

## The Frozen Manifestations: An Analysis of Christopher Nolan's Women Characters in Interstellar

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### Abstract

Films are sovereign endeavors constructed through the medium of artistic creation embossing its reflections on cultural, social and political aspects of the then society from which it is born. Films have carved their own niche in constructing a world and providing with a space for one's endless imagination. Though manipulative in its own terms, Films have been acknowledged as one of the most powerful pillars in the firmament of visual media generating its conspicuous control over the emergence of a social perspective among the latest generation.

Christopher Nolan is one of the noteworthy directors in the firmament of Hollywood Industry who has manifested himself from the margins of British cinema to the blockbusters of Hollywood classics in the span of a decade. Nolan's fully-developed explorations in the field of film-making has helped him reap gargantuan scales of success than any other contemporary of his time. Nolan's films have been stable and steady through a span of ten years which began from his incredibly low-budget feature-length movies into his high-grossing blockbusters. Not all directors possess the punch to design and bring forth what they really want in their movies. However, Nolan had been with a razor-sharp focus in his directorial flexibility in creating his independent storyline in realistic backgrounds. The whack with which he materializes his meandering narrations, his all-pervasive backdrops, the mind-games that could nonplus the audience and the labyrinths of visuals push him to stand out from his contemporary directors. Nolan got his foot in the door with his initial movie *Following* in the year 1998. On a visceral level, his movies are inclinations towards human psyche and fascinations as well as its complexities and maneuvers.

However, his inclination towards the refrigeration of women in all of his movies is evident. Beginning from *Following*, his approach towards female characterization remains unchanged. A re-reading of his female characterizations through the theoretical framework of

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Feminism, Film Theory and women's lived experience in current society will establish new lights and claim a new pedestal of justice for women.

Feminism was taking a vigorous tilt in the later years of 19th century with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1990) and Susan Faludi's *Backlash* (1991). The development of Feminist Aesthetics intending to study and promote women as producers of art thereby accepting women's fluid identity too contributed in etching out a new theory-oriented perspective. The notion that the male gaze is always on the pictured female gave forth a distinctive gendered binary focus in the process of pleasure-creation in movies. Roberta Sassatelli, the Italian socio culturalist opines thus.

What we watch on the screen could and should be interpreted as bearing a latent, and partly hidden, meaning, reflecting the profound concerns of the culture it emerges from, thus eliciting emotions, pleasure and pain. (18)

However, it was in 1975 that Laura Mulvey, the British Feminist Film Theorist published her groundbreaking essay entitled *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* in the most influential British Film Theory Journal *Screen*. The essay was grounded on the concept of Freud and Lacan and paved a new rollercoaster ride in the trackway of Feminism and Films. The essay turned out to be a protean zeitgeist moment of visual studies emerging in a new line of trend. It combined Feminist Aesthetics and Feminist Theory in association with Psychoanalysis. The germinal essay combines voyeurism, fetishism and narcissism in one single structural layout. The crux of Mulvey's essay focusses on how the gaze, spectators and pleasure in viewing forms a masculine structure only to please the male community in the society

No other single essay has ever excited and transformed the contemporary film theory into such depths and vastness. Mulvey's germinal essay was first coined as a paper at the French Department of Wisconsin University in the year 1973. The paper was subsequently

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published in the film journal *Screen*. Contouring the sketches of Psychoanalysis, Mulvey described mainstream cinema as a Phallogentric apparatus. She distinguished the female roles in movies as gazes - gazes created by men for men. Thus, the entire shaping of a movie inclusive of its narration, editing and camera-shots denoted the gaze meant for the masculine orb. As the art historian John Berger had recently pointed out,

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. (Berger 74)

The dwindling female representations and the eternal masculine magnification in Nolan's movies have triggered nothing but a sexist society. The underlying structures hardly change as with Nolan's journey through films. A survey of Christopher Nolan movies will reaffirm the fridging of these female characters and the article attempts in drawing conclusions by studying the characters in the light of the theoretical frameworks discussed above. A re-reading of the movies through the lens of Mulvey's essay *Visual Pleasure and narrative Cinema* will spill light into the current scenario of women positioned in movies and enable us to take further steps to improve their portrayal and to eliminate the objectification of women in movies.

