

## WOMEN'S RESISTANCE AGAINST OPPRESSIONS IN THE FILM *DAMSEL*

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Received: 06-04-2026 Revised: 29-04-2026 Accepted: 17-05-2026 Published: 30-05-2026 Volume: 10 Issue: 2 DOI: 10.33019/lire.v10i1.612	This research examines women's resistance and empowerment in the film <i>Damsel</i> , utilizing Iris Marion Young's "Five Faces of Oppression" and Rosemarie Tong's radical feminism as analytical frameworks. The film follows Elodie, a young noblewoman, who is sacrificed by the monarchy to a dragon under the pretense of tradition. The study identifies the forms of oppression Elodie faces and analyzes her strategies for reclaiming agency. Through qualitative textual analysis of scenes, dialogue, and visual symbols, the findings reveal that Elodie experiences exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence, manifested through physical aggression, loss of autonomy, gendered stigma, and political manipulation. From Tong's radical feminist perspective, Elodie emerges as an active agent who resists patriarchal control. Her rejection of gender roles, assertion of autonomy, and confrontation with the monarchy illustrate resistance to unjust structures. However, while Elodie's actions disrupt the oppressive system, the film's emphasis on her individual agency raises questions about whether this resistance represents broader collective liberation or remains centered on a singular heroic figure. This research contributes to feminist film criticism by demonstrating that integrating Young's structural theory of oppression and Tong's radical feminist perspective provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing both systemic domination and transformative resistance in contemporary fantasy cinema. This approach offers new insights into the relationship between individual agency and structural change.
<b>KEYWORDS</b>  <i>Damsel, Oppression, Radical Feminism, Resistance, Women</i>	

### 1. INTRODUCTION

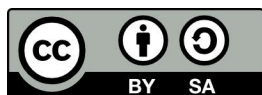
Women have historically faced many forms of oppression caused by a patriarchal system deeply embedded in societies worldwide (Saxena & Joshi, 2024). This oppression strips women of their rights and constrains their social, economic, and personal potential. In both literature and film, the problem of oppression in patriarchal civilizations is commonly addressed. This issue is upheld by social, stereotypical, and institutional rules that favor some groups over others (Taylor, 2016). Global cinema, in particular, presents women in ways that both challenge and reinforce patriarchal values and traditional gender norms (Afifulloh, 2025). These portrayals occur across diverse contexts, including historical periods, dystopian futures, and fantasy worlds. For example, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments* illustrate the commodification of women's bodies through systems of religion, language, and social control that deny female autonomy (Robison-Greene, 2024). Although these narratives are fictional, they reflect the persistent realities of women's subordination in patriarchal societies.



However, cinematic narratives increasingly depict women not only as victims but also as agents of resistance to oppression. Female characters are frequently portrayed escaping confinement, challenging authority, expressing anger, or confronting systems that seek to silence them (Fatmawati, 2020). Therefore, film serves both as a reflection of gender injustice and as a medium for envisioning resistance and liberation. A recent example is *Damsel* (2024), directed by Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, which reinterprets traditional fairy-tale conventions to critique patriarchal power and structural injustice. The narrative follows Elodie, a young noblewoman married for political purposes, who later discovers she has been designated as a sacrificial offering to a dragon. By situating its narrative within a structured system of ritual, hierarchy, and gendered expectations, *Damsel* serves as a compelling case study for examining the construction, constraint, and contestation of female subjectivity within institutionalized forms of oppression.

Previous scholarship has examined *Damsel* (2024) from various theoretical perspectives. Salsabila (2024) analyzes the film's reconstruction of the traditionally passive female protagonist through Max Weber's theory of social stratification and feminist film theory. This study contends that Elodie subverts the conventional "Damsel in distress" trope by actively shaping her own fate rather than awaiting rescue. Complementing this perspective, Panggabean & Saragih (2024) investigate Elodie's position through Martha Nussbaum's theory of objectification, particularly the concept of instrumentality. Their findings indicate that Elodie is treated as a political tool in marriage, targeted for revenge, and ultimately sacrificed to a dragon. Although these studies provide valuable insights into female agency and objectification, they tend to emphasize agency and objectification without fully addressing the broader structural forms of oppression that shape Elodie's experience. Methodologically, reliance on a single theoretical framework limits the examination of the intersection of oppressive mechanisms. In terms of contribution, prior research does not sufficiently examine resistance as a challenge to systemic and institutionalized patriarchal power.

