

Woman Equality Presented by Natasha Trace in *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) Movie

Steffani Putri Maharani¹ and Ariya Jati¹

¹Faculty of Humanities, Diponegoro University, Semarang 50275, Indonesia
ariya.jati@live.undip.ac.id

Abstract. Over time, there has been a shift in how women are represented in movies. These days, female characters aren't portrayed as helpless victims, sex objects, or others. We now live in a time where women are strong, determined, and successful— even in fields like the military, which are traditionally held by men. One American military film featuring this type of representation is *Top Gun: Maverick*. The film chronicles the story of twelve academy-trained pilots who were called back to complete a mission with challenging parameters. Natasha Trace, a female pilot known as "Phoenix," is one of the trainees. Her persona functions as a feminist equalizer. She is able to work, pursue education, contribute to societal changes, and refuse to be treated differently. The equality that she achieved is expounded upon via the lenses of existentialist feminism and feminist film theory. The author uses the library research approach to collect data and information in order to assess the character. The objective of this paper is to demonstrate that, like Phoenix, women are capable of achieving autonomy and self-expression.

Keywords: *film, equality, representation, existentialist, feminist, Top Gun: Maverick*

1 Introduction

Joseph Kosinski's 2022 film *Top Gun: Maverick*, is a sequel to Tony Scott's 1986 movie *Top Gun*. The film, distributed by Paramount Pictures, is a 130-minute action-packed drama. It follows Maverick, leading Top Gun graduates on a mission to prevent the establishment of an illegal uranium enrichment facility. The movie introduces Natasha Trace (Phoenix), highlighting the acceptance of women in the military. Phoenix's character is portrayed as a capable pilot, challenging traditional gender roles.

The study focuses on Phoenix as a feminist equalizer, using Simone de Beauvoir's feminist concepts from *The Second Sex*. It explores gender equality, arguing against women's subordination based on sexual distinctions. The research is divided into three sections: analysing Phoenix's intrinsic characteristics through feminist film theory, examining extrinsic elements using de Beauvoir's literary concepts, and connecting both viewpoints. The study aims to provide theoretical and practical insights into women's representation in military films.

There are three research questions which this study contains: how Phoenix is characterized as a pilot in *Top Gun: Maverick*; how Phoenix is characterized as a feminist in *Top Gun: Maverick*; and how Phoenix's characterizations as a pilot and feminist are related in *Top Gun: Maverick*. The objectives of this study are to identify Phoenix's characterization as a pilot; to examine Phoenix's characterization as a feminist; and to determine if Phoenix's characterization represents gender equality. This study analyses her character, characterization, and setting using feminist film concepts. Phoenix's qualities as a pilot and feminist are examined through Simone de

Beauvoir's feminist theory, which views women as the 'other' in society. The study explores whether Phoenix achieves gender equality and represents a feminist equalizer in the movie.

This study reviews prior research on *Top Gun: Maverick*. One, it is Donato Loia's "The Empire Cannot Die: Propaganda and Immortality in *Top Gun: Maverick*" (2022)². Her study examines the use of missionary metaphors and propaganda in the film, and it discusses the American empire's portrayal of eternal youth and immortality. Two, it is Yuniar *et. al*'s "Semiotics of *Top Gun: Maverick* Film as an Inspiration for Indonesia to Rise from the Covid-19 Pandemic" (2023)³. Their study analyses the film's semiotics to convey leadership and moral messages, and it views the film as an inspiration for Indonesia's recovery from COVID-19. Three, it is Sukmajati's "American Dream Portrayed in *Maverick* as the Main Character in *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022)"⁴ (2023). Her study explores how *Maverick* represents the American dream through hard work and individualism. Four, it is Hamourtziadou and Jackson's "Hollywood and Airpower: Myths and Realities" (2023)⁵. Their study critique the glamorous portrayal of aerial combat in the film, and it highlights the contrast between cinematic depiction and real war realities. The writer's study will differ by focusing on the representation of women and gender equality, specifically through the character of Phoenix, and her role in the military, which has not been covered in the previous studies.