Written by his brother Jonathan Nolan and directed by himself, *Interstellar* is one of the most celebrated movies of Christopher Nolan. Released in the year 2012, *Interstellar*, a science fiction thriller is a dystopian multi-dimensional movie exposing the temporalities of time and space. Shot with impressive visuals and stunning thematic exhibitions, *Interstellar* hit the box offices with its lengthier running time of two hours and forty minutes. A futuristic world which turns out to be uninhabitable and the obligatory actions required to save the human race becomes the main nucleus of the plot.

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Nolan mainly represents two female characters Murph and Amelia Brand and they do become an inevitable part of the whole movie structure. Distinct from his initial female representations, both Murph and Brand are highly intellectual, and both are acclaimed scientists though they contribute in two different ways to the movie's plot. Though their importance has not been completely negated, the prominence of the male figure John Cooper - the engineer cum pilot - never diminishes. As the story culminates, it is again the male protagonist who paves the concrete way for the success of these women and an onlooker still admires and applauds for Cooper before leaving the theatre.

Cooper played by Mathew McConaughey is an aspiring Pilot and the father of two children. Unfortunately, Nolan fixes him as a widowed middle-aged man struggling to bring up his kids in the midst of a survival crisis. Nolan's comfort in separating the female figures through death propels in the initial segment of the movie. Unlike *Memento* or *Inception*, the audience never get a chance to know about Cooper's wife. Though she swings at times in the placated memories of Cooper, she hardly takes a shape in the movie. However, Cooper's first reference to his wife comes during a teacher's meet at Murph's school. Cooper tells "she was always the calmer one" (*Interstellar*). His wife's calmness can easily be equated with his aggressiveness. The gender trouble which thrusts calmness and weakness as the strength of a woman is not ignored in the slightest way in the movie. Through this description, the license of being aggressive and violent is automatically disbursed to a man.

Murph, Cooper's daughter is the most prominent character of the movie. She is initially presented as a ten-year-old schoolgirl who pines for her father's affection. She is shown as an intelligent girl whose main interest lies in Science and Maths. Professor Brand says "Murph is a bright spark. Maybe I should fan the flame" and Donald replies "She is already making fool of her teachers. So may be she should come and make a fool out of you" (*Interstellar*). Murph is seen as a well disciplined and organized girl. Her keen observations make her believe that

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there is a poltergeist in her room. When Cooper continually denies the chance of such a ghost, she firmly sticks to her conclusions. Cooper advises her thus. “You got to record the facts, analyze, get to the how and why, then present your conclusions” (*Interstellar*). Murph takes this hypothesis to her heart and solves the gravitational equation years later in the absence of her father. Thus, her father is portrayed as a source of inspiration to the young girl just like Bruce Wayne in the *Batman Series*.

Nolan has been poured with accolades over his strong representation of female figures in his *Interstellar*. However, a deep-seated study of them will not transcend the inclination he has settled upon in his movies.

Murph has been portrayed through three different characters - as a young girl, a young lady and a very old woman awaiting death. Though she is termed to be an intelligent student, she is helped and assisted by her father, Cooper, in finding the geographical location through the binary coordinates. The first sequence in which her father helps her out is purely understandable with her dearth of experience as a school girl. But the real credit for solving the gravitational equation is not given to Murph. It is still questionable as to why Nolan makes a 33-year-old independent scientist like Murph depend on her father's clues sent through the identical watch to crack the equation. It is Cooper who transmits the data through Morse code to the second hand of the wrist watch. It is Cooper who glides in the five-dimensional tesseract and sends the details of the quantum mechanics. The plot of the story could have been reversed in any way as to give importance to Murph's discovery of the equation. But Nolan hesitates in doing so and bestows Cooper with all the appreciations. The dependence of Murph on her father is eternal as Nolan sketches it. It is this dependence that Janey Place firmly attacks in her essay.

