

Sexy, Sterile, Sacrificed: Black Widow in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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The character Natasha Romanoff (Scarlett Johansson), better known as her superhero alias Black Widow, has held a prominent role within the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). She has appeared in seven of the franchise's films thus far and will return for an eighth time in her standalone film, *Black Widow* (Cate Shortland, 2021). Despite her importance throughout the MCU, her role within these films typically adhere to common sexist tropes and female character functions within Hollywood films. The character is designed with her sex appeal in mind, and within each film she is presented as either a love interest or a sex object. Furthermore, her backstory that is revealed in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon, 2015) portrays Natasha as monstrously feminine, conflating Natasha's inability to be a mother with her moral wrongdoings as a spy. Natasha's character arc is largely centered around her desire to repent for her crimes and wrongdoings that she committed prior to becoming an Avenger, and her sacrificial death in *Avengers: Endgame* (Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2019) further ties her atonement with this theming surrounding motherhood and family. These elements of Natasha's characterization present several problematic features that are worthy of feminist critique. As Natasha is the most prominent female character in the franchise, her character merits critical analysis. Given that the MCU is a global, multi-billion-dollar franchise, these films have a significant cultural impact and warrant analysis and critique of how women are represented in these films.

Natasha is introduced to the MCU in *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010), in which she functions as an undercover spy for S.H.I.E.L.D. (Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division), a secret intelligence agency. In her second film appearance in *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012), it is revealed that prior to working for S.H.I.E.L.D., Natasha used her expertise as a spy and an assassin indiscriminately, often committing unsavory operations. Though Natasha's past crimes are never discussed in detail, it is clear that she deeply

regrets her actions prior to joining S.H.I.E.L.D., and her desire to make up for her wrongdoings motivates and determines her actions throughout each film. Even until the very end of her role in *Avengers: Endgame*, Natasha's need to repent for these transgressions serves as a backdrop throughout her character arc.

Natasha is introduced to the MCU as a sex object, and it is clear that her character is crafted by the male gaze. Her first appearance in the franchise in *Iron Man 2* frames her as an object of desire through the film's text, cinematography, and other aesthetic elements, such as her costuming. In the scene in which she is introduced, it is clear that Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) is infatuated with her, and Natasha is dressed in a professional outfit with a low-cut shirt that emphasizes her breasts. While Natasha speaks to Happy (Jon Favreau) on the other side of the room, Tony searches for her on the internet and finds a picture of her modeling in lingerie. Natasha grows tired of Happy's patronizing boxing demonstration, and she quickly takes Happy down by twisting his arm and pinning him to the floor by wrapping her legs around his neck. Her swift takedown demonstrates her advanced fighting skills and prowess as a spy, but her fight choreography has a sexual element to it through the use of her thighs. After she leaves, Tony comments, in reference to Natasha, "I want one". Here, Tony speaks about Natasha as if she were a toy. Though Tony's ogling is presented as inappropriate yet comedic, this scene firmly establishes Natasha as a sex object despite her obvious skill and independence.

Though *Iron Man 2* is most blatant in its sexualization of Natasha, she is consistently treated similarly through the MCU's subsequent films' text, cinematography, and her aesthetic features. Visual elements such as Natasha's catsuit and her aforementioned fighting style are notable examples that contribute to her objectification. In each film, Natasha wears a version of her skin-tight black catsuit for fight sequences, as well as many other additional scenes

throughout each film. Though her catsuit is slightly adjusted in each film, some features remain consistent; her catsuit is always a skin-tight, leather bodysuit which is zippered down just enough to display and emphasize her breasts. As discussed in the analysis of her introduction in *Iron Man 2*, her fighting style is somewhat suggestive, as she frequently takes down her opponents by wrapping her thighs around her enemies' necks and heads. Natasha's stunt choreography aligns with Sabine Lebel's critical feminist analysis of female superheroes' bodies, as Lebel notes that "The powers attributed to female superhero bodies are linked to traditional notions of female power, including manipulation, sexuality, and masquerade (rather than brute physical or muscular strength)". Indeed, Natasha's occupation as a spy and highly skilled assassin and her treatment as a sex object are consistent with Lebel's analysis. Though these attributes are present and consistent throughout Natasha's appearances in the MCU, her introductory scene in *Iron Man 2* exemplifies each of these qualities that Lebel describes. As she is undercover in this scene, she engages in manipulation and masquerade, and her sexuality is evident through her costuming and fight choreography.