The writer is interested in analyzing this film for three main reasons; they are gender equality in military films, character analysis, as well as theoretical and practical implications. This study will have the potential to contribute to discussions about gender equality and women's representation in military films. Later, the analysis of Phoenix's character can provide insights into the portrayal of women in popular culture. Last but not least, this study aims to provide both theoretical and practical insights, which can be valuable for filmmakers, audiences, and scholars.

2 Methods

Data is essential in scientific research, categorized into primary and secondary data. The primary data includes original records and objects from direct experiences or events, while the secondary data consists of textual works or materials created by others to support primary data conclusions (Lune and Berg, 2017:161)⁶. In this analysis, the primary data is the movie *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022), used to explore gender equality through Phoenix's character. Secondary data includes theses, articles, papers, books, and websites related to the movie or topic.

The research employs a qualitative method, focusing on meanings, descriptions, and symbols within social settings (Lune and Berg, 2017:12). To analyze Phoenix's representation of gender equality, the researcher uses feminist theory, close reading, note-taking, and transcription. The data is gathered by watching *Top Gun: Maverick* and selecting scenes that illustrate equality, followed by recording and transcribing the information. The approach is objective, focusing on intrinsic elements of the text (Lune and Berg, 2017:14). It involves solitary analyses of the narrative components, such as story, characters, thought, and language, to explain the discovery's narrative elements.

3 Result and Discussion

The term “character” originates from the Greek word *charakter*, meaning a mark of personality (Brown, 2018: 49). Characters are seen as independent entities with distinct identities, and their behaviour and personality can be understood through their words and actions. Fictional characters can be analysed through: mimetic aspect: how realistically a character represents a human being; synthetic aspect: how characters function within the story; thematic aspect: how characters convey the story’s themes.

Names of characters can reflect spiritual qualities and thematic relevance, conveying their knowledge, values, philosophies, cultures, and attitudes. An actor’s physical attributes and interpretation also influence character portrayal. In this study, Phoenix is examined as a character representing gender equality. She is a static character supporting the main character’s goals, portrayed as a determined female pilot who competes with male pilots without losing her identity as a woman.

Characterization is the process by which a narrative creates the illusion of a real person (Brown, 2018: 61). Characters are evaluated based on their words, actions, and ideas. Consistency in actions and words is a measure of a character’s trustworthiness. Other people’s accounts of a character need verification. Characters’ behaviours reflect their inherent qualities, driven by internal motivations toward goals. Phoenix’s characterization shows her as a smart, friendly, and competitive woman who works hard to achieve the same goals as her male counterparts, reflecting a culture that accepts women in society without judgment.

Cinema scenes are always in the present tense, unlike literary prose which can shift between past, present, and future tenses. The setting encompasses the local, historical time, and cultural circumstances of an action (Brown, 2018: 88). It can be classified into: setting of place: the physical location where the story occurs; and setting of time: the time of day, year, or century. In feminist discourse, settings are divided into private (intimate, trust-required) and public (open, idea-exchange) spaces. The setting influences characters’ behaviours and representations, providing a backdrop that develops the plot and characters. Phoenix’s character is influenced by her environment, living in a society that accepts women in various roles. She feels safe and comfortable in both private and public spheres, with the movie set in modern times.

The analysis connects *Top Gun: Maverick*’s intrinsic elements with feminist film theory. Phoenix is portrayed as an autonomous character, challenging the typical depiction of women as sexual objects. The analysis uses Brown’s narrative elements: mimetic aspect: Phoenix as an independent character with personal goals; synthetic aspect: Phoenix’s role as a woman pilot in a military genre; thematic aspect: Phoenix’s character conveys the story’s themes, focusing on the use of call signs in the military.

