

Scarlet Witch and the monstrous feminine in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022)

Poetry Salsabila Nurrانيا¹, Lilis Puspitasari², Dinda Akhlakulkarimah³

^{1,3}Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, Indonesia

²Faculty of Communication Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, Indonesia

Submitted: February 2026, **Revised:** May 2026, **Accepted:** July 2026, **Published:** September 2026

ABSTRACT

Background: This study examines the narrative transformation of Wanda Maximoff, the Scarlet Witch, from a female superhero to a villain in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022), positioning the transformation within current debates on gender representation in superhero cinema. **Purpose:** Drawing on Susan Lanser's feminist narratology, the study examines how narrative techniques carry gendered ideological meanings that reshape women's subjectivity within patriarchal storytelling conventions. **Methods:** This study employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach. Objects were gathered through close reading of visual cues, cinematic techniques, and dialogue across twenty-two purposively selected scenes, with attention to narrative order, focalization, and *mise-en-scène*. **Result:** The results show that the movie systematically uses narrative order and masculine focalization strategies as the rational eye to construct Wanda's character, pathologized as hysterical, while the male heroes were framed as heroic sacrifice. **Conclusion:** The analysis found that motherhood was used as an instrument of the monstrous feminine, by which women's emotional power is recast as an existential threat to a male-governed cosmic order. **Implication:** The findings extend feminist film criticism by showing how narrative order functions as a structural device for the cinematic deconstruction of maternal agency in mainstream superhero films.

Keywords: Feminist film criticism; feminist narratology; monstrous feminine; Scarlet Witch; superhero film

To cite this article (APA Style):

Nurrانيا, P. S., Puspitasari, L., & Akhlakulkarimah, D. (2026). Scarlet Witch and the Monstrous Feminine in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022). *ProTVF*. 10(2), 204-222. <https://doi.org/10.24198/ptvf.v10i2.69873>

Correspondence: Poetry Salsabila Nurrانيا S.Hum, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Padjadjaran, Jl. Raya Bandung-Sumedang KM 21, Hegarmanah, Kecamatan Jatinangor, Kabupaten Sumedang, Jawa Barat 45363, Indonesia. Email: poetry18001@mail.unpad.ac.id

ISSN: 2548-687X (Printed), ISSN: 2549-0087 (Online). Website: <http://jurnal.unpad.ac.id/protvf>

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>). Copyright © 2026 The Author(s).

INTRODUCTION

Film functions as a cultural medium that actively produces and circulates ideology by reinforcing dominant social norms (Yusnaini et al., 2025). Media narratives often normalize the repression of women in ways that uphold patriarchal social order (Murtiningsih et al., 2017). Against this backdrop, heroic narratives function not only as entertainment but also as cinematic mechanisms through which cultural values are produced and circulated within popular culture. Consequently, superhero conventions significantly shape cultural imaginaries of heroism (Magalhães, 2025) as well as gendered moral reasoning (Prihandini & Zulkifli, 2025). Beyond fiction, empirical research confirms that perceived heroism carries real institutional consequences, shaping legitimacy and public support for those coded as heroic (Silver et al., 2025). Contemporary digital screen narratives actively reframe and contest feminist discourses, showing how platformed television can both enable and constrain representations of women (Verma et al., 2025). This research approaches *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022) not as an action fantasy but as an audiovisual site in which patriarchal anxieties surrounding female power are articulated through narrative form, visual framing, and character construction.

Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness (2022) presents a multiverse narrative in which Doctor Strange and Wanda Maximoff (the Scarlet Witch) function as co-

lead characters. Following the events of the television series *WandaVision* (2021), Wanda is depicted as increasingly determined to steal the power of America Chavez, a teenage girl with multiverse-traveling ability, to reunite with her children. Wanda's motivations in the film are presented as stemming from her refusal to accept that this loss defines the reality she now inhabits. The film constructs Wanda's descent from hero to villain through narrative choices that foreground grief, maternal loss, and an escalating desire to reclaim motherhood, even at the cost of multiversal collapse.

In this article, four different theoretical perspectives have been applied in one single analytical framework, where Susan Lanser's feminist narratology acts as the unifying perspective. Lanser (1986) holds the view that focalization strategies, narrator, and the sequencing of events are not just technical aspects but ideological in nature. The concept of the male gaze by Mulvey (1975) works as the visual aspect corresponding to Creed (2023) and Lanser (1986) monstrous feminine acts as the theory explaining how the female body, especially the maternal body, is coded as something fearful in cinema. The theory of hegemonic masculinity Wedgwood et al. (2023) explains the societal structure behind the fact why rationality and self-mastery have been coded as virtues of masculinity. When all these theories are read together, the gender politics of the film work on all three levels of narrative technique, visual codes, and cultural ideology.

Narrative and visual techniques are used by mainstream Hollywood films to restrict the agency of women where cinematic form and ideology work in harmony with each other (Subekti, 2024). This phenomenon is especially evident in the sphere of popular culture where the representations become tools that confine women's identities in accordance with gender hierarchy, even in progressive stories which relate directly to the image of inclusiveness adopted by the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) (Di Leo et al., 2025). As pointed out by Acquaye (2022), the same applies to narrative technique as a method for controlling femininity and making sure that women who are presented as strong characters are always subjected to patriarchal laws. In superhero films, the results are even more pronounced. Hegemonic masculinity legitimizes men's authority through self-mastery and rationality (Wedgwood et al., 2022; Yang, 2020), which is producing a binary in which men are framed as subjects of logic while women are framed as emotional and unstable (Ben Hagai & Zurbriggen, 2022). Mulvey's male gaze accounts for the visual objectification of women, while Creed's monstrous feminine extends this account by showing that women are also fashioned as figures to be feared, whose presence threatens masculine order (Phipps & Montgomery, 2022). Lanser's contribution is to demonstrate that these visual logics are inscribed at the level of narrative arrangement through the choice of focalization, the sequencing of events, and the omission of past heroic acts are

formal mechanisms by which female agency is rewritten as a threat.