This study addresses these limitations by analyzing Elodie's oppression and resistance through the combined frameworks of Iris Marion Young and Rosemarie Tong. The integration of structural and transformative perspectives forms the theoretical foundation of this approach. Young's Five Faces of Oppression offers a systematic lens for identifying how injustice operates across interconnected dimensions: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Tong's radical feminist framework extends the analysis by conceptualizing resistance as a deliberate effort to dismantle patriarchal institutions, rather than merely enduring them. Methodologically, the study employs qualitative textual analysis, enabling in-depth interpretation of meaning through close examination of key scenes, dialogue, and visual elements. This method facilitates analysis beyond surface-level description and reveals how oppression and resistance are constructed narratively and symbolically within the film. The study contributes to feminist film criticism by demonstrating the effective application of Young's structural theory and Tong's radical feminism to contemporary fantasy cinema, providing a more comprehensive understanding of oppression and resistance as interconnected processes. Practically, this research offers a framework for critically engaging with media representations of gender, encouraging audiences and scholars to recognize the normalization of systems of domination and to view resistance as a form of structural transformation rather than individual survival.



## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Women's resistance in fiction films is frequently depicted through challenges to patriarchy, gender inequality, and violence, encompassing both subtle defiance and overt rebellion. These portrayals often illustrate women's responses to institutional discrimination, such as restricted opportunities, hostile environments, and unequal access to resources (Putri & Wahyuningsih, 2019). Numerous studies investigate the representation of women's resistance in contemporary films. Johri & Yadav (2025) analyze *Mrs.* (2024), an adaptation of *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), using a Marxist feminist framework to demonstrate how the protagonist resists oppression by rejecting unpaid domestic and care labor. Their analysis conceptualizes liberation as withdrawal from exploitative marital structures rather than their transformation. Similarly, Br. Perangin-angin & Putri's (2025) study of *Birds of Prey* (2020) through Naila Kabear's empowerment theory, analyzing how female characters reclaim agency, resources, and achievement through solidarity, and presenting empowerment as gradual character development within the existing social order. Other research addresses women's resistance in contexts of extreme violence. For instance, Yang et al. (2025) examine Zhang Yimou's films, including *The Flowers of War* (2011), *Ju Dou* (1990), and *Article 20* (2024), and find that although female characters attempt to resist sexual violence, their bodies continue to be framed within male-dominated narratives.

While these studies provide important insights into women's resistance in cinema, they also reveal a recurring limitation: resistance is frequently depicted as personal empowerment or survival within existing structures, rather than as a direct challenge to those structures. Consequently, patriarchal systems may remain intact as narratives emphasize individual resilience over systemic transformation. This limitation underscores the relevance of radical feminism, which contends that women's oppression is fundamentally rooted in patriarchal institutions and therefore necessitates broad social transformation rather than superficial reform (Pebrawaninggil & Nurhayati, 2025). From this perspective, resistance is understood not as adaptation, but as an effort to dismantle the institutions that sustain women's subordination

Rosemarie Tong articulates this position by arguing that women's liberation requires confronting the structural sources of domination, particularly those embedded in institutions such as marriage, family, religion, and tradition (Tong & Botts, 2018). Existing studies applying Tong's framework tend to focus on how female characters challenge patriarchal norms through gender performance, bodily autonomy, or refusal of subordination within hostile environments. For instance, Asshary et al.'s (2023) analysis of *Monster Hunter* (2020) uses Tong's radical feminism to show how the protagonist Natalie Artemis embodies resistance through androgynous appearance and the rejection of gendered limitations, framing radical feminism primarily as a struggle over gender representation and identity. Similarly, Rosyidah & Rifai's (2022) semiotic study of *Perempuan Tanah Jahanam* (2019) draws on Tong's radical and postmodern feminism to highlight women's control over their bodies and refusal of sexual domination, emphasizing resistance through individual courage, survival, and moral agency within violent patriarchal settings.

