companion of the unbeatable male hero, and sometimes the female heroes look like a trophy for the male heroes who defeated the villain. The shift in the role of female hero in action movies began after the 20th century. The female hero also fight with her body as male hero does in an action film genre. However, the society believes that the tough female hero still is not considered as a hero. They consider that fighting is an activity that is only done by men (Ibid.).

Thus, the female action heroes began to attract the fans' interest of the heroes' series, especially about the female action hero as the main character. One such television series is *Marvel's Agent: Carter* (ABC, 2015 - 2016). It is an ABC Entertainment production television series that aired in January 6th, 2015 and on January 19th, 2016. The series focuses on the storyline after Steve Roger also known as Captain America being frozen. In the Marvel Comic book series, Margaret Carter or otherwise known as Peggy Carter is a female agent who was once a Steve Rogers' love interest during World War II era. She is relegated to secretarial duties in the Strategic Scientific Reserve (SSR). The first appearance of Peggy Carter, played by British actress Hayley Atwell was in the movie *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011).

This study focusses on the representation of Agent Peggy Carter as female agent in post-World War II era and how is the representation of Peggy Carter suitable with in the early twenty first century in *Marvel's Agent: Carter* (ABC, 2015-2016).

## 2. METHOD

This research belongs to qualitative research. Qualitative research is used because it attempts to broaden and/or deepen our understanding of how things came to be the way they are in our social world. If the research question involves exploring how people experience something, or what their views are, exploring a new area where issues are not yet understood or properly identified (Hancock, et al, 2009, p. 4).

The primary data for this research are taken from the series of Marvel's Agent: Carter Season One (2015) and Season Two (2016) as the source of data. Thus, the data for this study are in the form of screen shots of gesture, dialogues, verbal acts, etc. Whereas, the secondary data are also applied to support the main data. The data are taken from articles related to the TV series, such as online reviews, online magazines, and online news.

The focus used in this research is to analyze the representation of Agent Carter as a female action hero through Marvel's Agent: Carter (ABC, 2015 - 2016) series. This research is guided by the concept of female heroes in action films or television series such as those discovered by Knights, Innes, and Kaplan. Those three are needed to get deeper understanding of how the female action hero in television series is represented.

Moreover, to understand more about how is the representation of Agent Carter that symbolize in the scenes, semiotic film theory is used to get better understanding about the sign appeared on the series. Hence this research applies semiotic theory from Daniel Chandler that uses Roland Barthes' theory of connotation and denotation as the basis of his theory.

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Through Peggy Carter first appeared in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) movie as a British officer who had participated in World War II. She is depicted as a strong and independent woman even though she was the only female in the group. The female officer attracted people through the movie which then led her to make another appearance in the spin-off of *Captain America* sequel.

The storyline focuses on Agent Peggy Carter as a former female officer in the post-World War II era. She plays the role of a female agent in the Strategic Scientific Reserve (SSR) places in New York, who is the only female agent among all male counterparts after the war ended.

As time passed by, the character development continues from time to time. Female action hero has developed sustainably covering various aspects such as character, profession, and appearance. The changing roles of the women are influenced by second-wave feminism which brings changes to society in the last few decades, changing women's roles on all levels of society. They become fire fighters, police officers, soldiers and so many jobs that considered too rough for "ladies" (Inness, 2004, p. 5).

With a background as a skilled agent who joined in the World War II, it is not difficult for Agent Carter to fight, hold weapons, as well as acting as a double agent. In the past, tough female hero usually fights with a gun on hand, however, the recent tough female hero doesn't follow the same pattern anymore. Innes exemplifies of *Charlie's Angels* back in 1970, they fight depend on their guns even though they rarely use it (Innes, 2004, p. 14).

Agent Carter fights almost in every episode in two seasons. The combination of kicking ass and shooting guns often done by Agent Carter. She fights with both male and female villains. Although female action hero in the present times fights using their bodies, the stereotype of female action hero has to be pretty and has nice body still attached to them. Their physical appearance still become the main attraction of female action hero.

Agent Carter's fighting skills and shooting gun in present times are considered as successful fighter. The way Agent Carter fight both male and female by using her body as a weapon in line with Inness statement. She explains, "The new heroines are accomplished and successful fighters. They portray a self-assuredness and confident reliance on their physical strength to take out the bad guys" (Inness, 2004, p. 98).

Keeping her true identity is a must for an agent. To cover her true profession, she tells her roommate and her friend that she works in the telephone company called the New York Bell Company. Working as a telephone operator became one of the jobs that was quite common for women in 1946 and it becomes a perfect cover up for a female agent like her.

Thus, working in the secret division in the SSR that handles cases that jeopardize national security requires agents to do work related to espionage. Agent Carter, who becomes a secretary in the SSR, turns into a double agent started in episode 1 because of Howard Stark. Howard Stark is an inventor of weapons during the second World War.

Furthermore, Agent Carter is depicted as a smart woman. Mr. Edward, who is the head office in Bletchley, compliment Agent Carter as an exceptional codebreaker. This explains the reason when Agent Carter was able to decode *Leviathan's*, a Russian covert organization, regarding Howard Stark's purchase of weapons in season one.

