

Representation of Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* as "Tough Woman"

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ABSTRACT

The character of Sarah Connor performed by Lynda Hamilton in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* serves as a barometer for the representation of 'Tough Woman' in Science Fiction Films. Usually science fiction films portrayed female protagonists as damsel in distress, victim, or femme fatale. But Sarah Connor in T2 transcends all the limitations paving way to reconceptualise gender roles in films in particular and society in general. Using Sherrie Inness' four characteristic features which define tough woman i.e., body, attitude, action and authority the paper closely analyses Sarah Connor's transformation into a tough woman.

1. Introduction

Representation of female protagonist as 'Tough Woman' has become a major archetype in the Science Fiction Films of recent times. Tough women challenge traditionally accepted roles of gender and redefine the ways in which only masculinity is associated with toughness. According to Sherrie Innes there are four specific characteristic features through which female protagonists establish themselves as tough women i.e., body, attitude, action and authority. Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, a Science Fiction Film directed by James Cameron is a prime example for the role of tough woman. With her muscular body, non-display of her actual emotions during the most adverse situations, intelligently planned acts of self-preservation and with better judgement imposes her authority and becomes victorious despite many hostile circumstances.

In *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), popularly called T2, the role of Sara Connor "caused the biggest stir, when she showed up chiseled, militant, and dour, wearing camo gear and even cooler shades" (Knight 252). Jason Meyer observes "Sarah Connor is one of the most visually striking action heroines anywhere. Her visual presence easily rivals any other Action Hero or Heroine"(quoted in Sims 187) . She has been transformed from a "soft-bodied, feminine beauty to hard bodied, athletic, warrior woman" (ibid). The "new Sarah Connor looks like the mercenary. She has trained to be through all the intervening years. She wears fatigues, totes heavy weapons, and a mission to perform" (Jeffords 160) which is to protect her son John Connor from a more ruthless, technologically advanced cyborg T -1000 who has arrived to kill him to stop him from leading the mortal in the great war of 2029.

Sarah Connor's first appearance on the screen in unsettling. She is in a 'Criminally Disordered Retention Facility' at Pescadero State Hospital in the state of California. As the camera moves into one of the cells what we hear is a rhythmic grunting, small explosions of breath in perfectly-metered time. The camera pans to a bedframe leaned upright against the wall,

we see a pair of sweaty hands grip metal bar. Tendons knot and release as someone does pull-ups. In the next wide angle shot we see a woman in a tank top and hospital pants hanging from the top leg of the vertical bedframe. Her body is straight and taut. The arms are lean and muscular. The inmate's face is hidden as she continues to pull up, like a machine. No change in rhythm. Cut to we see Dr Silberman, the criminal psychologist explaining to his interns about the next patient, "a 29-year old female diagnosed as acute schizo-affective disorder. The usual indicators... depression, anxiety, violent acting-out, delusions of persecution". Silberman stops at the intercom and wishes her "Morning Sarha". In close up shot we see Sarah, not the same woman of *Terminator* (1984). Her eyes peer out through a wild tangle of hair like those of a concerned animal. Defiant and intense Sarah asks him, "How is knee?" She had actually stabbed him in the kneecap with his pen a few weeks ago. This introduction according to J P Telotte, "emphasizes her body and a transformation that has occurred. Compulsively exercising, she has made herself hard and muscled – like a smaller version of the Terminator in preparation for the apocalypse she knows is coming"(31). Connor has become

decisive, determined, and hardened—traits that are necessary for her son's success—and has transformed her body in preparation for her role as a warrior. This transformation is not only physical—her outer transformation reflects her inward transformation. She must stay alert and hard (Knight 257).

But Sarah has been labelled insane and incarcerated; nobody trusts her premonitions of the coming apocalyptic war. Her son who is put in a foster home thinks that "she is a complete psycho who tried to blow up the computer factory and got shot and arrested. She is a total loser". "She has subjugated her emotions...in way she has technologized herself, shaped herself into the best *human* cyborg possible in order to cope with the menace posed by the futures' real cyborgs" (Telotte31).

In the opinion of Sherrie Innes, Sarah, however has

accomplished far more than fashioning herself into the best possible simulacrum of a machine. Although her pumped-up pecs might align her with the terminator in some ways, they suggest her ability to stand up for herself, she is a different woman from the one encountered in the beginning of the first film (126).

The film required Linda Hamilton to sport the look of a feral warrior. She was expected to learn about weapons and combat techniques and to train her body into peak physical shape. For this "Cameron paired Hamilton with Uzi Gal, an ex-Israeli commando...as her personal trainer...The actress worked out three hours a day, six days a week, for four months, lifting weights and performing aerobic exercises" (Keegan 117). The result of rigorous and intense training is clearly seen in each shot of the film. Keegan argues,

there had never before been a female character like Sarah Connor in T2. Cameron had edged closer to her with each of his Films, from young Sarah's reluctant acceptance of her awesome responsibility in the first movie to Ripley's ferocity fighting the queen in *Aliens* to Lindsey Brigman's courage in the face of death in *The Abyss*. With T2, Cameron and Hamilton went all the way and created the ultimate female action hero. For the first time, saving the world was woman's work, too (118).

