

# The Question of Gender in Star Wars Movies

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Grčić, Ivana

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Odjel za anglistiku  
Sveučilišni prijediplomski studij Anglistike

**Ivana Grčić**

**The Question of Gender in Star Wars Movies**

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The Question of Gender in Star Wars Movies

Završni rad

Student/ica:

Ivana Grčić

Mentor/ica:

Doc. Dr. sc. Zlatko Bukač

Zadar, 2023.



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Zadar, 2023.

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## 1. Introduction

This thesis will examine the question of gender in *Star Wars* movies by conducting an analysis of its main female characters. Firstly, the focus will be on introducing the *Star Wars* universe and its three trilogies which are the main focus of the analysis in this paper and present its cultural impact. Following that, some of the main theories and concepts that are used in this paper will be presented. Primarily, gender theory and Laura Mulvey's theory on the male gaze, as well as two often gender tropes - the damsel in distress trope and the Mary Sue literary trope. Subsequently, this paper will examine the concept of gender in science fiction movies, focusing on its history, evolution, and shortcomings. Throughout the decades there have been quite some changes in the *Star Wars* movies, especially concerning the female leads. The focus will be on Princess Leia from the original trilogy, Padme Amidala from the prequels and Rey Skywalker from the sequels. This thesis will analyze each of their characters in selected scenes through the already noted theories, narratives and tropes. The analysis will also focus on their public perception, their dynamics with the male leads and how their portrayal has evolved throughout the years. This doesn't only mean that each character will be analyzed in accordance with the socio-cultural time period they were written in, but rather how the characters are holding up in this day and age.

## 2. An Introduction to Star Wars movies

When talking about sci-fi movies it is almost impossible to not mention one of the most recognizable and everlasting sagas in the world of cinema, the *Star Wars* movies created by George Lucas. Even those who have never watched the trilogies can understand references such as "May the Force be with you," or "Luke, I am your father," because of the impact the movies have had on movies released consequently and popular culture.

The "*Star Wars*" movie series has captivated fans worldwide since "*Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*" was released in 1977, cutting across decades and cultural divides. The movies are in a galaxy far, far away and they blend science fiction, fantasy, and epic adventure into an intricate web of storytelling that never fails to enthrall and motivate audiences. An everlasting story that appeals to viewers of all ages, *Star Wars* is

fundamentally a tale of good battling evil. The struggle between the good Jedi, who use the mystical power of the Force to uphold fairness and harmony, and the evil Sith, who use the Force's dark side to gain control and dominance, defines the universe. *Star Wars* movies, which were first produced in the 1970s and 1980s and then revived at the beginning of the twenty-first century, have continuously revolutionized the area of motion picture special effects and created a hugely successful merchandise sector. *A New Hope*, the first movie from the trilogy, was enormously successful when it debuted on May 25, 1977 (The Editors of Encyclopaedia para.1).

In this space opera, which takes place "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away" Luke Skywalker is a young man who becomes caught up in a conflict between an oppressive government and rebel forces on another planet. The mission for Skywalker and the audacious outlaw Han Solo is to rescue Princess Leia from the command of the terrifying Darth Vader. The Jedi Knights who control and use the Force, a universal spiritual energy that maintains the harmony between the powers of both good and evil—and Skywalker's desire to become part of them are at the center of the movie and the series they launched. Each of the renowned characters from the series has made a permanent impression on society. The characters' richness and depth, which range from the wise and elderly Jedi Master Yoda to the vibrant rogue Han Solo and the famous antagonist Darth Vader famously recognized by his heavy-breathing and menacing background music played during scenes, have helped create an intimate connection between viewers and the story. Seen with Luke Skywalker's story, which shows his maturing and development, Princess Leia's unwavering determination, or Darth Vader's complicated redemption arc, each protagonist's internal struggles and progress are crucial to the emotional impact of the narrative.

According to Arthur Berger, Luke Skywalker has support, just like the normal heroes in fairy tales, in addition the movie is filled with wonderful cast of bizarre roles, like fantastical beings seen throughout numerous folk tales, to aid Skywalker to fight Darth Vader followed by henchmen. In fairy tales, a young protagonist frequently engages in combat to free a princess from an evil older man. The oedipal elements of fairy tales are a significant undercurrent of this movie since we find out during another installment that Luke is the son of Darth Vader. Young men and women may relate to Princess Leia and Luke Skywalker, respectively, and find immense solace in their battles and eventual victory over the forces of adversity (17-18).

Despite having a limited initial release in 42 theaters, *Star Wars* made approximately \$3 million in the initial week of release and reached a \$100 million worldwide total by the end of summertime. By winning six Academy Awards and an award for outstanding excellence in music achievements, the movie changed the motion picture business with its advances in visual effects (The Editors of Encyclopaedia para.3).

*The Empire Strikes Back*, released in 1980 and *Return of the Jedi*, released in 1983, the films that follow *A New Hope*, were produced by George Lucas. Lucas started releasing a second trilogy of movies, over twenty years after the first one, focusing on events which occurred before the plots that happened during the initial movies. *The Phantom Menace*, released in 1999, along with *Attack of the Clones*, released in 2002, and *Revenge of the Sith*, released in 2005, were all commercially successful, despite receiving far fewer positive reviews than the original trilogy. But even into the twenty-first century, *Star Wars* continued to be enormously successful. a full-length animated movie *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*, as well as a few popular video game series produced by another of Lucas's companies, LucasArts, were all included in the collection. It was projected that the franchise had made almost \$20 billion up until *Revenge of the Sith* came out, almost three decades since the series had begun. This level of success is still incomparable to most in the industry (The Editors of Encyclopaedia para.4).

*The Force Awakens*, the seventh movie, appeared in 2015. Walt Disney's company created it as the first episode of the series. The J.J. Abrams-directed movie expanded on the histories of well-known characters like Han Solo and Princess Leia while also introducing new ones to the *Star Wars* canon. The narrative was continued in Rian Johnson's 2017 movie *The Last Jedi* by reintroducing Luke Skywalker. The ninth and concluding movie in the nine-movie series, which came out in 2019 is *The Rise of Skywalker* and Abrams served as the director once again.