The historical link between female suffering and pathology further supports this narrative mechanism. Heroic and villainous identities are not natural or fixed categories but products of discursive social construction (Frisk, 2019). Taking inspiration from the views of de Beauvoir who argues that one does not become a woman but is made into one (Dini, 2017), gender is seen to be contingent and socially constructed. In cases where women exercise agency that goes against gender norms, they get stigmatized and excluded symbolically through dominant discourses (Ramzan & Javaid, 2025). Showalter (1997) notes that while suffering experienced by men, especially during war times, is coded to be heroic in nature, suffering experienced by women tends to be seen as hysteria. In extending this argument, Abdulla and Ahmed (2023) note how patriarchal discourses tend to translate any form of resistance expressed by women into individual forms of madness. Translation of hero to villain in superhero movies is often achieved using this kind of translation (Martin & Kapoor, 2024). Whenever the hero is a woman, whose grief is seen as maternal, the translation is even stronger in nature, and it is the motherhood which serves as the vehicle for translating her powers to monstrosity. Social expectations about reproductive norms compound this process by producing stigma when women are perceived to fail or exceed those norms (Basnet & Khatiwada, 2025). The

intensive mothering concept proposed by Hays, according to Minnotte (2023), suggests that legitimate motherhood entails total selflessness. A mother, pursuing her own interests including those related to her children, violates the cultural script of the holy mother, and becomes monstrous-maternal, as explained by (Creed, 2023). The approach has been developed in relation to science fiction popular culture by (Dumas, 2018). Such maternal characters are created within narratives due to cultural fears associated with excess female reproductive abilities, which should be contained through masculinity (Dumas, 2018).

Literature has been widely done on the representation of women in Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) films. Despite the variety of roles, the representation of female heroes in the MCU continues to reinforce patriarchal norms and normative beauty standards (Olufidipe & Echezabal, 2021; Ridaryanthi & Sinuyul, 2021). The complex evolution of women's emotions in MCU movies, while still acknowledging the narrative structure's limitations, which are dominated by men (Himika & Ahmed, 2025; Jones, 2022). Donaldson (2019) shows how women's authority is delegitimized when it does not conform to patriarchal expectations. On the other hand, studies on monstrous femininity and motherhood in media have been discussed by Stang (2019), who emphasized the brood mother trope and the notion of abject maternity which arguing that monstrous maternal figures

materialize cultural anxieties about female reproductive power, as well as Konkle (2019) and O'Reilly (2021), who examines ambiguities and vulnerabilities, arguing that the "terror of mothering" exposes and destabilizes ideals of selfless motherhood. Kashyap et al. (2024) even see the potential for empowerment behind representations of maternal grotesque imagery. Widyaevan (2023) extends this line of inquiry to interior *mise-en-scène*, showing how domestic space operates as a spatial device for staging the monstrous maternal in horror film, an approach this study adapts to examine how visual and spatial elements code Wanda's maternal desire as monstrous within the superhero genre.

Although previous studies have made contributions to the representation of monstrous-feminine and female superheroes in media, there is a gap in the problem of how the motherhood motive is specifically used as a deconstructive tool to change the hero status into a villain in superhero movie stories. This study aims to fill the gap by examining the *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022). The focus of this study is to investigate how the character of Scarlet Witch (Wanda Maximoff) was deconstructed through the distortion of motherhood into an existential threat. This study argues that the film deploys maternal essentialism within a narrative ordering that progressively records Wanda's heroic identity as hysterical, thereby reinforcing patriarchal narrative conventions in contemporary superhero cinema.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach to examine how patriarchal ideology is embedded and reproduced in the narrative structure of the film *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022). The qualitative descriptive-analytical approach is appropriate because the research aims to interpret meaning within a cultural text and to show how formal narrative elements carry ideological weight, rather than to test hypotheses or measure variables. To provide theoretical and methodological rigor, this study apply Lanser (1986) feminist narratology as the primary analytical lens. Feminist narratology foregrounds the gendered nature of narrative form, insisting that formal features such as focalization and narrative order always operate within gendered discursive fields. Thus, Lanser's approach treats narrative form as gendered through focalization, narrative order, and selective omission that operate within gendered discursive fields and therefore can be analyzed for their ideological effects.

The unit of analysis for the current study is the film text, viewed as a whole assemblage of narrative and cinematic signs such as sequences, scenes, dialogues, compositions of shots, and editing patterns. Since the purpose of the research is to investigate the change in Wanda Maximoff/Scarlet Witch from hero to villain, purposive sampling was employed to choose the scenes that would symbolize this transformation process. The criteria for scene

selection were (1) scenes where motivations or motherhood of Wanda are shown; (2) scenes where focus is made through male characters (Strange, Wong, Mordo, etc.); (3) climaxes and turning points where there is a shift in viewers' perception of Wanda; (4) scenes where there are visual markers of Wanda's monstrification. There were 48 scenes selected at first viewing, and later after further viewings, the selection was narrowed to 22 scenes.