Natasha's sexualization is certainly not unique within the context of the superhero genre in general. Indeed, "hypersexualized bodies remain an intrinsic part of the superhero and comic book legacy" (Lebel). Natasha's role as an object of desire throughout the MCU aligns with this larger trend. Furthermore, as Natasha has yet to appear in a standalone movie of her own, she appears either as a supporting character in the *Captain America* and *Iron Man* films, or as a member of an ensemble cast in the *Avengers* installments. Without the opportunity to be showcased as an independent main character, Natasha's character lacks the depth and attention that is granted to her male Avenger counterparts. As media critic Emily VanDerWerff writes, "Marvel's treatment of Black Widow is frequently outright lousy", adding that because Natasha

is the most significant woman in the MCU, her role as an Avenger is a complicated matter of representation because “that leaves Black Widow to represent nearly *all* women in a very guy-heavy story, and that, of course, is an impossible task”. Indeed, Natasha cannot represent all women, and this must be compounded with the consideration that her character is designed to be and introduced as a sex object. She is rendered a sex object, and what little of her backstory that is provided furthers an engagement with the monstrous femininity that is introduced in *Age of Ultron*.

In *Age of Ultron*, more details about Natasha’s dark past are revealed, including that she was trained to be a ruthless spy and assassin in the “Red Room” training program. Without providing details, Natasha implies that she committed atrocities before her career with S.H.I.E.L.D. Furthermore, Natasha reveals that the “graduation ceremony” from the Red Room is a sterilization surgery, as motherhood would prevent her from being able to commit to her dangerous, amoral career. With tears in her eyes, Natasha explains why the sterilization was necessary, commenting, “It’s efficient. One less thing to worry about. The one thing that might matter more than a mission. Makes everything easier, even killing”. Here, Natasha highlights that not only would motherhood prevent her from maintaining her career because her role as a mother would have to come first, but she suggests that being a mother would be so emotionally compromising that it would be impossible for her to commit the violent acts that her career requires. Following this statement, she refers to herself as a monster.

In Jeffrey Brown’s essay, “Supermoms? Maternity and the monstrous-feminine in superhero comics”, Brown uses Barbara Creed’s concept of the monstrous feminine to investigate maternity within the superhero genre, using examples from comic books as well as film and television. Brown’s analysis can be applied to Natasha’s sterility. Brown analyzes how

the genre overwhelming frames maternity as a state of abject, monstrous femininity and instead favors paternity, thereby reinforcing patriarchal values. Brown discusses the significance of genre's preoccupation with bodies, control, and boundaries, particularly the importance of the superhero's strength and impenetrability. Since maternity implies penetration, the superheroine's pregnancy presents a vulnerability and is framed as "problematic because they challenge the strictly enforced bodily boundaries that are fundamental to the heroic fantasy" (Brown). This presentation of pregnancy as a compromising invasion is what makes the superheroine's pregnancy abject and monstrously feminine. Additionally, Brown outlines the most common representations of pregnancy in the genre, noting:

"A quick survey of maternity in comics reveals four consistent tropes: (1) the superheroine chooses to give up her child in order to continue her career, (2) she has to give up her heroic calling to assume motherhood as a full time role, (3) she repeatedly puts her child at risk because she continues her adventures, and (4) mothers are cast as purely monstrous because they are inherently evil, neglectful or absent".