According to Gordon Andrew, George Lucas crafted a folktale during the modern era from various strands of contemporary American prevalent stories, including classic motion pictures, sci-fi, shows and graphic novels in a time when Americans lacked heroic figures that they could put their faith. However, it was fundamentally grasped together by the formula based on the exploits carried out by a mythical heroic figure. The movies are a masterpiece for production, a demonstration of creativity and tenacity, and a testament to how the outdated may be revived. George Lucas rummaged through the discarded contents of mass culture and assembled a functional story from leftover parts. *Star Wars* is a combination



of elements from popular culture that have been modified, boosted, and driven hard. Either a generation has to invent its individual myths and heroes, or it must revive those from the past. *Star Wars* was published during a time when the heroes had been brought low by events like the Vietnam War when the distinction between good and evil was becoming hazy, and when the Women's Movement was starting to rethink sexual identities. Americans discovered themselves to be residing in a sort of Death Star, a mechanical society devoid of spiritual values, where people felt powerless and foreign. Americans momentarily reverted to the more straightforward patterns of the past in the late 1970s as they sorely needed a rebirth of trust in themselves as men and women, as men and women who matter, as good guys on the international stage. Superman and other vintage superheroes were brought back, as well as classic genre movies such as *Rocky* and *Star Wars*. These imaginations relate to aspirations for the future of society and of ourselves and express our innermost desires. *Star Wars* has no direct connection to the actual world, but it does touch on our fantasies of how people would imagine it to be (315).

Each unique planet, race, culture, and technological advancement in the *Star Wars* universe has been carefully designed to envelop viewers in a galaxy that seems both strange and familiar. The aesthetically spectacular locales, which range from the busy landscapes of Coruscant to the desolate deserts of Tatooine, offer a dynamic background for the characters' travels whilst simultaneously conveying themes that are universal, such as freedom, persecution, and the search for one's identity.

The *Star Wars* movies additionally expanded storytelling and technological frontiers in filmmaking. The series has been a leader in special effects, bringing to life mythical monsters, epic battles, and aesthetically breathtaking settings with the help of innovative technologies. The series has a reputation for pushing the boundaries of what is possible on the big screen because of its epic space battles, lightsaber duels, and detailed alien designs.

By fusing fascinating narratives, enduring characters, ground-breaking technology, and meaningful themes, the *Star Wars* movie trilogy has made an enduring impression on world pop culture. Its capacity to travel through time and space has left it with an enduring legacy by inspiring viewers to explore the worlds of fantasy and the seemingly limitless opportunities of the *Star Wars* universe. The movies maintain their hold on viewers with each new entry, solidifying their status as a cultural icon and a monument to the effectiveness of filmmaking narrative.

Although all three trilogies arguably have a woman among the few main cast members, it still sparks controversy because there is still a limited amount of representation, these female characters are portrayed in very stereotypical ways, they are often objectified for male pleasure and a majority of the women have limited growth and purpose for the plot. According to Rebecca Harrison, *The Force Awakens*, the first Disney *Star Wars* movie that had its release in 2015, revolutionized the genre as it included a white lady along with an African American man as the main characters. After all of the motion pictures, the most of which centered on white male protagonists, Rey and Finn were given the spotlight. With all being said, it is possible to analyze gender issues, primarily related to female characters, in this work, using gender theory it is possible to analyze gender questions (16).

### 3. Gender Theory

#### 3.1 Gender

In relation to the topic of gender, in “*Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex*” Judith Butler argues:

The distinction between sex and gender has been crucial to the long-standing feminist effort to debunk the claim that anatomy is destiny; sex is understood to be the invariant, anatomically distinct, and factic aspects of the female body, whereas gender is the cultural meaning and form that that body acquires, the variable modes of that body's acculturation. With the distinction intact, it is no longer possible to attribute the values or social functions of women to biological necessity, and neither can we refer meaningfully to natural or unnatural gendered behavior: all gender is, by definition, unnatural (35).

If the distinction is constantly applied, the repercussions for being a certain type of gender alongside being a certain type of sex, are still unclear as it directly challenges the notion of gender and sex as well the assumption that their relationship is either parallel or casual. The arbitrary center concerning the gender of the female body could be labeled as, “woman”, however there isn't a particular reason to exclude the possibility of that type of body to fall under other gender constructions. The cultural perception of what it means to be a woman is a product of society that can change over time and in various cultures. It draws attention to the difference between a person's biological sex, which is a biological issue, and

the socially constructed idea of gender, that is impacted by culture and norms of society. The gender and sex divide, in its most extreme cases, implies a certain degree of heteronomy in regards to created gender and natural bodies as results demonstrate that "being" a woman and "being" a female are two completely different types of "beings" (Butler 35).

Simone de Beauvoir argues: "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one," (330). She sees gender as suggested rather than formed. She claims that one gradually acquires their gender as a part of their identity (335). In relation to gender, the focus will shift to the male gaze, and the themes of damsel in distress and Mary Sue as tools for analysis of female characters in *Star Wars* movies.

### 3.2 Male Gaze

According to Laura Mulvey, in an active society of sexual variance, the pleasure of seeing has been largely separated between the female and male viewers. The feminine image is created and defined in compliance with the male gaze and its fantasy concerning that very image. The appearance that is tied to the definition of a woman is usually showcased with the high amount of visual and sexual effects as to indicate that women are only there to be looked at. They are also mostly gazed upon and portrayed in their respectively traditional and exhibitionist roles. In a stereotypical storytelling movie where the story and appearance are skillfully interwoven, woman and her presence are continuously used as an essential form of spectacle even though their visual presentation rarely effects the plot progression, usually slowing down the action in order to highlight sensual reflection (11). A woman in a movie typically serves two purposes: as a sexual figure for the protagonists in the screen tale and as a sexual object for the audience, with a fluctuating tension between the gaze on both sides on the screen (11). As an example, Mulvey uses the showgirl's devices to enable the two appearances to theoretically be combined without causing a noticeable discontinuity in the diegesis. Without necessarily compromising the realistic aspect, the male gaze and the gaze of the viewer are efficiently integrated, making the woman act inside of it. This movie briefly expands out of boundaries of its own place and time on account of sexual influence conducted by a woman (12).