Although Sarah has a tough physique and appear masculine the traditional feminine vulnerability haunts her. She is caught between her naturalised and manufactured self. Along with her body "She has also created an almost impenetrably hard, unfeeling surface that denies depth by disallowing displays of emotion or caring, as a defense against that cold, emotionless menace she must face" (Telotte 31). But this manufactured self fails her in the most significant scene in which she decides to become the terminator herself in order to kill the scientist Miles Dyson, the scientist who is responsible for the development of Skynet computer system which will go out of human control brining the impending holocaust. As a female terminator she disturbs the domestic tranquility of Dyson. While preparing to kill him she exhibits no emotions whatsoever except her pursuit. She sets up her sniper rifle, aims at Dyson, but misses him as the toy truck of Blythe Shields (Dyson's son) hits his feet making him bend down. She continues to shoot tearing into his desk and computer, blowing his keyboard into shrapnel. She strides towards him shoots him in the shoulder, but couldn't terminate him as his son pleads "Don't hurt my daddy". Dyson pulls his son off him and pushes him towards his mother indicating that he is ready to sacrifice for the sake of his family. Looking at Dyson lying on the floor Sarah screams "it's all your fault". With his wife and son and crying, "seeing her victim in this human way, seeing the family bond that evoke her broken family, seeing herself as Terminator (Telotte 31) she wakes herself up to her feminine side. She lowers the gun slowly backing away from them. Her human side takes control of her machine side. It appears as if she's backing away in terror from what she almost did. She reaches a wall and slumps against it. She collapses on to the floor in a foetal

position. As John arrives she breaks down. She finally tells him that she loves him and hugs him. This is first time we see Sara hugging her son. She "has returned to her role as a mother and woman" (Innes 128). This overt display of the emotion according to Telotte John has throughout the narrative longed for (32). Previously, when John rescues her from the asylum she had berated him for endangering himself. She appears concerned only about the physical wellbeing of her son not his emotions. She reaches to him opening her arms, and John thinks she is going to hug him, but disappointed when he realizes that she is just checking his body to see if there were any injuries on him. She reprimands, "John it was stupid of you to go there. You have to be smarter than that. You almost got yourself killed. What were you thinking? You can't risk yourself even for me, do you understand?" When shattered John tells her that he wanted to get her out of that place and apologises. His chin quiver, his face crumples and he starts to cry. Sarah is cold to all this and admonishes him that she didn't need his help and she can take care herself.

There is another scene which foregrounds Sarah's natural feminity over her manufactured tough masculine appearance. The scene was included in the special edition of 1997. Kyle Reese appears to her in this dream or fantasy sequence. He gently wakes her up, asks her about their son, and reminds her that he is the target now, he is alone and she should protect him. She asks "how am I supposed to do that, he doesn't even believe me anymore. I've lost him". Reese tries to convince her saying that she is strong, stronger than she ever thought. He shouts "on your feet soldier" to rekindle Sarah's determination to fight. She kisses him passionately. They are locked together in a timeless moment. As Sarah buries her face in his shoulder Reese is gone. Dean Conrad in *Space Sirens, Scientists and Princesses, The Portrayal of Women in Science Fiction Cinema* observes,

Connor's "supernatural guide" and lover in *The Terminator*...lifts her spirits, encourages her to fight on and appeals to her role as a mother...this short sequence softens, and so deepens, Sarah Connor's character...it projects Connor's feminity forward...Removing the sequence leaves Sarah Connor as an angry, masculinized cipher (229 Google Books).

Sarah is a complex woman who embodies different roles throughout the film. She successfully negotiates between her primary feminine characteristics and her developed masculine traits.

She is tough, determined heroine who retains most of the agency available within the narrative... being the primary female in the stories of the other three strong characters, who are all male. She is a mother to one hero, lover to another and once prey/now friend to a most powerful protagonist (Andris and Fredrick 39).

The film actually begins with Sarah's "premonitory vision of the future after the judgment day"(Vergne 7). Her voice over narration confirms that Judgement Day has come and gone "3 billion human lives ended on August 29th, 1997.The survivors of

the nuclear fire called the war Judgment Day. They lived only to face a new nightmare, the war against the Machines..." The Skynet has sent a second Terminator to the past to eliminate Sarah's son John Connor, leader of the human resistance against the machines. Her voice over is confirmed by the preceding inter titles giving the date and location of the action. She is presented as all knowing omniscient narrator of the action, and "her vision acquires 'objective' legitimacy: the lengthy pre-credit sequence set in 'Los Angeles 2029 AD' appears not as a product of her imagination filmed in subjective camera but as the likely future of humanity within the film's narrative economy" (ibid).

Andris and Fredrick argue that her developing the buffed, lean, strong body of a well-trained fighter is made explicit in the films narrative. "She has a moral imperative to fight at two levels: firstly to save her son and secondly, in consequence, to save the world...what makes her stand out, is not so much that she is female but she is human (ibid 43)". She is a

woman who comes to terms with the unsettling space simultaneously occupied humans, cyborgs and machines. She works with and against masculine militaristic cyborgs and she negotiates her own status

as a woman who is also a ruthless fighting "machine" for a cause determined by the very substantial ghost of her own humanity" (ibid 52).

Conclusion

Until the very end of the movie Sara is encoded as tough with moments of explicit return to femininity. In the denouncement she wields a shot gun and shoots at the T-1000. With every shot T-1000 is pushed back right to the edge of the platform just above the vat of molten steel which could terminate him forever, but she has no ammunition left. She is incapacitated and requires the Terminator to protect her. In a literal *deus ex machinasequence* T-800 uses the backup power supply and shows up just in time to resolve the situation. As T-100 advances towards Sarah and John the conveyor belt behind them brings the Terminator into our view, and he fires his last grenade into the T-1000. It explodes, falls into molten steel becoming a part of the steel. About this scene Sherrie Innes argues that although Sarah is tough, but she is not able to take care of herself as well as tough guy like Shwarzenegger can look after himself. His ability points out her inability, reducing the threat that tough women like Sarah pose to society's codes of femininity (131).

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