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# Exploring Feminist Existentialist Themes in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* through Peirce's Semiotic Lens

*Meneliti Tema Feminisme Eksistensial dalam Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness melalui Lensa Semiotik Peirce*

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## Abstract

This study investigates how Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism is represented in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* through the lens of Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory. Utilizing Creswell's qualitative descriptive methodology, the analysis focuses on scenes and dialogues showcasing existentialist feminist themes via female characters. The findings indicate a prominent presence of these themes, with significant semiotic elements underscoring the roles and intrinsic qualities of women. Key semiotic signs qualisigns, indexes, and dicent signs are pivotal in reflecting Beauvoir's ideas of freedom, identity, and gender roles. This approach underscores the efficacy of semiotic theory in unpacking feminist representations within popular media.

**Keywords:** Existentialist Feminism, Simone de Beauvoir, Charles Sanders Peirce, Semiotic Theory, *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*

## Introduction

In the modern era, the movie industry has emerged as a compelling field for creative expression, providing filmmakers with a platform to convey their ideas through a rich combination of visual and verbal elements. Movies, akin to dramatic performances, use moving images, acting, cinematography, and dialogue to communicate intricate narratives and messages. This audiovisual medium enables creators to tell stories, depict complex characters, and express nuanced ideas, inviting audiences to engage deeply with the movie's thematic content (Joesoef, 2020). As a significant form of mass media, movies are not only sources of entertainment but also

powerful tools for emotional and intellectual engagement, reflecting and shaping cultural narratives (Sklar & Cook, 2024).

Despite their widespread influence, movies often contain layers of meaning that are not immediately apparent. <sup>7</sup> Semiotics, the study of signs and their interpretations, provides a framework for uncovering these hidden meanings. Semiotics focuses on how signs are created, understood, and communicated, examining various elements such as icons, indexes, and symbols (Cobley & Janz, 2012). Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of semiotics, which includes representamen, object, and interpretant, offers a structured approach to analyzing how signs convey meaning (Liszka, 1996).

This study applies Peirce's semiotic theory to analyze feminist existentialist themes in the <sup>2</sup> movie *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022), directed by Sam Raimi. The movie features complex female characters who challenge traditional gender roles and embody feminist ideals. By employing Peirce's semiotic framework, this research aims to decode the semiotic signs related to feminist existentialism present in the movie. Feminist existentialism, particularly as articulated by Simone de Beauvoir, emphasizes themes of freedom, independence, and the social construction of gender roles (Beauvoir, 1949).

The central research problem is to explore how feminist existentialist themes are represented in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* through semiotic analysis. Specifically, this study seeks to understand how various semiotic elements in the movie reflect or challenge the concepts of freedom, identity, and gender roles as defined by feminist existentialism.

The objectives of this research are twofold: first, to identify the feminist existentialist symbols present in <sup>5</sup> *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*; and second, to analyze and describe the representations of these feminist existentialist symbols within the movie. This analysis focuses on the symbolism present in the movie, using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory to reveal and interpret the hidden meanings related to feminist existentialism. The study encompasses all female

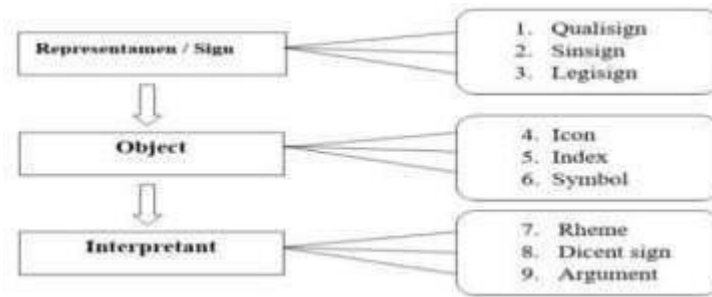
characters that embody feminist existentialist ideals, providing insights into how these symbols contribute to the movie's narrative.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to enhance understanding of feminist existentialist themes in contemporary cinema. By elucidating the semiotic representations in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*, the study aims to offer valuable insights for both audiences and researchers. It will serve as a reference for future analyses of feminist themes in media and contribute to the broader discourse on how movies convey complex ideological messages.