### 3.3 Damsel in Distress

According to Tracy L. Dietz, men might assume that their responsibility is to defend and own women, sometimes using abuse, whereas women can always expect to be largely dependent, victimized, and mindful of preserving their sexual attractiveness and beauty is one of their obligations. This everlasting stereotype gives a depiction of how women are portrayed in movies, especially ones where there is a male lead, such as the *Star Wars* movies. This type of woman is typically called a “damsel in distress” (426).

Nichole A. Bogarosh explains how action movie plots that include a hero saving a damsel in distress frequently have a strong heterosexual love and romance at their core. Naturally, the heroine falls in love with the hero (65). This assists to support the views on women, heterosexual relationships, marriages, and families, which will be analyzed in this thesis.

### 3.4 Mary Sue

Paula Smith created the first Mary Sue character in her *Star Trek* parody “A *Trekkie’s Tale*”, and without fault gave an outlook into the character’s characteristics:

“Gee, golly, gosh, gloriosky,” thought Mary Sue as she stepped on the bridge of the Enterprise. “Here I am, the youngest lieutenant in the fleet – only fifteen and a half years old.” Captain Kirk came up to her. “Oh, Lieutenant, I love you madly. Will you come to bed with me?”  
 “Captain! I am not that kind of girl!” “You’re right, and I respect you for it. Here, take over the ship for a minute while I go get some coffee for us.” Mr. Spock came onto the bridge. “What are you doing in the command seat, Lieutenant?” “The Captain told me to.” “Flawlessly logical. I admire your mind.” (Para. 1)

Mary Sue is known for having an amazing, almost magical capacity to outperform everyone she encounters. She comes across to everyone as being incredibly talented in whatever she does, astute, and gorgeous enough to have anybody fall under her spell. Just like any other self-aware person, Mary Sues occasionally feels vulnerable, but she bounces back swiftly. Audiences still see a female figure as a Mary Sue if her powers are even somewhat more outstanding than they thought reasonable (Biniek 42).

#### 4. Gender Representation in Sci-fi movies

Science fiction has frequently been seen as a mostly masculine discipline; it has really been an important tool for exploring social conceptions of gender. The conversation begins by recognizing the historical marginalization of women from science fiction and the idea that technology and science were fundamentally male interests. The definition of "gender" is expanded to include socially created traits and roles related to sexed bodies (Merrick 241).

Helen Merrick tries to show how science fiction has addressed gender issues and challenged conventional cultural perceptions while moving through several points in science fiction's interaction with gender. The "super-man" stereotype, which prioritized intellectual supremacy above conventional masculinity, appeared in early tales. Over time, more sophisticated investigations of gender emerged, such as "Woman Dominant" narratives that depicted matriarchal communities that simultaneously questioned and supported conventional gender norms. Concerning women's roles in science fiction from the 1920s through the 1960s, a time when feminism and concerns about "sex in sci-fi" collided. It draws attention to the existence of female characters, their absence from the traditionally male-dominated field of science, and stories that either questioned or supported gender inequalities. Science fiction literature has changed from traditionally male-focused stories to a genre that is strongly involved with difficult gender issues (241)

Merrick displays a variety of strategies, from imagining ideal communities to challenging gender stereotypes and examining various identities. This highlights how gender representation in science fiction is both dynamic and transformational (242).

It's easy to conclude that when it comes to the portrayal of women in popular science fiction and action movies, archetypes quickly devolve into clichés. The outcome is a traditional repetition of the love interest, mother or caregiver, and other stereotyped female roles when there is just one "symbolic" female because characterization is viewed as inferior in significance by the companies producing the movies.

From January 2009 to December 2018, just fourteen percent of movies were headed by women or girls. Thirty one percent had co-leads who were both men and women, and fifty-five percent had males as the leader. Since 2013, there has been "some improvement," with females taking the lead or co-starring in fifty-three percent of superhero/sci-fi movies, up

from thirty-six percent from 2009 to 2013 (*Information courtesy of Box Office Mojo and IMDb*).

John Arit points out that it could be said that sci-fi is societally regarded as a male-dominated space and that people connect women with weakness or fantasy, making the female main character less appealing and serious than the male one. It also disregards the ever-growing female audience, which is a negative for the studio, but a positive for the bro-culture fandoms. These fandoms are often plagued with toxic masculinity and the dislike of women. (Para. 10)

Over the last few years there has been a positive upwards trend in female leads, as well as directors in sci-fi movies. Movies like *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow* have been released to great success. Continuing regarding gender representation in sci-fi movies, the focus will be on the problems, solutions, and history of gender identity in science fiction.

Sonja Fritzsche argues that fantasy writing has a long history of questioning preconceived notions about gender, society, and science. Women authors pushed for fair representation in both the present and envisioned future in the beginning of the twentieth century. Resistance continued throughout the advancement and individuals voiced animosity against women working in science fiction (6).

Susan A. George argues that women are underrepresented in the science fiction genre for a variety of reasons that affect their support, trustworthiness, and self-perception in this industry, not because they lack the necessary skills. The cultural expectations of men and women are significantly shaped by gender stereotyping, which frequently limits women's potential and increases violence against them. These preconceptions hinder the advancement of women by leaking into professional and academic settings. Since science and technology have historically been controlled by males, there is a risk of unconscious gender prejudice, which makes it challenging for women to excel and be taken seriously. Expectations based on appearance further exacerbate the situation because a woman's beauty frequently affects how competent she is seen (14).

According to Sanjukta Chakraborty, the representation of women in science fiction has changed throughout history. Traditional science fiction often depicted women as the embodiment of dread and immorality, perpetuating negative gender stereotypes. The social mores prevalent at the period were portrayed in this way. Nevertheless, there has been a movement in favor of more complex representations over time. Science fiction has seen an

increase in the number of female authors and influences, as well as in the diversity of their positions. Changes in the perception of gender roles in science fiction stories have been influenced by feminist movements, the call for more equitable sexual interactions, and other factors. Science fiction has the capacity to confront and change social standards, even while it currently struggles with gender stereotypes. Contemporary science fiction explores a variety of positions for women that go beyond how they are often portrayed. These books challenge stereotyping's constraints and urge viewers to see women in a variety of positions throughout society and the world of science fiction. Still, development has been gradual. Science fiction has occasionally failed to keep up with the changing roles of women in society, portraying stereotypical and diminished female characters, such as Princess Leia in *A New Hope*. The genre may be a platform for depicting autonomous and powerful female protagonists that question expectations and choose unconventional careers, even as women continue to manage job, family, and social biases. It may support a larger cultural change towards gender equality by challenging conventions and challenging established ideals (932-933).