Although these studies are valuable, they primarily interpret resistance at the level of identity, voice, and individual agency. Limited attention has been devoted to narratives in which resistance results in the destruction of oppressive systems that generate violence and exploitation.



Furthermore, Tong's theory is often applied independently from broader structural theories of oppression, leaving unexplored how women resist interconnected systems of exploitation, marginalization, violence, and cultural domination.

Young (2012) offers a complementary perspective by conceptualizing oppression as a systemic condition rooted in institutions, cultural practices, and political arrangements, rather than as isolated individual acts. Her theory of the Five Faces of Oppression—exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence—articulates how inequality is normalized and reproduced across multiple dimensions. In global politics, this framework has been employed to demonstrate how structural injustice generates insecurity for marginalized actors within international systems (Lerner, 2023). In postcolonial feminist literary criticism, Lufini et al. (2025) apply Young's Five Faces of Oppression to Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, identifying these forms of oppression in the experiences of Black and South Asian women under intersecting colonial and patriarchal systems. These studies underscore the versatility of Young's framework in elucidating how oppression operates across social, political, and cultural contexts.

Despite its wide application, Young's theory has been less frequently utilized in analyses of cinematic narratives of women's resistance, especially within the fantasy genre. Existing scholarship has tended to focus on women's agency, empowerment, or objectification, with less emphasis on how multiple forms of structural oppression shape women's experiences in film narratives. Moreover, there has been limited research integrating Young's structural theory of oppression with Tong's radical feminist perspective. Consequently, the relationship between systemic domination and transformative resistance remains insufficiently examined.

This study builds on prior research by examining how Elodie seeks retribution for personal oppression and challenges a patriarchal order institutionalized and sustained by royal authority. To fully understand how this domination operates within the narrative, a structural framework of oppression is required. Accordingly, this study addresses the gap by integrating Young's Five Faces of Oppression with Tong's radical feminism in analyzing *Damsel* (2024). By combining these perspectives, this article demonstrates how *Damsel* depicts both systemic oppression and resistance aimed at dismantling patriarchal power, thereby advancing feminist film scholarship on women's liberation and structural transformation.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a qualitative descriptive research design to examine representations of systemic oppression and women's resistance in *Damsel* (2024). A qualitative approach is selected for its capacity to provide interpretive depth and enable a close reading of feminist themes within the film's narrative structure, dialogue, visual symbolism, mise-en-scène, and character development. *Damsel* was selected as the subject of analysis because it subverts the conventional "Damsel in distress" trope by presenting a female protagonist who actively confronts and dismantles oppressive systems through self-awareness and resistance.

The data in this study consist of textual and visual elements from the film, including dialogue, key scenes, character interactions, gestures, and symbolic representations related to Elodie's experiences of oppression and resistance. The film was viewed multiple times to ensure familiarity with the narrative and to confirm the relevance and consistency of the selected scenes. The data were analyzed using thematic coding in several stages. First, selected scenes were transcribed and documented through descriptive notes, with attention to dialogue, visual details,



and narrative context. Second, the data were coded according to Iris Marion Young's Five Faces of Oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Scenes were classified based on indicators such as the instrumental use of women for political gain, exclusion from decision-making, deprivation of autonomy, enforcement of patriarchal norms, and the infliction of physical or psychological harm. Third, after identifying and categorizing the forms of oppression, Rosemarie Tong's radical feminist framework was applied to interpret Elodie's responses as resistance to patriarchal institutions rather than as acts of individual survival. Special attention was given to the ways Elodie challenges royal authority, sacrificial tradition, and gendered subordination.

To ensure consistency in interpretation, the selected scenes were re-examined across multiple viewings, and coding decisions were continually aligned with the theoretical concepts guiding this study. Integrating Young's structural framework with Tong's radical feminist perspective enables a systematic analysis of how oppression is normalized within the narrative and how resistance functions as a transformative force in *Damsel* (2024).

