

REDEFINING INDEPENDENT WOMAN: FEMINIST INSIGHTS INTO DAMSEL

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Abstract. This study takes the film *Damsel* (2024) as an object of research through the perspective of existential feminism. Analyze Elodie character how she fight to stay alive, also another woman power character as in the study of existentialist feminism. This study uses qualitative descriptive analysis research method with approach of Simone de Beauvoir's Feminist Existentialism. Collect data method will be form of character's action scene, dialogue, and context. This analysis shares the awareness of women's freedom reach by fight not given and redefining woman independency based on *Damsel* (2024). This study concludes that in the film highlighting women's efforts to remain viable. Being a damsel in distress does not mean having to depend on others and be miserable, this film teaches to stand alone in survival.

Keywords: *Feminist existentialism, Independent Woman, Equality, Damsel.*

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The concept of independent women has become an important part of feminist thought. Since the first wave of feminism, the existentialist feminist movement has been one of the voices raised. Although it originated from the early struggle for equal rights, this concept remains relevant to this day. According to Rosemarie Tong in her book titled "Feminist Thought," (Tong, 1998) first-wave feminism occurred in the 19th and early 20th centuries, emphasizing women's basic rights as an "exist" citizens in the Women's Decade, including participation in suffrage (politics), economics, culture, religion, and law. In this context, the idea of women being economically and socially independent appears. Although this struggle has been ongoing for more than a century, many women today still face similar structural issues, such as gender inequality, social pressure, and stereotypes about women's expectation roles. In the context of existentialist feminism, as proposed by (Beauvoir, 1953) independent women are not just about intellectual freedom, but about being the full subjects of their existence.

Women are no longer positioned as "objects" within the patriarchal structure, but rather become active agents in choosing their own paths, and free to choose what they do aside from social expectations. The representation of independent women is displayed clearly in films and literary works. For example, *Enola Holmes* (2020) depicts Enola, an independent female character with sharp intellectual capacity who chooses her own path in life decision and successfully solves mysteries before her brother Sherlock Holmes. She managed to break free from the shadow of Sherlock Holmes. Similarly, in the film *Legally Blonde* (2001), it depicts how Elle pursues her goal to prove her abilities in the field of law as a lawyer, a field generally dominated by men, without relying on others. In addition to the above film, *Damsel* also emerges and depicts a female character who struggles to survive and exist without being easily destroyed.

In the film *Damsel* (2024), it tells the story of a royal princess who is married off for political reasons but is made a sacrifice. Elodie's struggle for survival, and how she managed to prove and avenge the injustice that befell her. Elodie then disrupted the next victim's wedding at the palace, revealing the betrayal of the Aurean royal family. Elodie advised the third bride and her family to flee, and the Dragon burned the palace with all the nobles and landowners of Aurean inside. Lady Bayford as a stepmother of Elodie faces the odd behaviour of Queen Aurea right a night before the marriage held. Each of the character have their own flaws in empowerment also have their struggle to achieve existential.

Women experience discrimination and injustice based on gender, as depicted in the film when the character Elodie is thrown into a cave pit after getting married and being made a sacrifice, discovering that she was not the first to be discarded. Innocent women also share the same fate as her and die in vain in the cave. The importance of analyzing the film *Damsel* conveys a moral message that, in real life, there are many cases where women become the primary targets of victims because they are perceived as being weaker, facing discrimination, violence, and even being treated arbitrarily.

Based on the background that has been described, a statement of the problem can be proposed, including: 1) How women depicted in the film *Damsel* (2024)? 2) How do women struggle to achieve existential in the film *Damsel* (2024)? 3) How woman was redefinition as an independent woman in the film *Damsel* (2024)?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This research aims to explore and redefining the concept of women's independence through the perspective of existentialist feminism while open new views on independent women, an approach that has not been widely studied in the context of women's empowerment to do something. In the film *Damsel* (2024), it focuses on how existentialist thought, often associated with individual freedom and survival, provide new insights into understanding women's independent. Although many previous studies have addressed the topic of feminism and some have examined women in the film *Damsel*, most still focus on social and political aspects, without considering how existentialist feminism can open up space for women to negotiate their identities and freedoms in a world full of norms and social pressures.

Previous research by Neti Navia, "Representation of Feminism in the Film *Damsel*" (2025) uses Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics to unveil the representation of feminism through visual and symbolic signs. The main focus is on the empowerment of women in the context of resistance against patriarchy.

Then the research by Dahlia Salsabila Ryana Putri (2024) also examined the film *Damsel* in her article titled "BREAKING THE DAMSEL IN DISTRESS STEREOTYPE: EXPLORING GENDER AND SOCIAL CLASS DYNAMICS IN NETFLIX'S DAMSEL," utilizing gender and social class analysis with a feminist approach and Max Weber's social stratification theory. Max Weber to examine how this film challenges the "damsel in distress" stereotype.