Chakraborty concludes by saying that gender preconceptions, historical biases, and cultural expectations all have an impact on the lack of representation of women in science fiction. The representation of women in the genre has undergone both growth and opposition. Modern science fiction could question and reinvent gender norms, unlike older works that frequently reinforced negative stereotypes. Science fiction may promote a more egalitarian and diverse society by including strong, varied female protagonists (933). Although slow, this change necessitates constant efforts to question and undermine conventional gender standards both inside and outside of the genre and as the years went by, the *Star Wars* universe has introduced new female characters.

## **5. Portrayal of the female leads**

Kathleen Ellis argues that regarding gender representation in particular, the basic presumptions of the *Star Wars* movies are strikingly comparable to the standards as well as the beliefs of planet earth in the present day. The parallel between the *Star Wars* world and our planet, notably in terms of female representation, is highlighted by this remark. The *Star Wars* universe's representation of gender roles, stereotypes, and interactions may be useful as an example of current society values and standards. It also begs the issue of whether entertainment and fictional worlds may be employed as instruments for criticism and

discussion on contemporary topics like gender portrayal, as well as how they either question or support existing standards (135).

The highlight will be on the question of gender in the movies, focusing on the three female leads. The movies will not be analyzed in the chronological order of the canon, but rather in the order they were released in. This is due to the fact that the goal of this paper is to show how the representation of women to research on the possible changes throughout the decades and the impact it had on the *Star Wars* franchise. The analysis will start with Princess Leia, then Padme Amidala and lastly Rey Skywalker.

### 5.1 Princess Leia

Princess Leia, whose parents are Anakin Skywalker, a Jedi, and Padme Amidala, a former senator and queen of Naboo. At the time of Leia's birth, her father completely surrendered to the Dark Side, completing his turn to the vicious Darth Vader, while her mother dies in childbirth after losing the desire to life. Obi Wan Kenobi and Yoda act swiftly to devise a strategy to avoid the identification of the Force-sensitive twins once Leia and her brother Luke were born. It's kept a secret that they were born, having everyone think when Padme didn't give birth when passed away. Additionally, Obi Wan and Yoda decide to split up the siblings to protect them and keep them safe from the dark Darth Sidious.

When Princess Leia first appeared to the public in 1977, she quickly caused an unprecedented increase in the amount of powerful female protagonists appearing in movies, making her undoubtedly the most significant female protagonist in the whole *Star Wars* saga. The *Alien* series' Ellen Ripley, who is regarded as the most courageous female character ever, first appeared in 1979. Several years later, Linda Hamilton's dominating performance as Sarah Connor in the 1984 movie *The Terminator* helped to make the character renowned. It is difficult to argue against the fact that these characters were in any way impacted by Princess Leia played by Carrie Fisher. During the first movie, she kills more stormtroopers than the whole male ensemble combined due to her arrogance and brazenness. Leia is presented as a senator from Alderaan in the initial introduction. She is dressed in a gown that shows absolutely no skin, and her hair is styled high and tight. By way of explanation, she doesn't come out as excessively sexualized and the viewer quickly sees her as a woman of power. Leia is quickly taken prisoner by the Empire, yet as she is faced by them, she exhibits an



astounding bravery that is completely unlike that of a damsel in distress. The first *Star Wars* movie is fundamentally a traditional story about a heroic individual saving a princess from the evil character's "castle." In that regard, the movie presents the women as being on a lesser level than the men; they need saving since they are unable to save themselves. In fact, Luke Skywalker and Han Solo, the male characters, must save Leia from the death star.

Nevertheless, quite soon after being freed from her prison, Leia assumes command, directing Luke and Han while bickering with Han continuously as well as saving them. Once they are forced to go to tight spot, Leia really snatches Luke's rifle away, fires a waste chute's grate, and then jumps in. Leia is the sole person who notices that the heroes' escape from the Death Star was incredibly simple and that their escape was planned for the Empire to follow them to the covert base (Pianka 37-38).

Leia started off the first movie on a high note. She was a strong female character that was able to hold her own. Though, this trend died off very soon. In the second movie her character becomes more of a damsel in distress. She constantly needs to be saved, apparently forgets how to fight, and fend off enemies by herself and shamelessly gets over sexualized. Two scenes that can be interpreted within damsel in distress narrative, as well as male gaze are the scenes when she is shown to be clumsy at driving and the scene where she is shown in a gold bikini next to Jabba the Hutt. The first scene is perpetuating the notion that women can't drive which is a theme that was popular at that time and is still contemporary. The second scene portrays a half-naked Leia in a gold bikini next to Jabba the Hutt. During this scene she is portrayed as the damsel in distress once again that is waiting for a male savior. Both scenes are byproduct of the studio wanting to appease their target audience which are predominantly young men. They can get a cheap laugh out the "women can't drive" joke and can appeal to men from a ten-minute bikini scene from Carrie Fisher. This can be interpreted as part of the male gaze and how it takes away from the character that was developed throughout the movies. Leia ends up killing Jabba with her chains, which, from a modern feminist perspective, can be interpreted as a way of her taking control of her own sexuality and slaying the trilogies biggest symbol of the patriarchy. Although this probably wasn't the aim of the scene, the beauty of revisiting older movies and literature is the fact that they can prove themselves to be timeless through different interpretations.

Leia often wears quite utilitarian clothing (Figure 1) and isn't any more sexualized than the male protagonists, but this shifts when *Return of the Jedi's* metal bikini sequences are included (Figure 2). The male gaze theory, according to which the female protagonist of a

narrative is converted into a show for the advantage of the males in the plot (Mulvey, 837), is illustrated by the sexual objectification of Leia during these sequences. Leia has been simplified to her outward look and bodily components in order to create sexual desires for the male viewers. Han Solo is led to the dungeons when he isn't able to be saved from Jabba the Hutt fails, but Leia is sent to serve as a slave for Jabba instead. Leia, who is wearing a metal bikini and is pressed up against Jabba, is also wearing a collar and a chain around her throat. This is shown as a closeup, highlighting how undressed she is.