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 OPPRESSION FACED BY ELODIE

#### 4.1.1 EXPLOITATION

In *Damsel*, exploitation is depicted as a structural condition maintained by political authority, familial obligation, and gendered power relations, rather than as an isolated act of cruelty. Young (2012) defines exploitation as the systematic use of the labor, bodies, or capacities of one group for the benefit of another. This form of oppression is evident in Elodie's experience, as her body, social position, and life are appropriated to uphold political and economic systems that deny her autonomy. Instead of being acknowledged as an individual, she is reduced to a resource valued solely for what she can provide to others.

This dynamic is initially revealed during the negotiation of Elodie's marriage to Prince Henry of Aurea. Lord Bayford confirms the agreement and highlights the extraordinary wealth promised in return, describing it as "more gold than I could ever imagine." The language of reward and transaction reframes marriage as an economic exchange, positioning Elodie as the commodity through which political survival is secured. Her body serves as the conduit for transferring resources from the affluent kingdom of Aurea to her impoverished homeland.

The exploitative nature of this arrangement is intensified by secrecy. Although Lord Bayford appears distressed, he withholds the fact that the marriage will result in Elodie's ritual sacrifice. By concealing the agreement's consequences, he participates in a hierarchical system that prioritizes national survival over his daughter's life. Young (2011) observes that structural injustice is relevant in such contexts, as individuals may be constrained by oppressive conditions while simultaneously perpetuating those systems. Lord Bayford acts under political scarcity and pressure, yet his compliance facilitates Elodie's commodification for the benefit of both kingdoms. Therefore, exploitation in this context is maintained by institutions that normalize the exchange of women for material gain.





Figure 1. Elodie's palm being sliced by the Queen for the sake of the ritual

The most overt form of exploitation is evident in the marriage ritual depicted in Figure 1, where Elodie and the prince's palms are deliberately cut and pressed together. While this act appears to symbolize unity, it is fundamentally a form of bodily manipulation. The ritual uses Elodie's blood to create the illusion of royal descent, allowing her to be presented to the Dragoness as a legitimate royal daughter. Through this process, the monarchy diverts danger from itself and shifts the burden of punishment onto an outsider woman lacking political power. Elodie's body thereby serves as a substitute shield, enabling Aurea to safeguard its rulers, maintain dynastic stability, and ensure the continuity of its governing authority. This sequence illustrates how exploitative systems maximize the utility of subordinated bodies to achieve multiple political objectives.

The advantages accrued by Aurea are considerable. By sacrificing foreign brides instead of royal daughters, the kingdom preserves its bloodline, secures succession, and prevents the internal political instability that would result from the loss of legitimate heirs. Simultaneously, the recurring practice of arranged marriages allows Aurea to attract wealth, alliances, and cooperation from weaker kingdoms seeking resources.

Taken together, these events illustrate that exploitation in *Damsel* operates through the systematic transfer of benefits from women to political institutions, families, and ruling elites. Elodie's marriage secures resources, her body protects the monarchy, and her potential death sustains dynastic authority. The film ultimately portrays exploitation as a gendered structure that renders women's lives expendable for the preservation of patriarchal power.

#### 4.1.2 MARGINALIZATION

In *Damsel*, oppression is also expressed through marginalization, where Elodie is excluded from meaningful participation and decision-making (Young, 2012). While exploitation involves extracting benefits from subordinated groups, marginalization is characterized by structural exclusion from recognition, authority, and institutional belonging. The harm, therefore, is not limited to what is taken from Elodie but also resides in her systematic exclusion from the decision-making structure.

This dynamic becomes explicit during the marriage negotiations, when Queen Isabelle dismisses Elodie from the discussion, stating, "the two of us can confer in private, it's nothing to bore our young people with." Although the arrangement directly determines Elodie's future, she is excluded from the conversation and denied any role in it. This



exclusion is not simply a matter of generational hierarchy or etiquette; rather, it reveals a structural logic that renders Elodie irrelevant to decisions that fundamentally shape her life. Whereas exploitation treats Elodie's body as a resource, marginalization in this context denies her recognition as a subject capable of agency or consent. The Queen's language normalizes this exclusion, presenting it as appropriate and protective, thereby obscuring the underlying power structure that removes Elodie from meaningful participation.