## **Review of Literature**

Semiotics, the study of signs and their systems of meaning, is crucial in analyzing movies. It explores how visual, auditory, and narrative signs convey messages to the audience, helping to uncover hidden codes and deeper meanings within the film. This approach is informed by key figures such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. Saussure introduced foundational concepts like signs, signifiers, and signifieds, proposing a dyadic relationship between them. In contrast, Peirce's triadic model includes representamen (sign), object, and interpretant, and introduces additional semiotic concepts like denotation and connotation (Cobley & Janz, 2012).

Peirce's semiotic theory is particularly relevant for understanding how movies create and convey meaning. His model categorizes signs into three types: icons, indexes, and symbols, each playing a distinct role in communication. Icons resemble their objects (e.g., a map), indexes indicate a causal relationship (e.g., smoke suggesting fire), and symbols rely on cultural conventions (e.g., a peace sign) (Liszka, 1996). Peirce's model consists of three components:



**Figure 1 Part of Trichotomy**

1. Representamen (Sign): The physical form of a sign, such as a visual or auditory element.

- Qualisign: A sign based on inherent qualities (e.g., red signifying strength).

- Sinsign: A sign based on its real-world occurrence (e.g., a crowing rooster indicating morning).

- Legisign: A sign based on established rules (e.g., a crying baby indicating hunger).

2. Object: The referent of the sign, which can be an icon (resembling the object), an index (indicating a causal relationship), or a symbol (based on social conventions).

3. Interpretant: The meaning derived from the sign, which includes:

- Rheme: Allows for various interpretations (e.g., puffy eyes suggesting different states).

- Dicent Sign: Corresponds to facts and reality (e.g., road warning signs).

- Argument: Provides reasons or justifications (e.g., signs prohibiting littering)

(Putri, Anggraeni, & Sigalingging, 2020).

Feminist theory examines the factors shaping women's lives and cultural perceptions of womanhood. It challenges the notion that gender inequalities are natural and scrutinizes how women are represented and represent themselves in media (Jackson & Jones, 1998). Feminism seeks to dismantle stereotypes and advocate for gender equality by addressing power dynamics and social structures.

Key branches of feminism include:

- Liberal Feminism: Focuses on achieving gender equality through legal and political reforms.
- Radical Feminism: Challenges the root causes of gender oppression and advocates for fundamental societal transformation.
- Marxist and Socialist Feminisms: Analyze the intersection of gender, class, and capitalism.
- Women of Color Feminisms: Address the intersectionality of race and gender.
- Psychoanalytic Feminism: Examines how psychoanalytic theories influence gender norms.
- Care-Focused Feminism: Highlights the importance of caregiving roles.
- Ecofeminism: Connects gender oppression with environmental issues.
- Existentialist Feminism: Critiques essentialist views on gender through existentialist philosophy.
- Third Wave and Queer Feminisms: Embrace diversity and LGBTQ+ rights within feminist movements (Tong & Botts, 2018).

Feminist existentialism, as developed by Simone de Beauvoir, explores themes of freedom and gender identity. In her seminal work *The Second Sex* (1956),

Beauvoir argues that women are often viewed as "the Other" in relation to men. Her existentialist approach critiques societal constructs that define women's identities in relation to men (Beauvoir, 1956).

This research uses feminist existentialism to analyze the portrayal of feminist themes in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022), focusing on the semiotic signs associated with female characters. By applying Peirce's semiotic theory, the study aims to reveal how the film portrays feminist existentialist concepts through its visual and narrative elements.

## **Methodology**

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the movie *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*, directed by Sam Raimi. The study focuses on identifying feminist existentialist symbols in the film through an examination of its script, scenes, and dialogues. The analysis is grounded in Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory, which helps uncover representations of feminism by interpreting signs and meanings within selected scenes. Both denotative and connotative meanings are utilized to derive a comprehensive understanding of feminist existentialist themes.