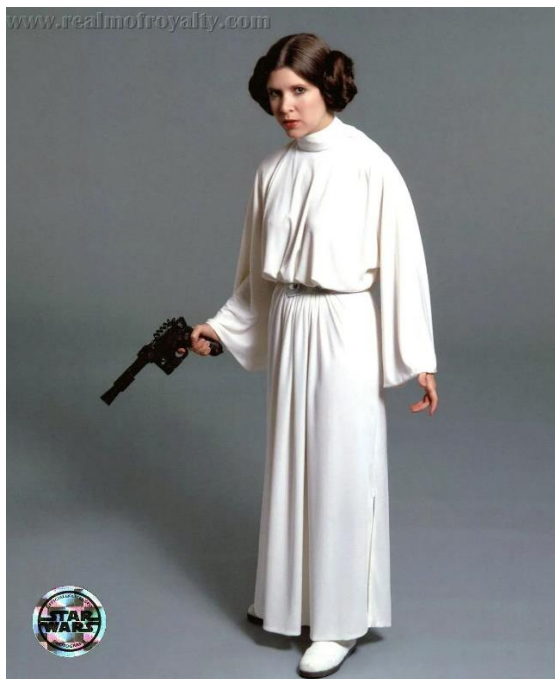


Figure 1: Leia's outfit in *A New Hope*



Figure 2: Leia's outfit in *Return of the Jedi*

The scene where Leia is held captive by Jabba was only ten minutes long yet probably brought the studio millions of fans. The marketing team wound up using Leia posing in the bikini at the front of the many posters they plastered around the world and the sole inspiration for Carrie Fisher's wax statue in the famous British museum "Madame Tussauds".

When talking about the wax statue, in her book "*The Princess Diarist*" Carrie Fisher wrote:

The main thing you notice, though, about wax Leia is that I'm almost naked. When you get close to my doppelgänger, she might look a little thick skinned or sweaty, so stay back if it bothers you! She might not have a "beauty mark" on her lower back, but I wouldn't either if I could help it. i i Maybe the wax me could take over when the flesh me can't do it anymore. But the wax me would have to do whatever

necessary thing it was in that fucking bikini. Everyone else got to wear their regular outfits from the first movie. I had to wear my outfit that Jabba picked out for me. Jabba the Hutt—the fashionista. Jabba the Hutt—the Coco Chanel of intergalactic style. Trendsetter, fashion maven, leader of women’s looks in his world, on his planet and the next. In wax, I would forever be outfitted by outlaw Jabba. In wax and out, I would forever be stone-faced (166).

In her memoir written three decades after the movie’s release, Fisher looks back on how sexist and unreasonable the choice was for her statue be dressed in the bikini and not something that her character wore in the first movie just like the rest of the actors. She also reflects how it also gives an unrealistic depiction of her true self by not having the beauty mark she has on her body, once again proving it was done to fulfill a male fantasy by creating the “ideal woman.” To make things worse she says that she wishes she could look like that and how she wishes she did not have the beauty mark, which is something women are very familiar with today, considering how much of social media is fake and how most women feel the need to photoshop their bodies and faces to fit the “beauty standard” to appeal to men and society in general. While reading this extract from the book I got confirmation that it was the same for women even four decades ago.

Analyzing *Star Wars: A New Hope* closely demonstrates the patriarchal mentality Lucas unwittingly embraced. Darth Vader lies about the exact place of the rebel base when Princess Leia Organa is captured at the start of the movie. But as soon as Han Solo and Luke Skywalker get involved in it, this is swiftly disregarded. Leia then becomes the classic damsel in distress, and it seems that being a woman is what keeps her from rescuing herself (Ellis 135).

Further proving that although Leia was thought to be written as a feminist icon, she fulfilled the part of in the damsel in distress and according to Dan Rubey, Darth Vader's kidnapping of Leia sets the stage for Obi Wan's exit and Luke's journey of rescue. Leia manages to at a certain stage take a laser pistol and fire a few bullets, but she ultimately depends on the men who are her saviors, as well as the one thing she takes throughout the mission nearly ends in their deaths in a waste crusher. "Help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi. You are my only hope." which is repeated by her hologram, is one of her most iconic lines. Princess Leia fades into the foreground as Luke advances from his first state of powerlessness and Kenobi's rescue to towards an increased heroic position. She is only a bystander during the assail on the Death Star. During the finale, at the highest point of the stairs, Leia can be seen

alongside her father. Her dress represents her role as a sexual prize. Her place within the system is obvious. Because she provides a route to the highest level, her presence makes the rebel hierarchy a good one. There is a lot of implicit aggression in rescue fantasies. The harsh treatment Leia receives from Darth Vader and the soldiers allows us to imagine the actual interrogation all have obvious sadistic overtones. In contrast to Luke's helplessness at the beginning, Princess Leia's victimization as well as powerlessness become a vital component of her sexuality as a result of the aforementioned cruel features that sexualize her captivity and identify her as an object of sexuality. Princess Leia, on the other hand, is stuck in the victim position due to her sex and does not play a significant part in the events that follow her rescue, unlike Luke, who may transition from victim to savior. Princess Leia's fragile nature is a result of her gender whereas Luke's is a result of his age and experience. Women serve as victims and as the subject of complex rescue fantasies (9-14).

Vilma Vainikka points out that in line with patriarchal ideology, Leia and Han's "flirting" and the beginning of an intimate relationship show heterosexual relationships to be what thing all women need and want, regardless of how they might initially oppose it. Another instance of patriarchal views is the romanticization of actions which Han Solo is using while pursuing Leia. This suggests that if a guy acts violently against a woman, it is just because he is drawn to her or has a deep affection for her (26). Leia's character is not particularly diminished by the romance element of the plot, and she is not neglected as a result. However, the inclusion of a relationship in the first place, particularly in the circumstance that she is the only significant female, is consistent with patriarchal notions and give the illusion that it is something women need.

Lucas once again doesn't break any norms and gives us yet another female character from a Sci-fi movie who has a romantic relationship with a man. Not only that but also with Luke kissing Leia. Although as Vainikka argues, the love story doesn't have much of an impact on her character (27), I would argue she does change in a way because she went from not giving any attention to the men in *A New Hope* to suddenly feeding into the stereotypical female character from a sci-fi movie, who is crazily in love with a man and gives him attention and is soft towards him.