Another study on the film *Damsel* was conducted by Yosep Liderman Panggabean and Mike Wijaya Saragih in an article titled "INSTRUMENTALITY OF WOMEN IN DAMSEL MOVIE" (2024), highlighting the instrumentalization of women through Martha Nussbaum's objectification theory, particularly how the character Elodie is used as a tool for the interests of others.

Also reaseach “Gender Role and Power Dynamic in Damsel Movie: A Feminist Stylistic Analysis” by Mutiara, Nasution, Lhaksmi, and Rangkuti. They examine how movie related to gender role and power dynamic that analyzed through the lens of feminist stylistics.

The previous initial studies have not clearly and consistently defined the concept of "independent women," making its meaning tend to be broad and ambiguous. In this study, there is a research gap that leads to a deeper understanding of the relationship between existentialist feminism and the idea of women's independence. This research will make an important contribution by linking existential philosophy with the issue of women's independence, as well as challenging the old discourse that views independence primarily as a form of resistance against the patriarchal system or heroic actions, without delving into the psychological, social, and intellectual processes that shape women's self-awareness. Furthermore, there is no distinction between individual and collective independence, nor has the cause-and-effect relationship in the transformative experiences of women in the film Damsel been elaborated.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with narrative textual analysis methods. This approach was chosen to explore the subjective and symbolic meanings of the female character's experiences in the film Damsel (2024), with a focus on redefining the idealist concept of an independent woman within the context of existentialist feminism. The data sources in this research consist of primary data in the form of the film Damsel (2024), as well as secondary data in the form of articles about the film Damsel and references to other existentialist feminist literature. In addition to referencing *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, this research also critiques the limitations of Sartre's philosophy in fully representing women's freedom. Data collection techniques were carried out through textual observation and visual documentation of film scenes that depict the process of self-awareness of female characters. Literature review is used to strengthen the argument that women cannot simply be "free" as claimed by universal existentialism, without considering the history of subordination and repression they have experienced.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The film Damsel (2024) is an interesting reflection on how women are placed and forced to play roles in a patriarchal social structure. Every female character in this film, both Elodie and Lady Bayford, faces pressure, betrayal, and moral dilemmas that not only test their physical strength, but also their integrity and identity. Having the power to control, Queen Aurea becomes an independent woman but becomes the side where the image of women supports the patriarchal system. Although not all characters show empowerment in the form of direct action or physical strength, each has an existential struggle that reflects their efforts to remain subjects in their own lives. They question, reject, or even destroy narratives that have positioned women as objects, political tools, or symbols of blind loyalty as you pledge your unwavering allegiance to someone or something without pausing to question their motives, actions, or impact (Kamboj, 2024). In this context, Damsel presents a broader understanding of the figure of an independent woman. Not always depicted as a physically tough figure, but as a woman who hold the principles that are believed, a strong rejection of limitations, and the courage to reject the destiny that has been determined by an unfair system. The female characters in this film show that independence is not just about acting alone, but about awareness of self-worth, the courage to demand justice, and the strength to fight against oppressive narratives. Through inner conflict and

real action, they present an authentic form of resistance to domination and control over their bodies and choices.

Indicator of defining independent woman in this analysis are:


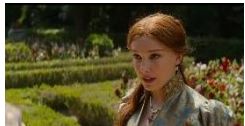
1. **Self-reliant:** Decide her own path, manages her life balance, and sets her own goals.
2. **Confident:** She knows her worth, boundaries, and communicates it clearly.
3. **Emotionally intelligent:** Easily read the situation, and quick adapt to deals with the problem. Manage to having sympathy and empathy trough the process.
4. **Vision-driven:** Has a purpose beyond herself, whether it's career, creativity, activism, or community.
5. **Lifelong learner:** Invests in her growth, mentally, financially, emotionally, and education.




Here are the analysis of Elodie's character in Damsel (2024) who can defines as independent woman. Also another character who woman in power who can defines also as independent as Elodie with a different flaws.

Elodie

The Princess of Bayford, who forced into a political marriage. Faces challenge being betrayed and to be sacrificed. Her fall into the cave symbolizes the abandonment and disposability of women. She discovers that many women were victims before her, highlighting systemic gender violence. Elodie transforms her suffering into strength, refusing to be a victim, and the most courage to confronts the power structures that wronged her. This process is her existential awakening, claiming her life, justice, and identity.