The expression of the myth of man's 'right' or need to control women sexually is in contrast to the dominant version of it in 'A' films of the 30s, 40s and 50s,

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which held that women are so weak and incapable that they need men's protection to survive. In these films, it is the woman who is portrayed benefitting from her dependence on men. ( Place 49 )

Murph represents this dependable frame of a woman who lives upto the expectation of a family and becomes a redeemer throughout the movie. She fills the space of her lost mother and is the only one woman character remaining in her family. She is a nurturer not just for her father who is away, but even for her brother Tom who leans on her. During an interview with Chastain who played the role of Murph, Sam Ashurst records her response thus.

Question : It's a really positive move by Nolan to create a female character in this way. Do you think Hollywood is getting better in terms of roles for women ?

Chastain's answer : Realistically, no. If you look at all the films that people are talking about this year in terms of best Picture, there's not one film that has a female protagonist. If you look at that, its pretty obvious. I think people are talking about it a lot, so I know people want change - they are acknowledging that there isn't equality in terms of female directors, writers and cinematographers. ( Ashurst 2)

The death of Murph is not shown in the movie. However, we see her in the last scene on her deathbed awaiting her young father to pay a visit to her. Though she was the one responsible for bringing the entire mankind to a new habitat of theirs, she herself gives the total credit for her father for the clues. Though Nolan substantiates it in the name of the *Theory of Relativity*, the concept of aging and withering which is mostly applied to a woman rather than a man stabilizes again with Cooper's looks which keeps him young even after 74 years of space journey. However, Nolan makes the gravitational pull and the *Theory of Relativity* as the real culprits which slows down the process of aging in Cooper while in space journey. Thus, we come across Cooper as in his forties meeting his daughter who is in her late eighties. The

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unswerving charm that rests with men and the visual appeal that withers in association with a woman has not been challenged at all even in today's Hollywood industry.

Though there is no sexual objectification in *Interstellar*, the second half of Mulvey's essay where she discusses the function of a hero on screen is directly applicable here with Cooper's character. The identification with the male image on screen is one major reason behind the success stories of male led star cast.

This is made possible through the processes set in motion by structuring the film around a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify. As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. (7)

Thus, Cooper, though not a superhero, is looked at with great awe and wonder from the perspective of the audience. He is seen as a savior of the dying world and re-echoes the iconic image of a man in the mind of the spectator.

Apart from Murph, Amelia Brand, the daughter of Professor Brand plays a significant role in the movie. *Interstellar* has been proclaimed by many critics as Nolan's pro-feminist work which has enormously bestowed the audience with inspiring women characters. But the truth is not in affirmative. Though there is no objectification that is accountable through female bodies, the true grit with which they have been constructed is far beneath the fiber of the male protagonists.

Amelia Brand, one of the most distinguished scientists in the NASA team is a strong-willed woman who is bold enough to join the team in the "Endurance" spaceship. She is dedicated in her nature and hardworking just like her father and is willing to sacrifice her own life to save the entire species of mankind.

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The first time she is presented in the movie, she comes from a dark shadowy chamber and appears before Cooper. As she introduces herself as ‘Scientist Brand’, Cooper mocks at her in a rather lighter tone.

Cooper : Who are you ?

Brand : Dr. Brand

Cooper : And I knew a Dr. Brand once. He was a professor.

Brand : What makes you think I’m not ?

Cooper : Oh, he wasn’t near as cute, either (Interstellar)

The jovial method through which Cooper diminishes her importance is the chain that sustains even after filtering the keys of patriarchy through a mesh. The andro-centered world has often identified women through the adjectives like ‘sweet’, ‘cute’ and ‘beautiful’. The indiscrepancy between what a woman can be and what a woman has to be can only widen within the prevailing gender disparity.