The data collected consisted of two main categories, which were inter-related: narrative data and *mise-en-scène* data. Narrative data included the transcript of the dialogues (verbatim), intertitles, and the chronology (and possible flashbacks and ellipses) of the narrative sequence in the film. The *mise-en-scène* data consisted of the screen captures of shots that captured compositional, angle, lighting, costuming, and proxemic features, along with notes on the editing rhythm and sonic elements (music, sound, and silence) that help create interpretive frames. The process of data gathering involved multiple viewings of the same film, whereby each chosen scene would be viewed three times: first for general comprehension, second for transcribing and timing, and finally for capturing screenshots and noting cinematic features. All observations were logged in an analytical log with scene code, time code, descriptive notes, and initial interpretations.

Analysis entailed the use of narrative focalization analysis, narrative order analysis,

and *mise-en-scène* analysis. Narrative focalization analysis involved analyzing the subject that acted as the perceptual and evaluative center in every scene and the changes in focalization in the entire movie. Narrative order analysis entailed the analysis of sequencing devices that include chronological progression, temporal gaps, flashbacks, and selective omission, and how these devices either emphasized or obscured some parts of Wanda's heroic deeds. Analysis of the *mise-en-scène* entailed the use of camera work, shot composition, lighting differences, and editing to analyze the abjection or monstrosity in Wanda and how the visuals related to focalization. The results of the analysis were divided into three thematic groups including (1) focalization systems and the rational eye, (2) narrative sequencing and the erasing of heroic history, and (3) visual representations of monstrous motherhood. Single movie analysis is seen as a weakness. Therefore, the analysis aims at interpretive depth rather than statistical generalization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Doctor Strange in The Multiverse of Madness (2022) is an entry in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) built around the multiverse. Its narrative centers on America Chavez, a teenage girl who can travel between universes and dimensions, a power that makes her a target for Wanda Maximoff, who undergoes a drastic role shift in the film. This

analysis proceeds in two parts. The first shows, through narrative sequencing, focalization, and visual devices of monstrous motherhood, how the film's narrative order devalues Wanda's character. The second examines how motherhood is deployed as an ideological instrument that strips her agency as a female hero.

Doctor Strange in The Multiverse of Madness (2022) uses narrative order to lock Wanda's identity into domestic obsession from its opening sequence. Rather than establishing her heroic history, the film opens with a dream in which Wanda is with her two children.

In Figure 1, warm color temperature, shallow depth of field, and high-key lighting build an idealized domestic fantasy. A hard cut abruptly shifts the palette to a desaturated, gray-toned register and the score to a somber tone as Wanda wakes to her current reality. This cinematographic contrast functions as a structural cue that positions Wanda's desire for motherhood as the ideological premise driving all subsequent conflict, before any other dimension of her identity is established. By opening the narrative with the dream, Wanda's history as an Avenger with cosmic powers gets replaced by that of a mourning mother.

The conflict in the story becomes evident in Wanda's apple orchard as Strange approaches her seeking assistance from the hero she still sees in her. However, the film quickly flips the table, as Wanda is the one chasing America Chavez. The dialogue between the two utilizes



Source: Disney+, 2025

Figure 1 Wanda with her children & Wanda awakening from the dream

their common history with the Avengers to create a narrative of betrayal, and after revealing Wanda's intentions, the apple orchard with its sunny imagery transforms into a dark red horror landscape, see Figure 2.

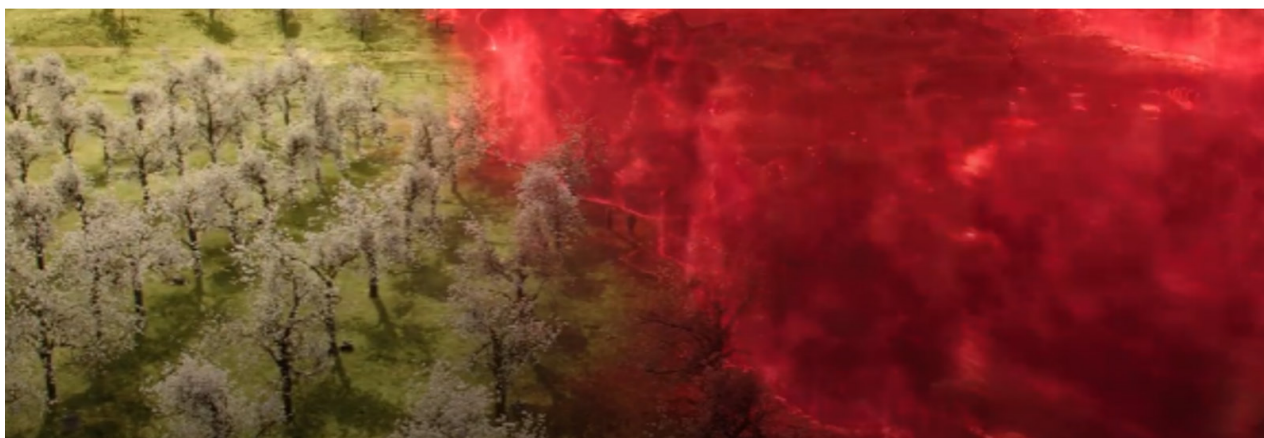
The transformation is accomplished through color grading and motivated lighting, where the idyllic colors of the orchard are replaced with dark reds and desaturated brown colors illuminated by the magic of Wanda herself. Apples in the film hold intertextual significance because, in the story of Eden, female desire for knowledge results in cosmic

violation. The domestic environment is not merely transformed but rather destroyed by the very woman who exists within it, and this destruction is symbolized by the fact that it stems from her own desire. Wanda's words to Strange:

“The Darkhold only showed me the truth. Everything I lost can be mine again,”

Signify the fact that her powers have become perverted from altruistic use to selfish use. Strange's declaration:

“Wanda, your children are not real,”



Source: Disney+, 2025

Figure 2 Visual transformation of Wanda's apple orchard scene

Sets up the logic as sane while her desire is presented as insane. In response, Wanda says:

“You break the rules and become a hero, I do it and I become the enemy. That doesn’t seem fair”.

This metanarrative statement is preemptively countered by the film in having America Chavez endangered, so that her desire can be seen as selfish rather than a genuine challenge to an imbalanced set of criteria. The scene ends with the statement:

“Then it won’t be Wanda who comes for her. It will be the Scarlet Witch,”

Shutting down her heroism at the beginning of the plot.

The devaluation occurs not just through narrative order but through masculine focalization, the rational eye. Focalization defines who observes and whose consciousness is used as a filter to narrativize and judge events (Genette, 1980). Genette’s differentiation between internal focalization, in which narrative world is perceived through consciousness of the character, and external focalization, in which character is observed from outside without any insight into his interior, is directly applicable to the film’s asymmetric representation of its two main characters. While Strange serves as internal focalizer all along, with his consciousness being the most important filter of evaluation of events, Wanda remains subject of external focalization with her interior always kept secret to the audience at the exact point where she could generate empathy. It is more than just a narratological device, it is an ideological tool since Strange’s

view of Wanda is the only one that gets created by the film as structurally possible. Film does not perceive Wanda’s grief as an experience to be evaluated, it creates Strange’s interpretation of it as the only one possible.

The structurally important focalization move occurs within Shakman (2021) *WandaVision* (2021), where Wanda acts as the principal internal focalizer, and her tragedy is defined by the organizing element of her grief throughout the story field. In contrast to this, the Multiverse of Madness defocalizes Wanda’s interiority by closing it down and placing it under the exterior evaluative perspective of Strange, who reinterprets her previously legitimate grief as a symptom to be diagnosed externally. Lanser (1986) points out that defocalization constitutes one of the keyways through which narrative authority is gendered. This move takes place even prior to Strange’s appearance because the introductory sequence of the movie establishes America Chavez as its first focalizer whose fear of Wanda forms the initial affective coding of the conflict. Thus, Strange’s rationality becomes only confirmation of what has already been established about Wanda as a threatening figure from the very beginning.

Contrast lighting and clothing helps create the good-bad dichotomy for Strange and Wanda. Wanda enters Kamar-Taj surrounded by thick smoke and dark fog that is red due to the magic present, and the smoke represents how the Darkhold corrupts one’s soul and erodes their physical form, as can be seen in Figure 3.



Source: Disney+, 2025

Figure 3 Wanda's arrival as the Scarlet Witch at Kamar-Taj

Wanda's transition into the Scarlet Witch is also made clear through the use of costume, which functions as another aspect of *mise-en-scène* that the film uses with ideological specificity; whereas Strange's highly formalized blue robes tie him to a structure of institutions that provide discipline, authentic knowledge, and legitimate power, Wanda's blood-red costume as the Scarlet Witch and her crown-like headdress rely on both royalty and the villainous imagery of horror rather than heroism, the latter not because of her having

won sovereign power through heroic acts but rather as a result of her own transgressive crowning. Figure 4 concludes this reasoning.

As Strange approaches, sunlight partially relights the scene, its high-key lighting coding with him as a source of truth while the residual smoke around Wanda codes her as contaminant. The eye-line matches him as active subject and her as the object of his evaluation, so that masculine presence becomes the visual condition for dispelling feminine darkness.



Source: Disney+, 2025

Figure 4 Strange approaches Wanda upon her arrival at Kamar-Taj

Figure 5 narrates Wanda's transformation as monstrous through horror-genre aesthetics: her body moves jerky and unnatural as she crawls out of a shattered glass surface.

The glass carries symbolic weight beyond spectacle. Within the psychoanalytic framework Creed draws on, a reflective surface marks the boundary between recognized identity and the abject, what must be expelled to maintain a coherent self. Wanda's penetration through glass rather than a door encodes her as violating that boundary from the outside, moving from the space of the expelled back into the sanctioned world; its shattering stages the dissolution of the boundary between her prior human interiority and her current monstrous exteriority. The medium shot removes facial expressions and eye contact, which are the ways by which empathy is generated visually, making Wanda's evil character created by her appearance as well as her actions. Horror visuals can be found throughout the movie, yet Wanda is the one who was once an admirable

hero figure exposed to this form of horror, and hence it justifies Strange's assertion that:

"the old Wanda is gone".

Music serves as a reinforcement for this kind of encoding. For sequences involving Strange's rationality, there are organized brass cues suggesting institutional authority. Wanda's Scarlet Witch sequences, on the other hand, involve dissonant strings and atonal clusters of brass that serve as codes of danger with no redeeming aspects. In the Figure 5 scene, the shattering of the glass is exaggerated beyond realistic levels, with the dissonant music making her appearance horror instead of tragic, proving that the music language used in the movie is consistent with the visual language.