As a code breaker, Agent Carter is really familiar with any kind of code including Morse code. In addition to successfully breaking the Russian-made code in episode 5, Agent Carter accidentally translated the Morse code

from Dr. Fennhoff to Dotty in episode 7. When Dr. Fennhoff began writing Morse code with his fingers, Agent Carter pays attention to Dr. Fennhoff's act and immediately writes what she saw. Assisted by Jarvis, the Morse code contained a message to prepare for the arrival of Leviathan in the next 90 minutes.

Conducting an interrogation is one of the duties that an agent needs to do to check the statements of someone involved in a case. Unfortunately, Agent Carter never gets the opportunity to interrogate the villain in Season One. She entered the interrogation room once only after she catch the scientist from Roxxon Industries. Although she is permitted to enter the room, she only monitors while her counterpart does the interrogation.

Her technique, however, being criticized by Dottie Underwood because she just literary ask Dottie to do this, and this, and this. Agent Carter replies that torturing Dottie is not necessary because Agent Carter knows how to make Dottie speak up, she only needs to attack her fear. The way Agent Carter interrogating surely is "soft" compare to Agent Thompson or Chief Dooley do. Her technique denotatively shows that she is using her feminine side as a woman rather than using violence.

In her workplace she is not considered as an agent from her male counterparts, but rather as a secretary who worked more behind the desk. Agent Carter is an accomplished agent in Europe, but her male colleagues in the Strategic Scientific Reserve (SSR) don't consider her as an agent.

Not long after Agent Carter arrived, the sirens suddenly rang and made the agents immediately went to the briefing room. However, when Agent Carter was about to follow the Chief, he stopped her by saying that to cover the phones. Chief Dooley refers to Agent Carter as an agent but she doesn't allow to join the meeting with the other male agents. Moreover, Agent Carter insists to join the meeting after she calls Rose, the receptionist, to forwards all calls to the briefing room.

After the meeting ended, Agent Krzeminski questioned her capability to catch Stark because she is friend with Stark. Hearing his comment, Agent Daniel Sousa asked him to apologize to Agent Carter but he mocked Agent Sousa and left immediately. Agent Carter told Agent Sousa that she could handle it herself so Agent Sousa did not need to defend her.

Agent Sousa tried to defend Agent Carter in line with the stereotype about female character in action genre that she needs to be saved by male. The female character usually depicts a damsel in distress who cannot stand for herself (Knight, 2010, p. xvi). Thus, Agent Carter tries to detach from the stereotype that by refusing Agent Sousa's defense.

The sexism she received does not come only from her male counterparts. In season two, a flashback scene was seen featuring Agent Carter as a child. She played the role of a knight who fought and saved the princess. While pointing out his toy sword, her brother comes and tries to grab the toy. They played and giggled together as knights, but then their mom suddenly came out of their house.

The setting time of television series *Marvel Agents: Carter* (ABC, 2015 -2016) happens in 1946 – 1947 while the series itself airing during 2015 - 2016. There is period gap between the series and the present times, however, the series adopt the value from twentieth century into the series.

Agent Carter is an agent who is independent, educated, assertive, and not easily dependent on others. These characteristics are a reflection of American women characteristic in present time. Today's generations are the result from feminists in the past who try to empower women to be succeed and be ambitious girls.

Throughout her career as an agent who joined World War II and became part of the SSR, Agent Carter shows many parts that reflecting today's American women as female employee. Following Zaslow explanation that in the beginning of their career, young women often miss opportunity to make them grow through their career. These young women limit themselves to their personal limitations which hinder their progress in the leadership department (2009, p. 66).

Agent Carter depicts young women in the twenty first century could be more willing to explore themselves by developing their leadership. Being in leadership can bring them to wider networking, establishing economy literacy, and they can discover more about their own power. It can be seen from Agent Carter ambitions to fight sexism she gets from her male counterparts by never gives up to prove her values until her colleagues recognize her.

Agent Carter does not want to miss any opportunity to developing herself. Several times Agent Carter breaks through the boundaries of society against the role of women in society to live up to her name. Since childhood Agent Carter dreamed of having a life of adventure, that is the reason why she played as a knight with sword rather than being the princess. The role play she chose as a little girl against the society norm because a girl supposed to behave like a lady while the knight is a depiction of masculinity.

Apart from her personality and characteristics, Agent Carter's appearance depicting female workers in the twenty first century era. On several occasions, Agent Carter several times wearing trousers to the office. Back to 1946 after World War II ends, many of the women became factory workers and for their own safety the women wore pants to work. However, the women workers mostly only wear pants when they are at home or working in factories. It took several decades before pants to be allowed at school or professional jobs.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Agent Peggy Carter in *Marvel Agents: Carter* (ABC, 2015 -2016) presents a female action hero in television series. The television series shows how Agent Peggy Carter can be considered as new tough woman throughout her attractiveness, feminine, heterosexual. The characterization that is presented by Agent Peggy Carter shows how she tries to break the previous gender norm that strives her ability as a Strategic Scientific Reserved female agent.

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