The primary data source for this research is the movie *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022), with a duration of two hours and six minutes. Data are collected from scenes and dialogues that depict feminist existentialist symbols. The research methodology involves several key steps:

1. Organizing and Preparing Data: Relevant dialogues and scenes illustrating feminist existentialist representations are collected and organized into categorized formats.
2. Reading Through All Data: The collected material is thoroughly read to understand the context and to identify feminist existentialist themes.
3. Starting Detailed Analysis with Coding Process: Semiotic elements are identified and coded according to Peirce's categories:
  - Representamen: Qualisign (RQ), Sinsign (RS), Legisign (RL)
  - Object: Icon (O1), Index (O2), Symbol (O3)
  - Interpretant: Rheme (IR), Dicent Sign (ID), Argument (IA)
4. Using Coding Process to Generate Description of Themes: Coded elements are grouped into broader categories reflecting feminist existentialist themes.
5. Describing Themes in Terms of Qualitative Narrative: Detailed descriptions of each theme are crafted, using specific examples from the data to illustrate how symbols convey messages about women's strength and resistance.
6. Interpreting and Making Meaning of Data: Findings are interpreted within the framework of feminist existentialist theory and Peircean semiotics, drawing conclusions about the impact of these representations on the understanding of women's roles and existence in society (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

## **Findings and Discussion**

**Datum 1 RQ, O2, IA**





Figure 2

00:21:16- 00:21:25

1 Wanda : *What if you brought America here?*

Strange : *Here?*

Wanda: *Yeah, i know what it's like to be on your own, hunted for abilities you never wanted and i can protect her.*

Wanda's statement "I can protect her" represents a **qualisign**, as it reflects a quality or potential capability rather than a specific instance. The object is an **index** because her words directly point to her actual ability to protect. The interpretant is a **dicent sign**, which means that the statement is understood as a factual assertion, aligning with the known reality of her powers. Together, these semiotic elements demonstrate how her words convey her capability to protect America through the relationship between representation, object, and interpretation.

In the dialogue, Wanda firmly states her ability to protect America, reflecting her self-confidence as a strong and responsible woman. This expression also highlights her crucial role in providing protection for others. Affirming her position as a leader and guardian. Furthermore, her statement implies that Wanda possesses greater magical power than Doctor Strange, revealing the depth of her expertise and extraordinary magical experience. However, ironically, behind her strong and confident demeanor lies the fact that Wanda is responsible for the events befalling America, adding layers of complexity to her character. This shows that sometimes words do not align with the reality of the situation.

#### **Datum 2 RS, O2, IR**



**Figure 3**

00:22:23-00:22:28

Wanda: You're familiar with the darkhold?

Strange: I know it's the book of the damned, and that it corrupts everything and everyone that it touches, i wonder what it's done to you

Wanda: **The darkhold only show me the truth**

The statement "The Darkhold only showed me the truth" representamen is a **sinsign** because it represents a specific moment where Wanda discovered a truth through the Darkhold. The object is an **index**, meaning Wanda is referring to a truth she has already discovered. The interpretant is a **rheme**, where the

meaning of Wanda's statement is influenced by her understanding of the Darkhold and Doctor Strange's previous words. Thus, Wanda's statement reflects a particular discovery, points to what she found, and conveys a general meaning shaped by the Darkhold and other information.

Wanda, who has mastered the Darkhold book, becomes influenced by it. This proves that Wanda is a person who has a desire to learn and she is an intelligent woman. She strives to obtain what she sees through the Darkhold using her powers, even if it means summoning magical creatures to achieve her desires, which in reality, Darkhold provides something quite impossible. Coupled with her strong ambition, Wanda has set an example of a woman who does not easily give up on pursuing her desires.

#### **Datum 3 RQ, O2, ID**



**Figure 4**

#### **00.30.11**

The representation used is a **qualisign**, where Wanda attempts to dismantle the magic defense barrier using her cunning to influence and control human actions. The object used is an index because what Wanda does will break the focus of the student and destroy the defense barrier, allowing her to

enter the Taj room. The **interpretant** used is a **dicent sign**. In accordance with what Wanda does, she whispers something to the distracted student.