The camera focalization of Wanda also makes her less subjective in the Kamar-Taj duel, as illustrated in Figure 6. The camera position behind Wanda shows only her back and hair, as her face is covered completely by light beaming on Strange's face, making her faceless and an



Source: Disney+, 2025

Figure 5 Scarlet Witch crawling out of the glass surface



Source: Disney+, 2025

Figure 6 Strange confronting Wanda before the duel

object that confronts the male protagonist. The moment Wanda cries out as Strange questions her on whether she became a mother somewhere else, a quick close-up gives viewers insight into her sorrow, but the smile that comes next, being interpreted from the perspective of Strange's judgment, is seen as threatening, leading him to attack immediately. Thus, female emotions turn out to be the kind of phenomenon that needs violent control rather than interpretation.

The male characters perpetuate the dissociation through discourse. Via Wong's discourse, Wanda is described as a prophet rather than as a colleague,

“a being of unfathomable magic... prophesied to either rule, or annihilate the cosmos,”

Whose naming authority erases the intricacies of her grief and recasts it as one of danger. In Universe-838, Mordo-838 adds to her stigmatization by referring to her Dreamwalking powers as “unholy” and “corrosive to the soul.”

The possession of Wanda-838 by

Wanda-616 is a brief exception to this pattern that serves to affirm rather than challenge it. The fear that Wanda-838 feels from the intrusion into her body is briefly internalized in a rare depiction of female interiority in a story where Wanda lacks one, and this female interiority is not used to confirm Wanda-616's position but to use Wanda-838's pain against her. The interiority of one woman becomes a means to prove the other wrong, an arrangement where the pain of women is only justified in so far as it proves the danger of a woman who broke patriarchal norms.

Unequal narrative is further accentuated through the confrontation when Strange mocks Wanda's notion of being rational,

“Book of the Damned, calling yourself a witch... I don't exactly call that being reasonable,”

Without recognizing that she had previously murdered her husband to stop Thanos. When Wanda reminds him of breaking the rules by giving away the Time Stone, Strange responds:

“That was a war and I did what I had to do.”

The rebuke of Wanda-616 made by Mr. Fantastic,

“You’ve possessed an innocent woman”

Implies that she is the latter’s sinful counterpart, while his statement regarding their common experience as parents,

“Please, I have children of my own,”

is countered by the indifferent,

“Good. Then there will be someone left to raise them,”

revealing, within the context of the movie, her dehumanization.

All of Strange, Wong, Mordo-838, and Mr. Fantastic contribute to grounding truth and reason in a masculine perspective, thus divorcing Wanda’s maternal instincts from the narrative of trauma and framing them as a danger to the entire multiverse, eliminating the possibility of interpreting her behavior as a rational response to systematic oppression.

All figures from 1 through 6, in combination, represent what this paper terms visual devices of monstrous motherhood, a set of cinematic techniques that code maternal desire rather than female power in general as the source of visual horror. Figure 1 shows how the idealized fantasy of domestic bliss turns into a desaturated version as soon as it gets interrupted, thus coding the difference between ideal motherhood and its impossibility as horror rather than pathos. Figure 2 indicates that the degradation of the orchard takes place right after the maternal

motivation of Wanda becomes known, so the visual destruction results from seeking the children as the object of desire. In Figure 5, the aesthetics of horror movies become relevant to her body as soon as she approaches America Chavez with the goal of obtaining access to her children, hence coding the maternal pursuit itself as a force that makes the body monstrous. These coding strategies make a distinct visual claim, namely, that maternal desire, once it gets pursued without the limitation of self-sacrifice, becomes a horror because of its ability to transform the maternal body into a horror itself. Because the narration has placed the morality of the film in the hands of male characters, the reaction of Wanda towards her suffering is denied any kind of political coherence. Her trauma is thus transformed into that of a horror story.

The second deconstructive dimension for Wanda comes from the narrative logic of maternal essentialism, by which Wanda is stripped of all her identities except that of a caregiver whose only function is to care for her babies, making the concept of a superhero identity secondary to maternal instinct. Whereas in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), Wanda is described as having cosmic powers that could rival those of Thanos, in this film all of her powers are focused on just one identity, that of motherhood, suggesting that female power, no matter how extraordinary, is subservient to the biological instinct to become a mother.

The monstrous-maternal proposed by

Creed (2023) provides the framework for what the representation of Wanda through images and storytelling achieves: the figure of the archaic mother who, in her physicality, disrupts the symbolic order; and monstrous not because she is evil but because her desires exceed the limits of proper maternity within a patriarchal culture. This system works on both levels. Visually, the horror-genre coding of Wanda's body in Figure 5 encodes her maternal body as abject in Creed's sense, a body that has crossed into the monstrous and must be expelled from the narrative's symbolic order. Narratively, the film literalizes this when Wanda-616 finally meets her children in Universe-838 and they recoil in horror at her appearance, condensing the proposition that maternal desire pursued with the full force of female power produces a mother no longer recognizable as one. Wanda's self-sacrifice at Wundagore then expels the abject maternal body, restoring the order her desire had threatened.