The significance of this exclusion is both individual and structural. By positioning Elodie as someone who need not be consulted, the Aurean monarchy reinforces a broader system in which individuals from weaker kingdoms are excluded from political and social authority. Marginalization ensures that subordinated groups remain outside the processes that define their roles, thereby limiting their ability to resist or redefine their position. Elodie is not merely denied influence; she is denied inclusion.

Furthermore, this pattern of exclusion extends beyond Elodie to other foreign brides, who are never regarded as potential members of the royal household and remain outsiders throughout the process. Their presence is temporary and conditional, with no expectation of integration or recognition. This dynamic reinforces the notion that their lives exist outside the social and political community of Aurea. In Young's terms, such exclusion produces a condition in which certain groups are not only dominated but also rendered socially peripheral and institutionally invisible. The monarchy's ability to exclude these women from recognition ensures that their eventual sacrifice does not disrupt the existing order, as they were never fully acknowledged.

Ultimately, marginalization in *Damsel* operates through normalized exclusion that appears routine rather than coercive. By denying Elodie and other subordinate figures a voice in decisions that determine their fate, the Aurean monarchy maintains a structure in which participation, recognition, and belonging are reserved exclusively for the dominant group. This analysis demonstrates that oppression is sustained not only through direct actions against individuals but also through the systematic denial of their presence within the frameworks that govern social life.

#### 4.1.3 POWERLESSNESS

In Iris Marion Young's framework of oppression, powerlessness is defined not simply as suffering harm or facing danger, but as a structural condition in which individuals are denied authority, excluded from decision-making processes, and deprived of the capacity to determine the conditions of their own lives. Unlike exploitation or violence, powerlessness is characterized by the absence of voice, status, and recognized agency within hierarchical social relations (Todorova, 2024). Individuals rendered powerless are positioned as subjects to be managed by others, rather than as participants entitled to consent, command, or refusal. In *Damsel* (2024), Elodie exemplifies this condition through the arrangement of her marriage and sacrifices.

This dynamic is first revealed in the conversation between Elodie and her father, Lord Bayford, who states, "We need this. Our stores are empty. We will not make it to the thaw. Your people need you." Before this exchange, Lord Bayford had already arranged the marriage alliance without consulting Elodie, demonstrating that decisions about her future were made in her absence. Women are often excluded from decision-



making in patriarchal systems (Campbell, 2023), which is evident when Elodie's father arranges her marriage without her consent, demonstrating how her voice holds no authority. When Elodie objects, stating, "That's no reason to marry," her protest is immediately dismissed. This scene demonstrates that her voice holds no authority within patriarchal power structures. In Young's terms, Elodie loses both social recognition and authority over her own body, becoming someone acted upon rather than an agent capable of shaping her fate. Her father retains the authority to decide, while she is expected to comply.

This condition is further reinforced in a later exchange with Prince Henry, who expresses sympathy by stating that he was unaware she had been compelled into the marriage. Elodie responds, "I made my peace with it. My happiness is a small price to pay for the future of my people." Although Elodie appears to accept the arrangement, her words reveal how powerlessness can be internalized by those subjected to domination. Instead of expressing personal desire, she frames her own happiness as expendable for collective needs. Her statement indicates that prolonged exclusion from authority has led her to reinterpret sacrifice as necessity.



Figure 2. Elodie discovers carvings of the names of previous ritual victims

In Figure 2, the depth of this condition becomes evident when Elodie encounters the names of previous victims carved into the cave walls. As she reads—"Victoria, Beatrice, Artemis, Genevieve, Fatima, Carlotta"—she confronts a history of failed escape attempts. The inscriptions signify more than past violence; they reveal a pattern in which resistance has consistently proven ineffective, suggesting that survival is not determined by individual effort. At this point, Elodie recognizes that she is operating within a closed system where outcomes are structurally predetermined. Although she retains the physical capacity to act, her ability to influence the outcome is effectively nullified.

Collectively, these moments demonstrate that powerlessness in *Damsel* is characterized not by passivity, but by the absence of meaningful control. Elodie speaks, makes decisions, and attempts to act, yet none of these actions translates into authority over her circumstances. The structures surrounding her, including familial, political, and ritual systems, ensure that decisions are made elsewhere and outcomes remain largely beyond her influence. In this respect, the film reflects Young's argument that oppression



persists not only through direct actions against individuals but also through the systematic limitation of their capacity to shape their own lives.