Though Natasha's situation presents an inability to experience maternity, Brown's analysis of the superheroine's abject, monstrous femininity is still applicable. Even though Natasha evidently regrets her sterilization, she recognizes that maternity is a threat to and incompatible with her dangerous and morally grey superhero lifestyle. These implications align with Brown's analysis of maternity tropes within the superhero genre. Furthermore, the reasons for Natasha's sterilization are consistent with Brown's discussion of maternity as an abject invasion. Natasha believes that she had to be sterilized because pregnancy would be an abject experience, leaving her emotionally and physically penetrable, vulnerable, and compromised.

Though the film maintains that maternity would be abject for Natasha, it simultaneously condemns her sterility, suggesting that she is spiritually and emotionally lacking due to her inability to be a mother. Brown notes that the “negative portrayal of maternity in superhero comics contradicts our romanticized cultural conception of motherhood as a loving and cherished role”, yet *Age of Ultron* manages to condemn Natasha on both fronts. The film simultaneously insists that Natasha could not be the feared Black Widow without being free from the abjection of maternity, while also suggesting that her sterility renders her an incomplete woman, divorced from society’s celebration of motherhood. Natasha even refers to herself as a monster when discussing her sterility, demonstrating that even she perceives herself as monstrously feminine even though she is removed from the abjectness of maternity. Though motherhood would be abject for Natasha, the film suggests that her sterility and its accompanying circumstances are just as monstrous. Nonetheless, Natasha’s life as a superheroine is deemed to be incompatible with motherhood, reaffirming the abjectness and monstrous femininity of maternity.

These choices about Natasha’s backstory prompted criticism from audiences regarding its implications about womanhood and motherhood. Writing about the negative audience reactions to this scene from *Ultron*, critic Emily VanDerWerff comments that “it seems as if she, like so many female characters, is being reduced to her reproductive choices”. VanDerWerff elaborates that Natasha’s backstory and character arc are built around “her creation by a system that cared nothing for her as a human being and everything for her as a game piece it could move around on the board”, and that “her reproductive rights were violated in the most heinous way possible and her freedom of choice stolen from her”. The implications about Natasha’s reproductive rights, coupled with this reading of her character within the context of monstrous femininity, warrants feminist critique because Natasha is defined by and condemned for her reproductive capabilities.

In contrast to the abjection of the superheroine's maternity, Brown discusses how male superheroes tend to offer more successful images of paternity. Brown elaborates, "Whether literal fathers or, more often father figures, the central male heroes typically mentor children in adventures and guide them through to maturation". The male hero is able to step into a kind of parenting role in a way which superheroines are not allowed. Brown elaborates that this is because "The preeminent male archetypes of the genre instruct and model for young characters, and by extension young readers, the value of being dutiful subjects and agents of patriarchal authority". The genre rejects maternity due to its abjection, and instead reaffirms the patriarchal sovereignty of paternity.

*Age of Ultron*, as well as some of the other films later in the Avengers franchise, reinforce and reflect this favoring of paternal figures, particularly through Clint Barton/Hawkeye's (Jeremy Renner) character arc and his family. Though Clint appears in *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011) and *The Avengers* (2012), it is not until *Age of Ultron* that it is revealed that Clint has a wife and kids who live in a nice farmhouse in the countryside, safe and separated from Clint's heroic yet dangerous lifestyle as an Avenger. Clint explains that he made an arrangement with Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson), the director of S.H.I.E.L.D., to ensure that his family would remain a secret so he could protect his family from the hazards and consequences of his perilous career.

The decision to introduce this information in the same film and at the same time that it is revealed that Natasha cannot have a family of her own is intentional and significant. Indeed, Natasha shares her story about her sterilization surgery at Clint's farmhouse, prompted by a discussion about how she can never have a family or a lifestyle like Clint's. Where maternity would be abject for Natasha, Clint's paternity is not just rewarded, but permissible and possible.



This aligns with Brown's analysis of how the superhero genre condemns maternity as abject but favors paternity.