In the end this is all brought back to the point that Leia could have been a strong female lead which women all over the world back then, and still now need. Throughout the trilogy she is witty, has an attitude, can fight for herself and is sometimes even smarter and stronger than the male characters she is surrounded with, but most of these characteristics

become forgotten because of the need for sexualization and always having to be rescued. Instead of taking a strong female character and making her even stronger and more complex, Lucas doesn't give her much growth and oversexualizes her and puts her in a relationship because apparently women cannot survive without one. Unlike the other (male) characters she has little to no character development and is used as an "addition" to make the male characters' plots better and more interesting.

Princess Leia does make her return in the sequel trilogy that started releasing in 2015, starting with *The Force Awakens*. General Leia Organa is used to refer to Leia instead of as a princess to indicate her continuous leadership of the Resistance. Her transition from being part of royalty to a military leader is symbolized by her change in title. Her career as a military leader defies long-held gender stereotypes that contend women are unsuited for senior positions in the military. She is also shown aging naturally, and in clothes appropriate for her age, which shows that she is still just as important without being sexualized or set to fit beauty standards. She is also seen as a motherly figure to her son Ben Solo, which gives her character greater depth.

## 5.2 Padme Amidala

In *The Phantom Menace*, Padme Amidala initially appears in the role of the young queen of Naboo. Following her time as queen, she joins the Galactic Senate as a senator and an antiwar activist. Padme gets married to Jedi Knight Anakin Skywalker in secret, and subsequently passes away whilst giving birth to the Skywalker twins, Luke, and Leia. Anakin's angst at losing Padme is the driving force that turns him toward the dark side and makes him into Darth Vader.

Leia's first appearance in *A New Hope* occurs earlier than Padme's in *The Phantom Menace*. The young boy Anakin, though, makes his appearance much later, and he is established as a major character and given a lot of screen time. Even though Padme doesn't arrive until over 30 minutes during *Attack of the Clones*, she plays a crucial role in the story. Padme is not a helpless damsel in distress when spectators finally get to meet her; instead, she is a major political figure involved in a conflict. She appears as Queen Amidala as she attempts to negotiate an end to the turmoil on her native planet Naboo (Pianka 36).

As Pianka stated, Padme was initially shown as a leader (36), but sadly most of this went the waste after making her only plotline her relationship between her and Anakin

Skywalker. Almost two decades after the last movie in the original trilogy was released and twenty-two years since *A New Hope* was released along with feminism becoming a bigger topic as the years go by, when rewatching the prequels, it was shocking to see how much the representation of the lead female hasn't evolved and was even diminished. Although unlike Leia, Padme never needed a male savior which may be seen as progress in comparison to the original trilogy, the writers still decided to make sure she always had male security to protect her from assassination attempts, which again, is related to gender and makes her a damsel in distress needing protection, because if it were a male in her position, he probably wouldn't need other male characters taking care of him. Padme has needed protection constantly from the start. The narrative is mostly driven by the urge to protect Padme, who Obi Wan and Anakin save from being killed in the movie's opening sequence. She is repeatedly saved after being taken away for reasons of safety. Her friendship with Anakin is also getting closer, but when Anakin's actions toward Padme are considered, this might be problematic. He holds Padme responsible for causing him feelings of lust because passion is what essentially governs him. *Revenge of the Sith* can be seen as an essentially a damsel-in-distress movie throughout. Anakin's desperation to preserve what he believes to belong to him and save Padme regardless of circumstances is what pushes him into the dark side. When he chokes her in a fit of wrath and is only prevented from murdering her by Obi Wan's intervention, the violent elements in their relationship reach the point close to the movie's conclusion.

One of the main arguments regarding Leia was her sexual objectification and appealing to the male gaze. Although throughout *The Phantom Menace* Padme was never dressed in sexual or scandalous outfits, in fact in most scenes she is seen covered from head to toe, continuing in *Attack of the Clones* things seem to change.

Padme is preoccupied with the responsibilities she has being a senator in the first part of the movie, aiming to keep freedom throughout the universe. Padme becomes more of a romantic interest for Anakin as the plot develops. Their affections develop over secret suppers, picnics, and quiet discussions in front of a crackling fire. Anakin continues to be devoted to Padme despite the Jedi Code forbidding relationships, while Padme begins to experience love sentiments. When she becomes aware of Anakin's love interest in her, her personality alters abruptly and significantly. Her attention veers from her senate responsibilities to a secret affair with Anakin. Padme, now a senator, starts to look seductive. The elaborate ceremonial attire that formerly wore no longer exists. Rather, she wears more exposed clothing (Morgan 105).

Watching back *Attack of the Clones*, it feels like a complete shift from *The Phantom Menace*, from Padme being a great female leader that young girls can look up to, to suddenly her only focus being the “love interest”. Once again showing that the sole intention the female protagonists have seems to be to fulfill the role of being an addition to the male characters. Padme starts to suddenly show more skin when Anakin starts showing greater interest in her can be interpreted as Padme becoming a “sexual” character.

According to Mary C. King and Jessica L. Ridgway, when it comes to Padme's more seductive clothes, objectification and the male gaze are major factors. In *Attack of the Clones*, Padme wears a very covering, tailored white jumpsuit that was designed with the intention of being functional as well as to provide her better movement in the movie's pivotal combat. In this disguise, Padme confesses her love for Anakin. Soon after declaring her love, Padme suffers an injury that causes her outfit to be torn and nearly exactly trimmed, revealing the stomach. Her once-tight, completely concealing outfit has evolved into one that bares her midriff (Figure 3). Her outfit is still perfectly white and blood-free, despite the massive wounds on her back. The attire is now intended to underline her status as Anakin's love interest rather than as a fighting suit, especially after he helps her, and she kisses him on the cheek (10).



Figure 3: Padme’s jumpsuit before and after her love declaration.

Although Padme was initially a witty character who wasn't afraid to talk back to others just like her daughter Leia, when she falls pregnant with the twins is when not only Padme's feisty personality is lost, but also a last hope for Padme to develop into the strong female character she had the potential to reach.

Morgan points out that after Anakin and Padme learn of Padme's pregnancy at the start of the movie, almost all of Padme's encounters with Anakin are the extent of her engagement in the movie. Anakin is frequently heard or seen being nurtured by Padme, who also serves to soothe his feelings and reassure him that she will be okay. She spends much of her discussions trying to make her spouse feel better. She hardly has any political influence. In the Senate she is only once made an interested listener, not an advocate or an indicative vote and other than that her involvement is confined to her house (110).