The definition of legitimate maternity under the intensive mothering concept requires selfless commitment, which is what the film reverses to interpret Wanda's quest for her children as a challenge to the established moral system rather than as trauma or wounded subjectivity and as such Wanda is punished not because she wants to be a mother but because she wants to be a mother on her terms. The discipline goes even further to frame maternal hysteria in a way that when Wanda expresses her desire to travel across the universe, the film interprets

this not as a mother's quest for justice but as an anomaly devoid of the political significance given to her male colleagues. However, the reader should be aware that this reading is still an interpretation because the film does not preclude other interpretations. The narrative of Wanda could also be viewed as one where the failure to resolve her trauma leads to a tragic end.

The process of hysterization happens through scenes and dialogue and not just in terms of the underlying theme. The trauma of Strange after *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), which involves his calculated sacrifice of the Time Stone and the fact that he disappeared due to the Snap, is always presented within the narrative context of the aftermath of an act of sacrifice, even if the trauma is one felt by Strange throughout subsequent films. However, the grief of Wanda, arising out of the same series of events, and further complicated by the fabricated and ruined world in *WandaVision* (2021), is never afforded the same level of legitimacy. In the orchard scene, her grief is instead presented as filtered through the authoritative medical diagnosis of Strange, who converts her grief to delusion by interrupting her desires with the simple statement that her children do not exist. It is indeed through the mechanism by which patriarchal discourse translates women's resistance into individual madness: when Wanda launches her critique of the rules of the game being bent for the benefit of Strange who becomes a hero for breaking

them whereas she is villainized, a structurally accurate criticism of the asymmetrical standard applied to the characters in the film, the narrative has already arranged this criticism to take place while she is threatening America Chavez, thus invalidating her critique on a structural level and reinterpreting it as that of a madwoman justifying herself. Resistance is not rebutted through logic but through positioning within the narrative, proving that translating resistance into madness does not require refuting but only repositioning the criticizer within the discourse that has already deemed her mad.

This reveals an inherent contradiction in the morality of the movie – woman can only be heroic when she sacrifices herself for someone else, which Wanda had done before, and monstrous when she tries to assert herself for her desires. Both Strange and Wanda violate the same set of rules, but one is portrayed differently from the other. Strange abandons the Time Stone and uses the same book to Dreamwalking, but the narrative treats their actions as completely different because Strange's act of breaking the rules becomes rational sacrifice, and Wanda's using the Darkhold is instantly interpreted as irrational behavior caused by grief. Thus, the movie has already decided who is rational and who is emotional long before any of these characters break the rules, and thus the Darkhold becomes a means of proving the identity of the person using it, rather than something to be judged morally. The film thereby encodes the ideological premise that female agency is

legitimate only under conditions of self-erasure.

The film's ending attempts to tame Wanda: her only path to atonement is destroying herself and the Darkhold, a pattern in which a superpowered woman who loses control cannot be permitted to improve or live with her power but must instead be erased from the world to restore normalcy. An anti-climax occurs when Wanda regains consciousness after encountering her children in another universe and they recoil in horror at her appearance as the Scarlet Witch: the film uses children as moral judges, so that she stops not from political conscience or logic but from a mother's guilt. Once that guilt arises, the narrative immediately leads her to self-sacrifice, destroying the Wundagore temple and every copy of the Darkhold across the universe by bringing the mountain down on herself.

Wanda's self-sacrifice can be read as the film's way of eliminating the threat posed by a female figure who cannot be controlled by male rule. After her demise, the responsibility of narrative control and maintaining multiversal stability is again vested solely on Strange. The contrasting approach of the film towards its two leading protagonists is noteworthy since Strange, despite the use of the Darkhold that leaves him marked by the third eye, is allowed to survive, maintain his hero status, and act as the protagonist of the film, whereas Wanda, despite carrying the similar burden of transgression and grief, is stripped away from the narrative altogether. In this way, a stable ideological statement is established since male authority

transcends its transgressions, while the feminine power based on emotions is sacrificed.

As such, the present analysis provides an opportunity to identify the conceptual framework, narrative ordering of maternal monstrosity, used for transforming the maternal desire of a woman into something monstrous not because of its nature but due to its order in relation to other elements of the narrative. The concept operates through three procedures. Pre-positioning introduces maternal desire before heroic identity is established, so desire becomes the character's defining attribute rather than one dimension among others. Sequenced adjacency places maternal desire next to harm inflicted on a vulnerable subject, positioning that desire as causally responsible before any counter-reading is possible. Narrative foreclosure makes self-destruction the only available resolution to the maternal figure's agency, encoding female power as something the narrative cannot sustain without dissolving the order it protects. This differs from focalization-based accounts of the monstrous feminine, which concern whose perspective organizes the narrative, and from gaze-based accounts, which concern visual objectification: it operates instead at the level of story sequencing itself.

All three procedures are operative in this film. Pre-positioning occurs through the opening dream sequence; sequenced adjacency, through the structure that reveals Wanda as the source of America Chavez's threat immediately after establishing that threat as the narrative's

first affective fact; and narrative foreclosure, through the ending, where Wanda's self-sacrifice at Wundagore is constructed as the only available resolution for a maternal figure whose power has exceeded the symbolic order's tolerance. Together, these procedures constitute a formal device that operates in concert with masculine focalization and visual abjection to produce the monstrous-maternal within the film's ideological structure.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022) indicates that Wanda Maximoff's transformation from a female superhero to a villain is not a neutral arc of character development. It is a structured form of deconstruction that reinscribes patriarchal ideology within the superhero narrative. The deconstruction operates through narrative ordering and focalization. The film opens by binding Wanda's identity to maternal obsession, while her past heroic acts are bracketed and replaced by the image of a grieving mother. Through the focalization of Strange, Wong, and Mordo, her actions are judged by male perspectives that frame her grief as hysteria, while comparable transgressions by male characters are recoded as strategic sacrifice. Motherhood is mobilized as the instrument through which her agency is stripped: her cosmic power is reduced to a tool serving biological instinct, and when she pursues motherhood on her own terms, she is recoded

as a bad mother and ultimately as a monster. The film's resolution, Wanda's self-sacrifice, legitimizes patriarchal authority by presenting her death as the only path to cosmic stability, after which control returns to the male hero.