The extrinsic elements are focused on Phoenix, a female character in *Top Gun: Maverick*, using feminist theory. Feminism advocates for equal treatment of men and women in all life aspects, particularly in public spheres. The study employs literary feminism theory, deemed most appropriate by the researcher. She denotes three key points in her study: first, feminism’s goals are for equal treatment in governance, decision-making, careers, and family life; second, NOW’s 1967 Bill of Rights advocates for equal employment and educational opportunities for women

(Tong & Botts, 2017)⁸; and third, Simone de Beauvoir's influence: her book *The Second Sex* is central to this research (Kraus, 2008:1-2)⁹. Beauvoir's work, especially the quote "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman," has significantly influenced feminist thought, particularly in America (Germain, 2013:4).

The researcher also denotes Beauvoir's contributions. First, *The Second Sex* explores women's social subordination and the distinction between sex and gender (De Beauvoir, 1949:11)¹⁰. Latter, despite controversy in France, the book has been positively received in America and has influenced many scholars (De Beauvoir, 1949:25-26). Moreover, she denotes two themes in *The Second Sex*: (1) women's social roles, in which historically, women have been defined in relation to men, fulfilling societal demands like childcare and housekeeping, and (2) autonomy, in which women are often seen as non-autonomous, while men are viewed as the absolute subject. This study uses Beauvoir's ideas to analyse Phoenix's character, highlighting her role in challenging traditional gender norms.

Furthermore, the researcher digests De Beauvoir's concept of 'other'. The 'other' refers to any group not seen as the 'main' group in society (De Beauvoir, 1949: 27). For examples, in Western civilization, white people are viewed as the main group, while Black and Jewish people are classified as the 'other'. De Beauvoir argues it is absurd to categorise women as 'other' since they are not a minority but still face discrimination and stereotypes. Besides that, the researcher designates De Beauvoir's concept as existentialist feminism because of its connection to Sartre. De Beauvoir's feminism is linked to existentialism, emphasizing freedom and self-definition (De Beauvoir, 1949: 37). Viewed through existentialism, every subject seeks freedom through surpassing others and developing towards an open future. Existentialist feminism has brought about women's autonomy, in which women should define themselves and make choices reflecting their will, not external pressures.

Last but not least, the researcher can infer four standards for women's equality from De Beauvoir's feminism: ability to labour; ability to be intellectuals; ability to bring about social changes; ability to reject otherness by associating with the dominant group. With regard to Phoenix as a representation, the researcher takes equality in the US Navy as a case of point of it. Phoenix works as a feminist equalizer in a challenging environment. The researcher believes that how Phoenix works represents intellectual and social transformation. Phoenix receives equal education and training, speaks out against males, and rises to leadership, performing on par with men.

Analysing Phoenix's character in the movie *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) from a feminist film theory perspective reveals her complex depiction as a strong, smart, and talented female pilot. As a trainee in a military setting, Phoenix is portrayed as brave and competitive, breaking stereotypes of women as mere sexual objects. She is shown engaging with her male counterparts in a respectful and inclusive manner, showcasing her intelligence and skill as a pilot. Overall, Phoenix's character in *Top Gun: Maverick* exemplifies a nuanced portrayal of a female pilot breaking barriers and defying expectations. Through her intelligence, skill, and unwavering determination, Phoenix challenges stereotypes and represents a new wave of empowered women in the military. Her journey serves as a testament to the strength

and resilience of women in traditionally male-dominated fields, inspiring audiences to reconsider gender roles and embrace diversity in all its forms.

Top Gun: Maverick takes place in various locations, primarily in America, reflecting the influence of American culture. The acceptance of women in male-dominated roles is highlighted in the film. The setting is divided into private and public spheres. In the private sphere, Phoenix reveals her intimate side with her best friend Rooster. In the public sphere, she interacts freely in locations like the training facility, bar, and airplane. The setting in the United States emphasizes how Phoenix, accepted in public spaces, is able to achieve her goals and gain respect from her peers. Her comfortable home environment allows her to function well individually and collaboratively. The time setting of the movie is inferred to be in the present era, indicated by the technology used by fighter pilots and in training classrooms. This modern era allows Phoenix to excel as a female fighter pilot in a field traditionally dominated by men, making her an existentialist feminist. The setting of both place and time shapes Phoenix's social acceptance and ability to succeed in a male-centric environment.

