



Sisterhood As a Tool of Resistance: A Study of Radical Feminism “Birds of Prey: And the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn”

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-01-19 Revised: 2026-08-04 Accepted: 2026-09-15 Keywords: <i>Birds of Prey;</i> <i>Solidarity;</i> <i>Sisterhood;</i> <i>Radical Feminism;</i> <i>Patriarchy</i> DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i2.9384 Corresponding Author: Tri Astuti Ningsih triastutiningsih13@gmail.com Ilmu Budaya dan Komunikasi, Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto, Jawa Tengah	<i>This research aims to find out the results of analyzing sisterhood as atool of resistance from the characters of the film Birds of Prey: And the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn through the lens of Radical Feminism theory. Data analysis, the author uses descriptive analysis techniques by watching Birds of Prey and taking screenshots and subtitle. The results of this research analysis, Sisterhood emerges through acts of solidarity and collective cooperation between Harley, Dinah Lance, Huntress, Renee Montoya, and Cassandra Cain to fight Roman Sionis (Black Mask). Emerging from experiences of patriarchal oppression, the character despite their diffrent background from patriarchal oppression and abilities unite and complement one another. Ultimately, they were able to defeat the Roman Sionis with their solidarity action.</i>

1. Introduction

In many modern social structures, women are often positioned as subordinate subjects under a deeply rooted patriarchal system. The patriarchal society estimates women as dependent, weak and secondary (Ahmadgoli & Raoof, 2019). This means women are often considered powerless without men and enable to make their own decisions. Patriarchy not only limits women through traditional roles and gender stereotypes but also creates hierarchies of power that reinforce male dominance over women. Important decisions in social life are typically controlled by men. The discourse has been passed down for generations, and all men and women agree to the construction (Ridwan & Susanti, 2019). But as women realized the importance of gender equality and felt oppressed by patriarchal

social structures, which encouraged them to fight for equality between men and women, feminism emerged as a critical response to the injustices inflicted by the patriarchal system.

One prominent approach to feminism is radical feminism, which explicitly identifies patriarchy as the primary root of women's oppression. Radical feminism represents one of the types of the feminist theory founded on the attitude that the society is based on the patriarchal grounds, because of which women are marginalized and discriminated against (Vukočić, 2013). Radical feminism creates an original political and social theory of women's oppressions, and strategies for ending that oppression which come from women's lived experiences (Rowland & Klein, 1996). One way to fight patriarchy is to build solidarity among women or sisterhood, which emphasizes cooperation, emotional support, and collective empowerment as tools against injustice. Radical feminism views sisterhood as a key political force in the struggle against patriarchy.

In her book, *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett argues that patriarchy divides women through social constructs such as class and race to suppress their solidarity (Millett, 2016). When women are separated by various social factors, their ability to unite and collectively challenge the patriarchal system becomes increasingly limited. Ultimately, this internal fragmentation weakens women's political position as an oppressed group. Similar to (Firestone, 2015) view, Millett asserts that solidarity among women is crucial to resisting male domination, particularly in matters of sexuality and reproduction. Women must be able to unite politically to regain control over their bodies and lives. This assertion is supported by thinkers such as Klein and Hawthorne, who advocate the restoration of sisterhood as a form of resistance to the fragmentation of women's identities (Ang-Lygate, Henry, & Corrin, 1997a). However, radical sisterhood is not immune to criticism, particularly for its tendency to be exclusive of issues of class and non-binary gender identities.

The recognition of the importance of women's solidarity becomes increasingly relevant when considering how media plays a significant role in portraying and reinforcing feminist messages. As an important means of cultural expression, the media often serves to reflect and critique prevailing social and political structures. Popular media frequently depicts and highlights various social and political dynamics, including gender issues and power relations. In the context of popular media, films that tell women's stories are generally used to examine and dismantle oppressive patriarchal systems.

Research on sisterhood and emancipation in popular media suggests that female solidarity has a significant ability to challenge and resist patriarchal norms and lead to collective feminist consciousness. Judith Butler (1990), in *Gender Trouble*, argues that the media's portrayal of women can undermine entrenched gender stereotypes. When described positively, sisterhood broadens the public's understanding of women's collective ability to resist injustice (Butler & Trouble, 1990). However, such representations are not always in line with the feminist agenda. JM Modiri (2012) warns that although popular media can serve as a platform for "the politics of sisterhood", it often acts as a tool of cultural domination that reduces the feminist struggle to mere entertainment, thereby hindering women's emancipation (Modiri, 2012).

Similarly, Kristine Hollinger (1997) observes that sisterhood has permeated popular culture, reflecting the widespread influence of women's bonds in shaping public discourse (Hollinger, 1997). An example of gender disparity in representation can be found in the study *Representation of Women and Work in the Most Popular Series in the UK and Spain* by Garcí'a-Muñoz, Navarro-Bosch, & Delgano-Reina (2024), which shows that female characters are often assigned motivational roles, while male characters dominate decision-making, political, and operational functions (García-Muñoz, Navarro, & Delgado, 2022). Despite these trends, some contemporary media works attempt to reverse the pattern.