This study contributes to feminist superhero criticism in two specific ways. First, it extends Creed's account of the monstrous-maternal by showing that the cinematic deconstruction of maternal agency operates not only through visual abjection but also through narrative ordering, through the strategic arrangement of which heroic acts are remembered, which are erased, and in what sequence maternal desire is introduced relative to threats to other characters. Second, the analysis proposes narrative ordering of maternal monstrosity as a conceptual tool for this structural mechanism, distinguishing it from focalization-based or gaze-based accounts of the monstrous feminine. This conceptual tool identifies a formal device that may operate across superhero films featuring female protagonists with cosmic or supernatural power.

Beneath the surface of action-driven superhero spectacle, *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022) sustains a narrative apparatus that restricts female agency. The film confirms that, in its ideological coding of heroism on the cinematic screen, authority and rationality are coded as masculine, while women who pursue agency are placed in positions of instability that the narrative ultimately requires to be eliminated. Such insights stem from an analysis of a single

film and thus require more comparisons to establish their validity and generalizability. An examination of the industrial context and the intentions of the filmmakers will be instrumental in understanding the relationship between industry processes and the narrative techniques observed in this study. Another research avenue would be separate reception analyses that could help in analyzing the interaction between spectator readings and the narrative techniques involved in the representation of powerful women. Comparative studies on other Marvel movies or other superhero movies can help researchers to find out whether such narrative techniques apply to other female superheroes. Such interdisciplinary approaches as feminist narratology combined with psychoanalysis, affect theory, or audience reception would be useful as well.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, P.S.N.; methodology, P.S.N.; formal analysis, P.S.N.; investigation, P.S.N.; resources, P.S.N.; data curation, P.S.N.; writing—original draft preparation, P.S.N.; visualization, P.S.N. and D.A.; supervision, L.P.; research collaboration, L.P.; writing—review and editing, D.A. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Acknowledgments: It is our pleasure to convey our deep appreciation to Dr. Hanny Hafiar, M.Si., for her tremendous assistance in making this research collaboration possible. Her help and cooperation have greatly contributed to the success of this collaboration.

AI declaration: In the process of preparing this manuscript, AI tools such as Grammarly and QuillBot have been used to proofread and rephrase, while the DeepL tool was used for translation purposes. These AI tools were only used to enhance the language used and had no effect on the research analysis, findings, and conclusions. All AI usages comply with the journal

guidelines and can be checked on Turnitin with the AI detection percentage not exceeding 20%. The authors bear all responsibilities for this manuscript content and ethical use of AI tools in preparing it.

Ethical clearance: This research did not contain any work involving humans, human data, or animals and thus did not require any formal approval from the Institutional Review Board. The main materials used for the analysis within this paper include the movie *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022) that can be watched via the official platform Disney+. All materials were acquired legally.

Data Availability Statement: The dataset used and/or analyzed within the current study includes the movie *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022). As the study is based on publicly accessible audiovisual materials, no further datasets were produced. More details about the methodology of analysis and interpretation can be provided by the author on reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest: There is no conflict of interest to be declared.

Funding: No external funding was provided for this study.

REFERENCES

- Abdulla, P. S., & Ahmed, A. A. (2023). Madness and feminism: An analysis of women's struggles in Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*. *Journal of Philology and Educational Sciences*, 2(2), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.53898/jpes2023221>
- Acquaye, P. (2022). Portrayal of violence against women in Ghanaian movies. *British Journal of Mass Communication and Media Research*, 2(1), 14–53. <https://doi.org/10.52589/BJMCMR-KBE5RPGT>
- Basnet, P., & Khatiwada, S. P. (2025). Women's experiences of infertility: Self and socially constructed identities. *Sotang, Yearly Peer Reviewed Journal*, 7(01), 79–90. <https://doi.org/10.3126/sotang.v7i01.89334>
- Ben Hagai, E., & Zurbriggen, E. L. (2022). Instability of gender identity. In *Queer Theory and Psychology* (pp. 67–98). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84891-0_4
- Creed, B. (2023). *The Monstrous-Feminine film, feminism, psychoanalysis*. Taylor & Francis.
- Di Leo, N., Rizzi, A., & Traetta, L. (2025). Stressing out the 'Damsel in Distress': Intersectional shifts in women's representation in video games. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 8(1), 113–139. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-025-00607-3>
- Dini, R. (2017). *An analysis of Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex*. Macat Library. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781912281725>
- Donaldson, E. (2019). Feminin justice. *Extrapolation*, 60(2), 157–182. <https://doi.org/10.3828/extr.2019.11>
- Dumas, R. (2018). Monstrous motherhood and evolutionary horror in contemporary Japanese science fiction. *Science Fiction Studies*, 45(1), 24. <https://doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.45.1.0024>
- Frisk, K. (2019). What makes a hero? Theorising the social structuring of heroism. *Sociology*, 53(1), 87–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038518764568>
- Genette, G. (1980). *Narrative discourse: An essay in method*. Cornell University Press. <https://books.google.co.id/books?id=yEPuQg7SOxIC>
- Himika, J. F., & Ahmed, S. S. (2025). From sidekicks to superheroes: The evolution of female representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, IX(III), 3204–3220. <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.90300252>
- Jones, B. (2022). The evolving portrayal of female emotions in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, 34(1–2), 196–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08952833.2021.2017615>
- Kashyap, V., Rashmita Devi, & Piraji, P. N. (2024). Demonizing motherhood: Mirroring the monstrous feminine in the Bollywood horror movie *Chhorii* (2021). *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 5(1). <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh>