Just before Anakin and Obi Wan engage in their last fight, Padme encounters Anakin after he joins the Dark Side and transforms into Darth Vader. She tells Anakin how all she wants is his love and tells him how he is breaking her heart. She then makes it very apparent that he is the most significant thing in her world. Anakin chokes her using the Force in a dramatic manner since he thinks she betrayed him. Afterwards, Padme undergoes an emergency birth. Medical staff are perplexed when Padme unexpectedly dies after giving birth to her children because there is no apparent medical cause for her death. She has lost the will to live, which is the sole explanation they can provide (Pianka 46).

Since Padme has little to no purpose throughout the whole movie her "downfall" as a powerful female character is best shown at the end of the movie when Anakin turns to the Dark Side as well as choking her using the force. This scene is again, showing a man who is stronger than a woman and even though Anakin is using the force and there wasn't much any character could have done, the writers didn't show Padme at the least trying to fight back or maybe even leaving him to prove that she is a strong independent woman, instead she cries and begs for him saying that his love is all she wants. Anakin's use of force to strangle Padme is the perfect display of masculine domination. He makes it clear that he owns her and if he can't have her, no one can. Afterwards one of the most heartbreaking scenes is yet to come: Luke and Leia's birth.

As discussed before, when Padme does give birth, she dies because she lost her will to live. Once again, the writers are failing to show a strong female character, and instead are giving the audience the stereotypical woman who can't live without a man.



### 5.3 Rey Skywalker

The main character of the *Star Wars* sequel movies is Rey Skywalker. Rey is a lonesome scavenger who becomes embroiled in the conflict between the First Order and the Resistance. When she sets out to find Luke Skywalker, the only remaining Jedi, to rescue the galaxy, she discovers her capabilities as a Force user. She grows close to Kylo Ren, the main antagonist and the child of Princess Leia and Han Solo. Though rivals, Kylo Ren and Rey gradually start to fall in love, and it is subsequently discovered that they compose a Force dyad.

When the world was introduced to the character of Rey in the first movie in the sequel trilogy, *The Force Awakens*, ten years after the final movie from the prequel trilogy was released, it's safe to say it wasn't something that could have been expected after being used to always having a male character at the front of the movie posters. Needless to say, it was a big change for the *Star Wars* movie trilogies and was completely different from what fans were used to seeing regarding the last two trilogies. Suddenly a woman was the main protagonist in the movie, and it wasn't a princess or some big title character.

Right from the beginning of her introduction in *The Force Awakens* it is very noticeable that Rey is not a "sexual" character that is a normal occurrence in other Sci-fi movies, she has no love story and isn't in need of a man to save her or even take care of her in any way. While that is exactly what many people would expect and want from a female character, some could argue that it was very "forced" and "overdone". Every significant inclusion of a female character in *Star Wars* has made headlines, and more recently than ever, it has drawn a range of passionate responses. That is a striking reflection of our culture: while adding males is seen as something normal, something people are used to, the addition of women to *Star Wars* is seen as disturbance to the story, while for some, having more women and more diverse men is a reason for celebration (Esterrich 118).

As mentioned before, there was a lot to say about the new lead in *the Star Wars* sequel movies, calling her a "Mary Sue". It can be argued that Rey is just a character the producers of the movies inserted to fulfill the need to appease to the new norm where people aren't afraid to speak up if they think women aren't being represented enough or that we are continuously given the exact same stereotypical storylines. The production team fears backlash, so they wrote Rey to be this perfect character who is able to do everything on her own with absolutely no hardships and a character who doesn't even have one flaw. By

making her this flawless character, they thought they were empowering women and giving the audience a strong female lead, but instead they are just giving us an unrealistic depiction of a main character who seems like she has no problems or no obstacles and because of that she is unrelatable and is probably why many fans aren't happy with her.

Rey had a difficult beginning since with her parents abandoning her and becoming a scavenger. Rey learns about the Force and the Jedi quite rapidly. In *The Force Awakens*, she receives minimal training and learns the Jedi mind trick right away to avoid arrest. In the movie's climactic scene, she also vanquishes the strongest Sith Lord in the galaxy. She performs all this untrained. During his first movie, when Luke engages in battle, he doesn't utilize a lightsaber, and in *The Empire Strikes Back*, he loses miserably to the galaxy's strongest Sith Lord. In contrast to Luke, who has a storyline that may span three movies, Rey doesn't even start one in the first movie. She is polite, brave, and incredibly competent despite having no prior training, and we only know that her parents are either exceptional Force users or unimportant, all pointing towards her being the definition of a Mary Sue.

In *The Rise of Skywalker*, Rey ultimately serves as an outlet for the development of a white male character, just like Padme did. Rey falls and appears to be dead after Luke and Leia's lightsabers have defeated Palpatine, but Kylo is able to save her using the Force.

According to Joannah Berry, the giving of Kylo's life force to Rey is his ultimate action, which solidifies both his remorse and mortality in the cause of Rey's survival. Rey's narrative, which was built on her rejecting the Palpatine lineage and executing the perpetrator of it, is no longer the main emphasis. Kylo Ren is now in the spotlight instead, which is a forced conclusion that rests on shaky base given his role as the rival for most of the trilogy (54).

In this scene, she is shown as no different to Leia and Padme, because she is here also portrayed as a damsel in distress, but to make things worse the man who is saving her is the same man who abused her throughout the trilogy.