Table 1 Elodie's Independent table analysis

| Indicator | Timestamp | Context | Exerpt | Images |
|--------------|---------------|--|--|---|
| Self-reliant | 49.17 - 50.08 | Elodie's self-reliant turning point is when after she escape the bird cave, she find blue light. She manage to get herself back into realization, shown with action of throw her wedding ring away. And start to climb the sloping side of steep ravine. | [sound of flashback Henry's dialogue] |  |
| Confident | 17.25 - 17.29 | She knows how to socialize with new people with secure boundaries. She ask to Prince Henry about his opinion about herself. And | Elodie : "but I'd like to know if the person I'm being guilted into marrying |  |

| | | | | |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|--|--|---|
| | | explain the reason why she ask that question, which we can conclude she know about her worth. | truly likes me or not." | |
| Emotionally intelligent | 1:37:21 - 1:38:42 | She manage to take a revange into Aurea. But in a calm gesture also giving a change to have mercy (Empathy) in the middle of her revange. | <p>Elodie : "Take your family and run. I will offer you all one last chance to do the same."</p> <p>Elodie : "It's not me you should fear. This is the end of your story."</p> |  |
| Vision-driven | 17:55 - 17:59 | She is a wise princess with strong idealistic and willing to contribute in help saving her own people and territorial by married with wealth future spouse partner. | <p>Elodie : "This union will save us, i've made my peace with it. My happines is a small price to pay for the future of my people"</p> |  |
| Lifelong learner | 1:35:18 & 1:40:25 | Invests with kindness, she save the Dragon after the fight. Straightening out all misunderstandings between her existence and the Dragon. When the Dragon find out the truth, it willing to follow Elodie. | [sound of ocean and flying dragon] |  |

[Source Damsel movie (2024)]

Lady Bayford

Lady Bayford is Elodie's stepmother of Elodie and Floria, her sister. She is married to Elodie's father and is support political matchmaking bet ween Elodie and Henry, the prince of the kingdom of Aurea. Initially, she seems to agree to the marriage for the sake of Bayford family's honor. However, as the wedding approaches, Lady Bayford begins to suspect Queen Aurea's behaviour, which seems peculiar. Although she does not play a direct role in the physical action, Lady Bayford is a symbol of women who are starting to become aware and question the system that has been considered right.

Excerpt 1

Timestamp 23.00 – 25.20

Queen Aurea : "And here you are. You've climbed so high. Still, one must not forget one's station. Nor place undue import on what is ultimately a transaction born of necessity."

Lady Bayford : "Uhh.. Necessity?"

Queen Aurea : "Well, your family needs money. My family needs a bride. What we don't need is more family."



Figure 1 Lady Bayford figured something odd with Queen Aurea

Lady Bayford try to reaches out Queen Aurea with respect and humble way, but turns out their conversation is not in the same heart. The underline part shows hidden intend of Queen Aurea, was catches by Lady Bayford so odd due the approaches wedding. And also Lady Bayford share this notice with Elodie wisely despite her panicked bad feeling also. It shows that Lady Bayford truly care about her children. She has a power to behave and protect her children.

Queen Aurea

Queen Aurea is the character that wronged all the princess who is victims in sacrifice. She is the queen of the kingdom of Aurea and the mother of the prince who is betrothed to Elodie. Behind her graceful and dignified appearance, Queen Aurea is a cruel figure who maintains her royal power through the tradition of sacrificing noble women to dragons. She acts as the mastermind behind the deception of Elodie and many previous female victims. Queen Aurea represents a female power figure who submits and preserves the patriarchal system in order to maintain the status quo.

Excerpt 2

Timestamp 01.18.43

Queen Aurea : "That damn girl. I knew she was trouble."

King Aurea : "Where are you going?"

Queen Aurea : "To fix this."

Timestamp 01.19.45

Queen Aurea : "Seize her! You promised us a daughter."

The underline upper sentence shows that Queen Aurea capable to do the dirty jobs to fix the situation based on her preference. The below sentence shows her power to give order, and authoritarian, she is unstoppable in this scene to kidnap Floria, Elodie's sister.

Excerpt 3

Timestamp 01.36.35

Prince Henry : "Elodie. You must believe me. I haven't slept a moment since ..I had no choice."

Elodie : "Since you tried to kill my sister?"

Queen Aurea : "Don't you dare explain yourself to this.. this commoner."

[Henry try to explain again]

Queen Aurea : "That's enough Henry. You know nothing of what we've endured. You know nothing of our story.

...

You're insolent creature. You think we ought to fear you now? Why? Because somehow you managed to escape the dragon?"

The underlined sentence shows how efforts that Queen Aurea bring to shadowing Elodie bring her back down, and take control of the entire situation with her power word again. After she say "insolent creature" she managed to manipulate Elodie to make her feel downward again. Sadly she failed to do the task at the end.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the film Damsel (2024) successfully redefines the concept of independent women through the character of Elodie and the woman in this film, the core traits of herself match with existentialist feminism of independence concept. Elodie's journey brings the self awareness idea that women decide their subjectivity. Lady Bayford's character show us that not only bloodline mother that used to be to care of us, she playing as a caring mother and make sure all her children behave and protect them. Queen Aurea's character undirectly say to us, that women supports the patriarchal system still exist. The third of them are independent woman in their flaws, but not all of them is moved by woman also. Existentialist feminism help to prove that woman are capable to do and rules as a subject.

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