In this story, Wanda uses her cunning to dismantle the enemy's defenses in a subtle yet effective manner. Her strategy relies on psychological influence and behavioral change rather than direct violence or physical confrontation. Her actions illustrate how female characters in narratives often leverage their emotional and interpersonal intelligence to achieve their goals, capitalizing on traditional feminine stereotypes of "weakness" to gain advantage. Thus, Wanda reinforces the idea that a woman's power doesn't always manifest in physical form or direct domination but can also come through subtle yet potent strategies and influence.

**Datum 4 RS, O3, ID**



**Figure 5**

00:15:31- 00:15:38

*America: <sup>1</sup> that thing was trying to kidnap me. It's like a henchman works for a demon, all we knew is that they wanted to take my power for themselves*

*Strange : what power?*

*America : **I can travel the multiverse.***

The statement "I can travel the multiverse" representamen is a **sinsign** because it reflects America Chavez's personal claim to a unique power. The

object is a **symbol**, as the star emblem on her clothing represents her ability to traverse the multiverse. The interpretant is a **dicent sign**, confirming the factual nature of her ability. Together, these elements underscore America's exceptional power, her personal assertion of strength, and her symbolic representation, emphasizing her independence and unique capabilities.

America Chaves claims to have the power to travel across the multiverse, indicating that she considers herself special and strong. The emblem of her power displayed on her clothes reinforces this claim by forming a star that reflects her abilities. Through her factual statement, America asserts her independent existence and shows that she does not live to fulfill the expectations of others.

## **Discussion**

The research focused on feminist existentialism in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory. It identified 53 instances of semiotic representation: 29 qualisign representamen, 21 sinsign representamen, and 3 legisign representamen. Objects included 13 icons, 33 indexes, and 7 symbols. Interpretants were 5 rhemes, 25 dicent signs, and 23 arguments. The analysis shows that while representations of feminist existentialism are prevalent, legisign representamen, symbol objects, and rHEME interpretants are least utilized. This indicates a preference for signs with causal or explanatory functions rather than those with fixed societal meanings.

Comparing with previous studies, this research complements existing work by focusing specifically on feminist existentialism. For instance, Pravita et al. (2023) analyzed feminism in "Encanto" using John Fiske's theory without delving deeply into specific feminist types. Sarah (2021) explored feminism in "Jane

Eyre" using Peirce's theory but did not specify the feminist type. Suana (2014) studied heroism in "Spider-Man 2," while Putri et al. (2020) examined feminist representation in "Enola Holmes" with an emphasis on liberal feminism. Hutauruk and Saraqih (2023) used Barthes' theory to analyze feminist representation in "Samjin Company English Class." This study provides a focused examination of feminist existentialism, highlighting how women's intellectual and existential struggles are portrayed, thereby contributing to a nuanced understanding of feminist ideologies in film.

### **Conclusion**

This research underscores the significance of feminist existentialist analysis in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*. The film demonstrates that women's roles are central to both societal and personal quests for meaning, rather than merely supplementary. Using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics, the study identifies feminist existentialist signs through characters, conflicts, and visual motifs. However, the application of feminist existentialism is limited by gender stereotypes and conventional narratives, which restrict more progressive feminist portrayals. Although Peircean semiotics assists in recognizing feminist existentialist signs, the ambiguous nature of some symbols poses challenges in connecting them to broader feminist themes. This research highlights the value of examining feminist existentialist dimensions in film, especially within the superhero genre, and emphasizes the need for further study to address these limitations and enhance the understanding of gender and existentialism in media.

### **Suggestion**

Future research should deepen their understanding of feminist theory and semiotics to effectively analyze feminist representations. Combining insights from specific feminist theories and semiotic frameworks can provide a clearer perspective. Researchers are encouraged to use a focused feminist approach to streamline their analysis and gather more precise data. Concentrating on dialogues and scenes may yield more abundant and clearer information. This study aims to serve as a reference for future research and addresses gaps in existing studies. Constructive feedback is welcomed to refine and improve subsequent research efforts.

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