Along with having Kylo Ren save her in this scene, fans are introduced to something known as a dyad in *The Rise of Skywalker*. The dyad was initially teased during the interrogation scene between Rey and Kylo in *The Force Awakens* but was ultimately revealed in the last episode of the trilogy, it is basically a connection between two force-sensitive people connected with the ability to do things in a powerful way such as heal and use telepathy. So, in this case it is a kind of soul connection between Rey and her abuser, and because of it she cannot be without him. No matter how much she tries to be independent,

progress as a person, push for development and save the galaxy, she will always be tied to him. We can argue that this is a typical example of a female character in sci-fi movies, and we can interpret this all as of symbol of the patriarchal society and considering that throughout the movies he abuses and controls her, this comparison becomes more and more obvious. Rey is surrounded by such symbols on both sides because she is also trying to escape from the shadow of her grandfather who also represents patriarchal society because he was the head of one of the largest empires in the history of the galaxy. He was a fascist, murderer and almost the entire race in his empire was human. There were few women, and he himself was arrogant and greedy. His empire can be taken as a metaphor for today's society, and Kylo Ren as an individual of that society. So even though she managed to escape from that society and from her grandfather's shadow, she only ended up in the hands of Kylo Ren, who, as we have already mentioned, is a metaphor for the abuser and who emerged because of the already mentioned patriarchal society. So, Rey, running away from the system, suffered anyhow because the system already had too much influence on other people. Therefore, the force dyad with Kylo Ren is nothing but a metaphor for female dependence on men and proof that a real feminist character didn't appear in these movies. If the goal was to create a strong and independent female character little girls and women all over the world could relate to, look up to and love it is quite contradictory to have her be depicted as this perfect character with no flaws and not one that women can relate to as well as having her be saved by her abuser, when up until then she was depicted as perfectly capable of doing it on her own. Along with having him bring her back to life they also have this relationship that is explained by the force dyad, once again furthering the point that female characters always must have at least somewhat of a relationship.

## 6. Conclusion

This thesis discusses the question of gender in *Star Wars* movies. Firstly, giving an introduction to the *Star Wars* universe and its history and impact on popular culture. Furthermore, this paper presents the concepts of gender, male gaze, the damsel in distress

trope and the Mary Sue type character to help with understanding gender representation in sci-fi movies and subsequently analyze the three female characters in the *Star Wars* movies: Princess Leia, Padme Amidala, and Rey Skywalker.

Princess Leia, being one of the most iconic female protagonists of all time was portrayed with a witty attitude and the ability to fight but was still an object of the male gaze due to the sexualization of her character, especially when she is held captive by Jabba in her infamous gold bikini. As mentioned, Leia was able to fight yet was still represented as a damsel in distress constantly needing to be saved by the men around her, contributing to the rescue fantasy and having her love interest save her. Padme Amidala, the female lead in the prequels, started off as a strong female character who wasn't sexualized, though soon after, just like Leia, she becomes a sexual object for the male gaze and needs protection and saving. Once she falls in love, her storyline revolves around her husband and when she loses him, she dies because she no longer wants to live, stating that a woman can't live without a man. While there could have been a big step for gender equality in science fiction movies with the introduction of Rey, it ended up failing due to her blandness and "Mary Sue" character archetype and again being portrayed as a damsel in distress who had to be saved by her abuser. Throughout the sequels, Rey was depicted as a perfect lead who wasn't sexualized unlike Leia and Padme, and she seemed to not need a love interest. It appears this was only done to fulfill a quota to be accepted by the popular culture of today, which likes to introduce female characters just for sake of it rather than to try to shift the social paradigm and bury prejudice by creating a female character that is just as interesting as a male one. However, her being a damsel in distress and being saved by her abuser contradicts the build of the character and once again shows that a female protagonist needs a male by her side.

To conclude, the root of the problem lies within the science fiction movies themselves. It's a male dominated space and equality is hard to come by if there are no female decision makers, the aforementioned concepts are proof that female characters are continuously being represented in the wrong manner and that this topic deserves more attention.

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## 7.2 Attachments

38. Figure 1 .....17  
<https://diythegalaxyofstarwars.wordpress.com/2020/11/07/master-post-all-of-leias-costumes/>
39. Figure 2 .....17  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Princess\\_Leia%27s\\_bikini#/media/File:Princess\\_Leia\\_bikini-Return\\_of\\_the\\_Jedi\\_\(1983\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Princess_Leia%27s_bikini#/media/File:Princess_Leia_bikini-Return_of_the_Jedi_(1983).jpg)



40. Figure 3 .....22

<https://i0.wp.com/mediachomp.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/padme-star-wars-looks-02.jpg?resize=650%2C650&ssl=1>

## 8. THESIS TITLE IN ENGLISH: Summary and key words

### The Question of Gender in Star Wars Movies

This Bachelor Thesis focuses on the question of gender in the *Star Wars* trilogies. By giving a quick introduction to the *Star Wars* universe and focusing on the gender theories explaining the concept of gender, the damsel in distress trope the male gaze theory and the Mary Sue literary trope, this thesis then shows the history and evolution of gender representation in sci-fi movies. Through these introductions and theories this paper examines the gender representation of the three main female characters throughout the trilogies: Princess Leia, Padme Amidala, and Rey Skywalker. This paper focuses on the portrayal and stereotypes of the characters and how they change throughout the movies. Leia and Padme fall into both categories of damsel in distress, and objects of the male gaze; in contrast to Rey who is covered by the damsels in distress and the Mary Sue concept.

**Key words:** Science Fiction, Representation, Gender, Star Wars, Stereotype, Male Gaze, Damsel in Distress, Mary Sue, Princess Leia, Padme Amidala, Rey Skywalker

## 9. NASLOV RADA NA HRVATSKOM JEZIKU: Sažetak i ključne riječi

### Pitanje Roda u Star Wars Filmovima

Ovaj se završni rad fokusira na pitanje roda u trilogijama *Ratova zvijezda*. Dajući kratak uvod u svijet *Ratova zvijezda* i fokusirajući se na teorije roda koje objašnjavaju koncept roda, damsel in distress, male gaze teoriju i Mary Sue, ovaj rad zatim prikazuje povijest i evoluciju predstavljanja roda u znanstveno-fantastičnim filmovima. Kroz ove uvode i teorije ovaj rad ispituje rodnu zastupljenost tri glavna ženska lika u trilogijama: princeze Leie, Padme

Amidale i Rey Skywalker. Ovaj se rad usredotočuje na prikaz i stereotipe likova te na to kako se oni mijenjaju kroz filmove. Leia i Padme spadaju u obje kategorije damsel in distress i objekata male gaze-a; za razliku od Rey koju opisuju damsel in distress i koncept Mary Sue.

**Ključne riječi:** Znanstvena Fantastika, Reprerentacija, Rod, Stereotip, Ratovi Zvijezda, Male Gaze, Damsel in Distress, Mary Sue, Princeza Leia, Padme Amidala, Rey Skywalke