#### 4.1.4 CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

Cultural imperialism is defined as the process by which the values, experiences, and worldview of a dominant group become the social norm, while those of subordinated groups are marginalized, devalued, or rendered invisible (Young, 2012). This form of oppression primarily operates through the power to define social meanings rather than through direct coercion, determining what is considered legitimate, natural, and valuable. In *Damsel* (2024), the Aurean monarchy exemplifies cultural imperialism by asserting control over narrative, hierarchy, and social value, thereby establishing its worldview as normative and rendering others inferior or invisible.

A central mechanism of cultural imperialism in the film is the monarchy's control over historical narrative. Rather than simply misrepresenting events, Aurea actively reconstructs history to maintain its moral authority. The sacrificial ritual is presented as a defensive necessity against the Dragoness, yet this narrative conceals the monarchy's initial act of violence that began the conflict. This dynamic extends beyond political manipulation and aligns with Young's argument that dominant groups construct interpretive frameworks that define reality. By casting themselves as victims and protectors, the Aurean rulers normalize their actions and delegitimize alternative accounts, particularly the Dragoness's perspective, which is excluded from recognized knowledge. The central issue is not only deception but also epistemic dominance: Aurea determines which stories are considered credible and which are dismissed.

This epistemic control is further reinforced through the monarchy's redefinition of social roles and relationships. The marriage arrangement between Elodie and Prince Henry is presented not as a reciprocal union, but as a transaction governed by Aurean aristocratic logic. Queen Isabelle's statement that one must "not forget one's station" illustrates how hierarchy is naturalized through language. Cultural imperialism functions here by embedding inequality within everyday discourse, making it appear appropriate rather than imposed. Elodie's identity is interpreted entirely through Aurea's value system, reducing her worth to her utility within royal interests. This differs from economic exploitation, as the primary mechanism is not material extraction but the imposition of meaning: Aurea determines the significance of marriage, status, and family.

The concept of "station" is particularly significant in demonstrating how cultural imperialism differs from other forms of oppression. Instead of relying on force, the monarchy maintains dominance by promoting the internalization of hierarchical norms. Lady Bayford is expected to accept her family's inferiority as natural, exemplifying Young's claim that subordinated groups are positioned as culturally inferior in ways that shape their self-understanding. This symbolic dimension distinguishes cultural imperialism from powerlessness: the issue extends beyond lack of agency to the imposition of a worldview that defines one's place in society as inherently lesser.

This dynamic becomes even more explicit when Elodie challenges the monarchy. When Prince Henry attempts to speak, Queen Isabelle interrupts and declares, "Don't you dare explain yourself to this commoner." Queen Isabelle's dismissal of Elodie as a



“commoner” functions not merely as an insult but as a deliberate act of cultural delegitimation. By categorizing Elodie as socially inferior, Isabelle undermines the credibility of her testimony, regardless of its accuracy. Elodie’s experience is not simply ignored; it is rendered insignificant within Aurea’s interpretive framework. Unlike marginalization, which involves exclusion from participation, this moment illustrates discursive domination, in which participation is permitted but stripped of legitimacy.

Furthermore, Queen Isabelle’s assertion that Elodie “knows nothing” of royal suffering demonstrates the monarchy’s monopoly on moral authority. By privileging its own narrative of hardship, Aurea constructs a hierarchy of suffering in which only royal experiences are deemed meaningful. Elodie’s suffering is not denied outright; instead, it is positioned as irrelevant due to her social origin. In this manner, the monarchy’s worldview becomes the standard against which all experiences are evaluated.

The ritual persists not only because of political power, but also due to cultural normalization. Once embedded within tradition, the practice is shielded from critique and presented as inevitable or necessary. This demonstrates that cultural imperialism sustains domination through meaning-making rather than overt violence. Although the ritual involves physical harm, its continuation depends on the acceptance of Aurea’s narrative, which both justifies and conceals its brutality.