One interesting example is *Birds of Prey: And the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn* (2020), hereafter referred to as BPFEOH, which not only features superhero action but also raises themes of women's emancipation and gender solidarity that can be examined through a radical feminist approach. Directed by Cathy Yan and written by Christina Hodson, the film narrates Harley Quinn's struggle to rediscover her identity after freeing herself from a toxic and abusive relationship with the Joker, who had long exercised emotional and psychological control over her.

Beyond Harley's personal emancipation, the film portrays the lived experiences of other female characters who are similarly oppressed by patriarchal systems in Gotham City: Dinah Lance is subjected to objectification and exploitation within a male-dominated nightclub controlled by Roman Sionis; Renee Montoya experiences institutional marginalization and gender discrimination within the police force; Huntress is shaped by trauma and violence rooted in male criminal power structures; and Cassandra Cain, as a young girl, becomes a target of exploitation and control by powerful men. The film premiered on January 25, 2020, in Mexico City before its global release on February 7, 2020. These women, coming from different social backgrounds and personal struggles, eventually unite to confront Roman Sionis, also known as Black Mask, who symbolizes patriarchal dominance and systemic male violence in Gotham. Through the solidarity formed between Harley Quinn, Dinah Lance, Huntress, Renee Montoya, and Cassandra Cain, BPFEOH offers a compelling portrayal of how female solidarity functions as a collective strategy to resist oppression, confront male domination, and reclaim agency from patriarchal control.

One of the important aspects of the solidarity between the female characters in the film BPFEOH is sisterhood, as one of the foundations of solidarity between the characters. In BPFEOH, sisterhood is not always understood as emotional closeness, but as a strategy to confront and resist the lines of power that oppress women. The term sisterhood refers to a collective bond among women that crosses social, economic, and political boundaries to fight gender-based oppression (Oyewumi, 2001). Essentially, sisterhood is a feminist concept that explains the unity, support, and cooperation among women in facing the challenges that arise from patriarchy and gender inequality. According to Rodak, (2020) what the sisters have in common is the same experience of oppression caused by male patriarchy (Rodak, 2020). Sisterhoods celebrate the close bonds that exist in parts of the Women's Liberation Movement while simultaneously conveying the commonalities among women (Evans, 2015). In doing so, they support each other's liberal endeavors and subvert the patriarchal culture that distracts them from their main goal (Ahmadgoli & Raoof, 2019).

Radical feminism sees this relationship as a force that breaks the patriarchal order, as well as a form of collective empowerment that transcends the limits of individualism. The word emancipation embedded in the film's title represents a process of liberation from various forms of control, whether it is emotional, structural, or social. The film shows that emancipation is a journey that involves individual and collective struggles and emphasizes the importance of women's solidarity against oppression. With its bold narrative and strong female characters, BPFEOH is a visual statement about the power of emancipation in a modern context. Basically, the word emancipation is the process of freeing a person or group from oppression, limitations, or inequalities that limit their rights, freedom, or opportunities. According to Indah, Ni'mah & Karima, (2022) women's emancipation is the process of women's self-liberation in various fields such as, social, political and others, because previously women did not get the same rights as men and had limitations (Indah, Ni'mah, & Karima, 2022).

Many studies and reviews on the BPFEOH film focus on Harley Quinn's emancipation process as the main character who seeks to break free from the Joker's control and influence. Several articles discuss similar themes, such as Ni'mah & Karima (2022), 'Women's Emancipation in Movie: A Feminism Analysis in BPFEOH by Cathy Yan'; Lubis et al.

(2022), *'The Effect of Gender Equality Reflected in 'Birds of prey' Movie'*; and Sabrina (2024), *'The Anti-Hero Characteristic on Self-Acceptance Reflected in Birds of prey (and The Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn) Movie'*.

However, none of these works highlight other characters such as Huntress, Renee Montoya, Dinah Lance, and Cassandra Cain as allies who eventually form a collective female solidarity to confront the main antagonist, Black Mask. Therefore, this study raises the following research question: how is sisterhood portrayed as a tool of resistance against patriarchy in *Birds of Prey (and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn)* from a radical feminist perspective. BPFEOH thus becomes more than just an action movie; it is a statement about female power and solidarity that is capable of changing an unjust social order. Through this analysis, we can understand how popular media not only reflects social reality but also offers a way to imagine resistance to oppression.

2. Method

To get an overview of the research on the issue of Sisterhood as a Tool of Resistance: A Study of Radical Feminism in the film "BPFEOH", a Qualitative data collection method technique was used. Qualitative data collection techniques aim to gain a deep understanding of social phenomena, culture or human behavior. Qualitative data is usually descriptive or narrative with different techniques and ways of collecting data. In this research, the author uses descriptive qualitative data with collection techniques by taking screen shoots and subtitle in the BPFEOH film.