4 Conclusion

The story involves Maverick, a top naval aviator, confronting his past while training a group of younger Top Gun graduates for a dangerous mission. Set 30 years after the original *Top Gun*, the film follows Maverick's return to the U.S. Navy Strike Fighter Tactics Instructor program also known as Top Gun. Among the graduates, Maverick trains the son of his deceased best friend, Lieutenant Nick "Goose" Bradshaw. The mission demands the ultimate sacrifice from those chosen to fly it.

Phoenix is portrayed as a feminist equalizer in the movie, symbolizing women's attainment of equality with men. The writer draws on theoretical frameworks, including Kevin McDonald's feminist film theory and Larry A. Brown's elements of film, to discuss Phoenix's character. As a pilot, Phoenix exhibits characteristics that represent equality: hard work, bravery, talent, and intelligence. She maintains her femininity while excelling in a male-dominated environment. Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism also informs Phoenix's equality achievements. Phoenix can work as a fighter jet pilot, attend Top Gun Academy, express opinions, and make decisions that benefit her surroundings. Her image contrasts with traditional views of women as inferior or controllable by men. Overall, Phoenix embodies gender equality in a unique way.

Top Gun: Maverick combines a compelling fictional plot, cinematic effects, and action sequences. It demonstrates that women can succeed as fighter jet pilots despite the field's historical male dominance. The film appeals to general audiences, whether fans of the original *Top Gun* or movie lovers in general.

References

1. Kosinski, J., *Top Gun: Maverick*, Paramount Pictures, (2022).

2. Loia, D., *The Empire Cannot Die: Propaganda and Immortality in Top Gun: Maverick*, New Blackfriars, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12776>, (2022).
3. Yuniar, R., Ningrum, D. F., Rahmah, I., & Sy Saad, A. N. S. I. P., Semiotics of “Top Gun: Maverick” Film as an Inspiration for Indonesia to Rise up from the Covid-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Urban Society’s Arts*, 10(1), 19–31. <https://doi.org/10.24821/jousa.v10i1.9070>, (2023).
4. Sukmajati, C. K. A., American Dream Portrayed in Maverick as the Main Character in *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022). Diponegoro University, (2023).
5. Hamourziadou, L., & Jackson, J., Hollywood and airpower: Myths and realities. *Journal of Global Faultlines*, 10(1), 120–122. <https://doi.org/10.13169/jglobfaul.10.1.0120>, (2023).
6. Lune, H., & Berg, B. L., *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences Global Edition*, Ninth Edition, Pearson Educatio, (2017).
7. Brown, L. A., How Films Tell Stories The Narratology of Cinema. In *Creative Art Press*, Second Edition, (2018).
8. Tong, R., & Botts, T. F., Feminist Thought A More Comprehensive Introduction. In <https://medium.com/>. [https://medium.com/@arifwicaksanaa/pengertian-use-case-a7e576e1b6bf\(2017\)](https://medium.com/@arifwicaksanaa/pengertian-use-case-a7e576e1b6bf(2017)), (2017)c.
9. Kraus, C., & Beauvoir, S. De., The Second Sex and American Feminism. *Les Temps Modernes*, 647–648(1), 413–420. <https://www.cairn-int.info/revue-les-temps-modernes-2008-1-page-413.htm>, (2008).
10. De Beauvoir, S., The Second Sex. In *Angewandte Chemie International Edition*, 6(11), 951–952. Random House Club. http://repo.iain-tulungagung.ac.id/5510/5/BAB_2.pdf, (1949).