In summary, *Damsel* illustrates cultural imperialism through the Aurean monarchy’s capacity to define history, normalize hierarchy, and regulate whose voices are considered legitimate. The film supports Young’s argument that oppression is sustained not only through material or institutional control, but also through the authority to shape social reality. By imposing its worldview as universal, Aurea renders alternative perspectives, including those of Elodie and the Dragoness, less credible, less valuable, and ultimately subordinate.

#### 4.1.5 VIOLENCE

In *Damsel*, Elodie experiences sustained and escalating violence that reveals her position within a sacrificial system in which harm is structurally produced rather than incidental. According to Young’s framework, violence constitutes a distinct form of oppression, defined by the systematic and socially sanctioned infliction of physical and psychological harm upon members of subordinated groups. Unlike exploitation, which extracts value, or powerlessness, which restricts agency, violence functions through the direct imposition of injury and the persistent threat of bodily violation.

Elodie’s initial experience in the dragon’s lair exemplifies this dynamic. Her abrupt transition from a ceremonial wedding setting to a hostile environment highlights the normalization of violence within the ritual. The contrast between these spaces is significant: what appears to be a legitimate social institution, such as marriage, conceals an underlying structure organized around harm. As Elodie navigates the cave, sustaining burns, cuts, and torn flesh, her injuries are not accidental but represent the predictable outcome of a system that designates certain bodies as expendable. In this context, violence is not simply physical danger but an institutionalized practice embedded within tradition, distinguishing it from isolated acts of brutality.

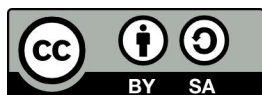




Figure 3. Elodie watches her father slowly succumb to the fatal wounds inflicted by the Dragon

The scene depicting Lord Bayford's death in Figure 3 further intensifies this dynamic by illustrating how violence extends beyond physical harm to encompass psychological domination. When the dragon kills him in Elodie's presence, the act serves not only as an execution but also as a deliberate strategy to inflict emotional devastation. Elodie is forced into enforced spectatorship, compelled to witness the destruction of a loved one without the ability to intervene. This moment is significant because it shifts violence from a direct assault to coercive control. The violence in this scene operates through coercive control, relying on emotional manipulation and the strategic use of a loved one to produce fear, guilt, and psychological entrapment rather than continuous physical force (Dichter et al., 2018).

This scene is distinguished from powerlessness by its focus not only on Elodie's inability to act, but on the deliberate infliction of trauma as a method of domination. The dragon exploits Elodie's emotional bonds, transforming them into instruments of harm. This interpretation aligns with Albert & Zubair (2025) assertion that violence can operate through psychological destruction, intensifying suffering by compelling individuals to endure morally and emotionally unbearable circumstances. Unlike marginalization, which excludes individuals from participation, Elodie is fully subjected to the system; her body and emotions become direct targets of violence.

Furthermore, this moment demonstrates how violence functions as a tool of reinforcement within the broader structure of oppression. By making survival dependent on witnessing and enduring extreme suffering, the system ensures both physical vulnerability and psychological breakdown. The objective is not merely to harm Elodie, but to undermine her sense of agency and capacity for resistance. In this context, violence sustains domination by illustrating the consequences of defiance and by instilling fear at both physical and emotional levels.

In summary, *Damsel* depicts violence as a systematic and multifaceted form of oppression that extends beyond physical injury. Through bodily harm and psychological coercion, Elodie is subjected to a form of domination that is immediate, visible, and profoundly destabilizing. This analysis supports Young's argument that violence is not



random but socially structured, serving to maintain hierarchical relations by continually exposing subordinated individuals to both the threat and reality of harm.

#### 4.2 ELODIE'S RESISTANCE AGAINST OPPRESSION

Elodie's trajectory in *Damsel* marks a decisive shift from enforced compliance to active resistance against a system constructed to exploit and eliminate women. The film does not portray resistance as mere endurance; instead, it frames her struggle as a deliberate rejection of patriarchal and feudal structures that normalize female sacrifice. Initially, Elodie is positioned as a bargaining instrument by both her father and the Aurean monarchy, expected to submit silently to marriage and death. Upon uncovering the truth behind the sacrificial ritual, her resistance evolves beyond self-preservation and moves toward systemic confrontation.