Professor Brand, Amelia’s father keeps open two options to save the human race. The first one is to decode a gravitational propulsion theory which can propel a mass exodus to another planet to save the entire humanity. If this option cannot triumph, he settles for a second option, Plan B which involves transporting 5000 frozen human embryos which can make a colony of humankind in any inhabitable planet other than earth so that mankind never becomes extinct. To corroborate the efficiency of Plan B, he entrusts the sole responsibility of these embryos to Amelia Brand. In short, Amelia’s role of nurturing and raising up the embryos into a colony is to be reflected here for a second reading. A metaphorical reading will put her back to a symbolic profusion of maternal plenitude. The question remains as to why the other three men in the mission, namely, Cooper, Romily and Doyle were exempted from this role and why Brand was placed in charge of this. The dichotomy between being a bold scientist and being in charge of 5000 embryos nourishing her own maternal instinct has to be assessed with a grave

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concern. The burden of reproduction and motherhood had always been the most intimidating reasons behind the exploitation of women.

Moreover, Brand's dialogues throw light to universal signification where she stands as a representative to the entire women around the world. She agrees with her mistake and realizes that reality is far away from the theories whereas Cooper who is not an expert in the field of relativity anticipates the situation and warns her beforehand. This is a testimony of a woman's intelligence being belittled as compared to a man. Cooper's proficiency in deterring things is contrasted with Brand's lack of insight.

To further magnify her less sagacious approach, she talks immensely about relationships, love and affection with tears in her eyes. "The tiniest possibility of seeing Wolf again excites me. That doesn't mean I'm wrong" (Interstellar). She adds, "Love is the one thing we are capable of perceiving that transcends dimensions of time and space" (Interstellar). Cooper reminds her occasionally that she is a scientist and reminds her of her mission and responsibilities. She does not appear prudent in many circumstances and her disposition is sketched in such a way as she tends to forget her higher mission of saving the mankind.

To supplement Cooper's stance in a better way, he is made to be the savior of Brand in the final scene where he goes in search of her to Edmund's planet. As a standard cliché in any literary piece, the role of a man as the savior and the woman as the victim is saddled to the plot of the movie.

With all the concrete slackening off that happens with Murph and Brand, the article strongly argues that the women have not been portrayed with their full capabilities. Though *Interstellar* has created an impression that it slowly evolved to the emergence of idealistic gender equality, the scene is still beyond our grasp. The most disappointing of all is Brand's dialogue when she says "I'm not gonna make it" (Interstellar) in a futurist world where we hope more determination and strength with womanhood. Murph and Brand are not completely

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redeemers nor Femme Fatales. They are not sexually objectified too. Still, their manifestations have been of lesser importance compared to the male figures. As long as the male glorification tends to hold on, female suppression becomes a necessity rather than an imperative component.

The realistic scope of looking at women in the most pleasurable visual form through a film is what a film ultimately offers to its spectators. The three angles as mentioned by Mulvey is true to the core as and when we assess the female characters. The camera angle, the angle through which the male heroes look at her and finally the angle through which she is seen by the spectators. Thus the female is instrumental to the development of the plot and aids the audience with visual pleasure which is inevitable for a cinema.

This complex interaction of looks is specific to film. The first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions (already undertaken by radical film-makers) is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment. There is no doubt that this destroys the satisfaction, pleasure and privilege of the “invisible guest”, and highlights how film has depended on voyeuristic active/passive mechanisms. Women, whose image has continually been stolen and used for this end, cannot view the decline of the traditional film form with anything much more than sentimental regret. ( Mulvey 12 )

Unless the reformers of the society put an end to this - this anomalous phenomena of one sex being misrepresented continuously, the dream of a shared co-existence with both the sexes in one society will never touch reality. For the society to indulge itself in a sweeping change, the change initially must evolve psychologically through the existing mankind. Cinema, being one of the most powerful tools with a lot of impact, can definitely bring solid reformations in the prevailing social order. The movie, which is manufactured within the master brain of a director relentlessly displays the tendencies of his inner conscience. Thus, the

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explicit change has to be born in the conscience of the contemporary directors so that the seeds of change are planted visually through their movies, creating a gradual change in the hegemonic order of the society.

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