To complicate matters further, Clint's wife, Laura, is pregnant in *Age of Ultron*. Upon the Avengers' arrival to Clint's farmhouse, they are greeted by Clint's two kids and Laura, who appears to be fairly far along in her pregnancy. Laura and Clint's kids are entirely removed from Clint's superhero lifestyle, and Laura's pregnancy serves as a reminder about the life and family that Natasha can never have. Laura's pregnancy is treated with the same kind of traditional societal celebration of maternity that Brown mentions. However, as Brown notes, this positive perception of motherhood is not ascribed to female superheroes. Laura's celebrated, traditional motherhood role highlights the contrast between this specific, societally accepted image of maternity and Natasha's monstrous femininity.

It is established in *The Avengers* that Clint and Natasha have an intimately close friendship, and that it was Clint who helped Natasha turn her career as a spy around and join S.H.I.E.L.D. This intimacy is further evident in *Ultron* through Natasha's interactions with Clint's family; the kids call her "Auntie Nat", and she enjoys playing with them. She is friendly with Laura and checks in with Laura about her pregnancy. Furthermore, Laura had planned on naming her next baby Natasha if the child would be a girl. Natasha's closeness with Clint's family adds an additional emotional layer to Natasha's longing to have a normal domestic life and a family of her own, as Clint's family embodies everything she is not, and everything she cannot have.

Clint's secret life as a family man further distinguishes with his unique status within the Avengers. Adrian Acu writes about "Hawkeye's place on the Avengers as the only 'human' member on a team comprised of gods and monsters," elaborating that "Hawkeye keeps the team

grounded through his everyman existence”. Though Clint’s family differentiates him from the rest of the Avengers, Acu’s analysis of Clint as the only “human” on the team is significant. As Acu describes, Thor (Chris Hemsworth) is a god, Bruce Banner (Mark Ruffalo) transforms into the Hulk due to science, and Tony Stark is Iron Man because of his wealth and technology. Furthermore, Acu notes that “Captain America [Chris Evans] and the Black Widow underwent training programs and experiments that fundamentally altered their bodies and psyches to fit their function as perfect soldier and assassin, respectively”. Acu further describes Natasha as “instrumentalized”; indeed, her experience at the Red Room shaped her mind and her approach towards her work, and the sterilization surgery is an alteration to her body intended to optimize her performance. In this sense, Natasha is not human in the same way as Clint. This dehumanizing distinction further facilitates an understanding of Natasha as monstrously feminine.

Curiously, elements of the film’s production reflect the text’s consideration of pregnancy and Natasha’s monstrous femininity. Scarlett Johansson was pregnant during the filming of *Ultron*, and as such, stunt doubles, CGI (computer generated imagery), and creative shot composition and blocking were used to hide Johansson’s pregnancy (Breznican). There is some irony in that Johansson’s pregnancy occurred during production for the film in which it is revealed that Natasha is sterile. The production choices and special effects that were used to hide Johansson’s pregnancy strikingly align with Sabine Lebel’s critical feminist analysis of the use of CGI on superheroine’s bodies. Indeed, Lebel notes that “in the recent cycle of superhero films, the super-hero/ine body is produced through a composite of the actor playing the character, stunt doubles, and, increasingly, the use of CGI technology”. Lebel elaborates that with CGI enhancement, the superheroine’s “body becomes the site on which the narrative is played out and

enacted”. Natasha’s body is already intertwined with the film’s narrative and her own character arc regardless of Johansson’s pregnancy and the subsequent necessity for special effects to hide it. Nonetheless, Lebel’s commentary about how CGI editing on female superheroes involves “deliberate and detailed aesthetic decisions about how bodies ‘should’ look” is relevant to understanding how the film treats Natasha’s body, particularly in regard to Natasha’s sterility and monstrous femininity.

Though Natasha’s training at the Red Room and her subsequent career as a spy and assassin are never discussed in detail, it is clear that her past haunts her, as her desire to be one of the proverbial good guys is a fundamental component of her character arc, up to and including her death in *Avengers: Endgame*. For example, her concern about ensuring that she is fighting for a good cause is brought to the forefront in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, when it is revealed that S.H.I.E.L.D. has long been infiltrated and influenced by HYDRA, an evil, enemy organization, and Natasha questions whether or not her efforts at S.H.I.E.L.D. have actually benefitted society and contributed to her quest for redemption. The circumstances of her sacrificial death in *Endgame* are built around her guilt about her past, and her inability to have a family of her own is once again brought back into consideration.