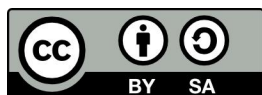
This transformation becomes explicit after Elodie rescues her sister and recognizes that the monarchy intends to perpetuate the cycle of sacrifice. When her sister asks, "What now?" Elodie's response, "I must tell her the truth," signals a refusal to remain within the logic of survival alone. Instead of escaping, she chooses to confront the structures that sustain the system. Her resistance manifests as disruptive truth-telling that challenges the ideological foundation of royal authority. By revealing to the Dragoness that the monarchy has long substituted foreign brides for royal daughters, Elodie exposes the falsity of the narrative that justified the ritual. In doing so, she contests political power and destabilizes the system of meaning that rendered the violence necessary.

While this act disrupts the dominant narrative, it also reveals a significant tension within the film's representation of resistance. Elodie's intervention is primarily individual; she alone uncovers the truth, confronts both the Dragoness and the monarchy, and initiates the system's collapse. Although her actions expose a structure that has victimized many women, these women remain largely absent from the process of resistance. Consequently, the film risks framing liberation as the result of exceptional individual courage rather than collective struggle.



Figure 4. Elodie and the Dragon to burn down the palace, ending the cycle of oppression.

This tension becomes more pronounced when Elodie returns to the kingdom and finds that the sacrificial system persists despite her survival. The monarchy proceeds with another wedding, underscoring that oppression is resilient and cannot be dismantled by escape alone. Elodie's subsequent alliance with the Dragoness and the kingdom's destruction, as depicted in Figure 4, symbolize a rupture in the existing order. Although the kingdom's destruction



signifies the end of an oppressive structure, the film offers little insight into what replaces it or how broader systems of inequality are addressed. The absence of other women as active participants in resistance indicates that the narrative remains centered on individual heroism rather than sustained collective action. In this context, Elodie's resistance can be interpreted as both transformative and limited: transformative in its challenge to patriarchal power, yet limited by its reliance on a single protagonist to enact systemic change.

Ultimately, Elodie's resistance operates at the intersection of personal survival and structural disruption. By refusing silence, exposing deception, and confronting institutionalized violence, she challenges the foundations of domination. However, the film's emphasis on individual agency complicates its feminist implications, raising questions about whether genuine liberation can be achieved without collective participation. This ambiguity highlights the challenge of representing systemic change within a narrative focused on a single heroine.

## 5. CONCLUSION

*Damsel* subverts the traditional fairy-tale narrative of a passive princess awaiting rescue by presenting a sustained critique of gendered oppression rooted in political ambition, ritualized tradition, and patriarchal power. Through Elodie's experience, the film reveals how women's subordination is reproduced as a structural condition rather than a series of isolated injustices. Drawing on Iris Marion Young's framework, Elodie's journey illustrates the interconnected operation of violence, cultural imperialism, marginalization, exploitation, and powerlessness, culminating in her reduction to a sacrificial object within an institutionalized system of domination.

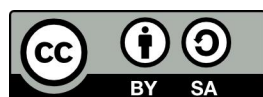
Importantly, *Damsel* presents Elodie's resistance as extending beyond individual survival. In line with Rosemarie Tong's radical feminist perspective, the film depicts resistance as the dismantling of patriarchal systems rather than their reform. Elodie's refusal to remain silent, her exposure of the myths underpinning the sacrificial ritual, and her confrontation with both the dragon and the monarchy transform personal suffering into a challenge to structural injustice. However, the film's focus on a single protagonist raises questions about whether this resistance constitutes collective liberation, thereby highlighting the tension between individual heroism and broader feminist transformation.

Beyond its analysis of *Damsel*, this study contributes to feminist film criticism by illustrating how Young's five faces of oppression can be applied to contemporary fantasy cinema to reveal the structural dimensions of gendered violence and inequality. It further underscores the importance of critically examining representations of resistance, especially the interplay between individual agency and collective liberation in feminist narratives. By integrating Young's theory of oppression with Tong's radical feminism, this article provides a framework for analyzing how films both challenge and perpetuate dominant conceptions of gender, power, and resistance.



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