v5.i1.2024.692

- Konkle, A. (2019). Mothering by the Book: Horror and maternal ambivalence in The Babadook (2014). *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 3(1–2). <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/5910>
- Lanser, S. S. (1986). Toward a feminist narratology. *Style*, 20(3). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42945612>
- Magalhães, S. M. (2025). The hero in military education and media narrative: Possibilities of development of values by media education. *Security and Defence Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.35467/sdq/204574>
- Martin, J., & Kapoor, H. (2024). It's worse if superman does it: Perceptions of moral transgressions committed by Superheroes and Supervillains. *Heroism Science: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.26736/hs.2024.01.08>
- Minnotte, K. L. (2023). Decentering intensive mothering: More fully accounting for race and class in motherhood norms. *Sociology Compass*, 17(8). <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.13095>
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6–18. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>
- Murtiningsih, B. S. E., Advenita, M., & Ikom, S. (2017). Representation of patriarchal culture in new media: A case study of news and advertisement on Tribunnews.com. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 8(3), 143–154. <https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2017.v8n3p143>
- O'Reilly, A. (2021). "The Terror of Mothering": In *Monstrous Mothers* (pp. 243–268). Demeter Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1vbd22k.16>
- Olufidipe, F., & Echezabal, Y. (2021). Superheroines and sexism: Female representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. *Journal of Student Research*, 10(2). <https://doi.org/10.47611/jsrhs.v10i2.1430>
- Phipps, E. B., & Montgomery, F. (2022). "Only YOU Can Prevent This Nightmare, America": Nancy Pelosi As the Monstrous-Feminine in Donald Trump's YouTube Attacks. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 45(3), 316–337. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2022.2097144>
- Prihandini, P., & Zulkifli, M. Y. (2025). Social identity and gender representation of superheroes and villains in Indonesia films. *Mediator: Jurnal Komunikasi*, 18(1), 126–141. <https://doi.org/10.29313/mediator.v18i1.4698>
- Raimi, S. (2022). *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.
- Ramzan, M., & Javaid, Z. K. (2025). Resisting hegemonic masculinity: Gender, power, and agency in the narratives of Qaisra Shahraz and Soniah Kamal. *Asian Women*, 41(2), 159. <https://doi.org/10.14431/aw.2025.6.41.2.159>
- Ridaryanthi, M., & Sinuyul, C. J. (2021). Representation of female superhero and gender roles in the Avengers: Endgame. *KOMUNIKA: Jurnal Dakwah Dan Komunikasi*, 15(2), 139–154. <https://doi.org/10.24090/komunika.v15i2.4580>
- Shakman, M. (2021). *WandaVision [TV series]*. Disney+.
- Showalter, E. (1997). *Hystories: Hysterical epidemics and modern culture*. Columbia University Press. <https://books.google.co.id/books?id=QSzVNODK2nAC>
- Silver, J. R., Sanil, M., & Moule, R. K. (2025). Perceptions of police as heroes and support for law enforcement. *Justice Quarterly*, 43(3), 696–722. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2025.2554156>
- Stang, S. (2019). The broodmother as monstrous-feminine. *Nordlit*, 42, 233–256. <https://doi.org/10.7557/13.5014>
- Subekti, A. S. (2024). I'm not, like, the best dragon, ya know?: A deconstructionist reading of Disney's Raya and the Last Dragon. *ProTVF*, 8(1), 36. <https://doi.org/10.24198/ptvf.v8i1.47577>
- Verma, A., Kusmayadi, I. M., & Arbani, M. (2025). Feminist narratives in Indian digital television: A discourse analysis of

- Scoop. *ProTVF*, 9(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.24198/ptvf.v9i1.59404>
- Wedgwood, N., Connell, R., & Wood, J. (2022). Deploying hegemonic masculinity: A study of uses of the concept in the journal *Psychology of Men & Masculinities*. *Psychology of Men & Masculinities*, 24(2), 83–93. <https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000417>
- Widyaevan, D. A. (2023). Analyzing monstrous maternal in “Jendela” and “A Mother’s Love” interior mise-en-scene. *ProTVF*, 7(1), 34–49. <https://doi.org/10.24198/ptvf.v7i1.36107>
- Yang, Y. (2020). What’s hegemonic about hegemonic masculinity? Legitimation and beyond. *Sociological Theory*, 38(4), 318–333. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275120960792>
- Yusnaini, Y., Nufus, H., Saleh, R., & Wibowo, W. A. S. (2025). The digital era and the evolution of media paradigms: A critical review of the adaptation of old media in new media ecosystems. *Society*, 13(1), 573–599. <https://doi.org/10.33019/society.v13i1.853>