The plot of *Endgame* is centered around the Avengers’ efforts to obtain all of the infinity stones, in order to revive half of the world’s population, who perished at the end of *Avengers: Infinity War* (Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2018). Natasha’s death is precipitated by the need to acquire the soul stone, which can only be obtained by sacrificing a loved one at the cliff of Vormir, thus trading a soul for the soul stone. Natasha and Clint arrive at Vormir unaware of the necessary sacrifice, but once they are informed, they subsequently fight, both verbally and physically, attempting to sacrifice themselves to save the other. Both characters cite their own

past mistakes as a reason for why their self-sacrifice is necessary and deserved, and this consideration bears greater weight for Natasha, whose continual repentance has been a key feature of her character arc.

Similarly, the importance of family is a significant component of the scene. The film in its entirety places an emphasis on domestic life, specifically Clint's family. The film begins with a family picnic at the Barton farmhouse turning into a tragedy, as Clint watches his family turn to dust. The choice to open the film with this image of Clint losing his whole family in an instant indicates the film's emphasis on the importance of family and brings this to the audience's attention. This deliberate reminder of Clint's family and his grief over losing them manifests in the scene at Vormir. As Clint attempts to sacrifice himself, he says to Natasha, "tell my family I love them", to which Natasha replies, "you tell them yourself," as she flips him over to prevent him from advancing towards the cliff. After their prolonged fight in an attempt to prevent each other's self-sacrifice, Natasha ultimately subdues Clint, and she throws herself off of the sacrificial cliff.

The scene's references to Natasha's troubled past and to Clint's family signal to the audience why Natasha must be the one to sacrifice herself. Natasha's character arc is centered around making up for her past wrongdoings, and her self-sacrifice serves as a final act of atonement. It is worth noting that Natasha's specific past crimes are given no detail, leaving her sterilization as the primary representation of her guilt. Furthermore, the mention of Clint's family further signals why Natasha has to sacrifice herself, calling back to *Age of Ultron's* juxtaposition of Clint's treasured domestic life and Natasha's inability to create a family of her own. Natasha believes that Clint's life is worth saving because he will have a family and his own children to return to after the Avengers succeed. This, coupled with the understanding that her self-sacrifice

is also driven by her desire to redeem herself, connects Natasha's sacrifice to her monstrous femininity. Clint's paternity is once again favored, and Natasha's monstrous femininity can only be redeemed through her self-sacrifice.

The MCU in its entirety has grossed roughly \$22.59 billion in the box office alone (Whitten). The franchise's massive global success has firmly placed the MCU as a fixture of pop culture, particularly within the United States. As Sabine Lebel writes, superheroes "have become iconic symbols to be reiterated and recycled in popular culture to mobilize and reflect themes, tensions, and anxieties of American ideology in terms of genre, gender, sexuality, class, politics, science and culture". As such, this feminist analysis of Natasha's role in the MCU is significant because the representation of women in these films both reflect and impact cultural attitudes towards women.

As previously discussed, Natasha has been the most significant female character up to the present phase of the MCU, and as such, the character bears the burden of serving as representation for all women when such an assignment is impossible to successfully complete. Between Natasha's role as a sex object in these films, her monstrous femininity, and her sacrificial death, there is much about her character that merits feminist critique. It is clear that Marvel is taking steps to improve their gender representation. Namely, the introduction of Captain Marvel (Brie Larson) and her standalone film demonstrates Marvel's response to criticisms about the little, poor representation that women have in the franchise's films. Furthermore, the impending release of *Black Widow* indicates that Marvel has not yet concluded Natasha's character arc and story line, but prior to the film's release it is impossible to determine if the film will seek to remedy some of the flaws with Natasha's character arc and role within the

MCU, or if it will be a posthumous celebration of a character who has suffered more than that which can be repaired.

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