This research employs Radical Feminism to analyze the sisterhood of Harley Quinn, Dinah Lance, Huntress and Renee Montoya who are oppressed by the patriarchal system. This study aims to analyze from Individual Emancipation, Early Solidarity, Active Coalition and Collective Empowerment. They resist this oppression it by uniting and forming solidarity among women from different backgrounds so that a Sisterhood is formed to fight structural oppression based on patriarchy.

3. Results

The results of this study are presented based on the sequence of figures (1– 10) taken from BPFEOH. These figures portray the development of sisterhood through four interrelated stages that reflect the key principles of radical feminism: individual emancipation, early solidarity, active coalition, and collective empowerment. Each stage marks a distinct transformation in the female characters' awareness of patriarchal oppression and their movement from isolation to political unity.

1. Individual Emancipation: Awakening Against Patriarchal Control



Figure 1. Roman Sionis humiliates women to show his power.

At the beginning of the film, the descriptive depicts the characters' realization of patriarchal domination through both personal trauma and observation of violence. The most vivid representation appears in the nightclub scene where Roman Sionis humiliates a woman, Erika, by forcing her to dance and undress before a crowd. Although Dinah Lance did not take direct action, the incident awakened her inner awareness of patriarchal

violence and how she was treated as an object in the club. This scene represents what (Millett, 2016) describes as *"the political nature of sexuality"* the control of women's bodies as an instrument of male power. Furthermore, the scene is also in line with (Firestone, 2015) idea that patriarchy works through forms of domination embedded in social practices that normalize the degradation of women. Therefore, even though there was no process of liberation taking place in that moment, the experience became a starting point for personal awareness that encouraged Dinah to question her position and ultimately resist male control.



Figure 2. Harley Quinn blows up the chemical plant

Harley Quinn's decision to blow up the ACE Chemicals factory symbolizes the collapse of emotional patriarchy and the termination of her dependent relationship with the Joker. In contrast to Dinah Lance's internal awakening, Harley's action represents a more advanced and radical stage of individual emancipation, in which personal awareness is transformed into concrete resistance. The destruction of the factory functions both literally and metaphorically, signifying Harley's rejection of an identity constructed under male domination and her reclamation of autonomy over herself. This scene demonstrates that the film conceptualizes individual emancipation not as an instantaneous transformation, but as a progressive process that evolves from personal awareness into active resistance against patriarchal domination.



Figure 3. Huntress reflecting on how to avenge her family's murder.

Huntress undergoes isolated training to avenge her family's death, demonstrating a form of individual emancipation that emerges from traumatic experiences. Her self-training and vengeance reveal the radical feminist emphasis on reclaiming physical and psychological autonomy after patriarchal violence (hooks, 1984). However, the freedom achieved by Huntress is still limited to the personal sphere and driven by motives of revenge, so it has not yet developed into the collective consciousness necessary for political struggle. At this stage, women move separately, each facing patriarchy in their own way. Although their experiences are still fragmented, each character begins to understand that male power is the root of the oppression they face.

2. Early Solidarity: Recognition of Shared Oppression



Figure 4. Renee Montoya's case taken by a male colleague who is considered better than Renee.

The initial phase of solidarity emerges when the characters begin to show empathy for one another and develop a shared awareness of how patriarchy operates systemically. A prime example of this can be seen in the marginalization of Renee Montoya at her workplace: her male superiors claim her work as their own personal achievement, revealing the deep-seated sexism within the institution. This experience reflects (Rich, 2003) concept of “*compulsory heterosexual and hierarchical systems*” where women are excluded from positions of power. Although Renee has not yet taken collective action, her disappointment marks a shift from personal to structural consciousness a crucial stage in radical feminism, when women begin to realize that the individual problems they face are part of a broader social system.



Figure 5. The moment when Dinah Lance saves Harley because of her empathy as a woman.

This act of empathy is the first visible instance of sisterhood in practice: a woman protecting another woman from male violence without personal gain. Sisterhood is not rooted in shared identity but in shared commitment to ending domination. This act of protection is an early manifestation of that principle. Thus, in this stage, sisterhood emerges not from emotional closeness, but from mutual recognition of patriarchal oppression and the moral obligation to resist it together.

3. Active Coalition: From Empathy to Collective Resistance



Figure 6. Harley Quinn offers cooperation to defeat Roman Sionis and his men.

In a desperate situation, Harley invites Renee Montoya, Huntress, Dinah Lance, and Cassandra Cain to help each other fight Roman Sionis and his army. As Harley says in the scene where she offers her cooperation, “We have to work together”. This scene is a crucial

moment when Harley, along with Renee Montoya, Huntress, Dinah Lance, and Cassandra Cain, finally unite to face a common threat. In a precarious situation, they find themselves surrounded by Roman Sionis's forces. The actions of each character in this film tell a story of self-discovery, self-expression, and the unity of girls from different backgrounds (Setianto & Win, 2020). They are able to unite and find collective solidarity to fight against patriarchy. They realize that working together is the only way to survive and defeat their common enemy, emphasizing that female solidarity can make them stronger to face male enemies with their strength and skills.



Figure 7. Harley, Renee, Huntress, Dinah and Cassandra fight with Roman Sionis' Men.

The scene features a colorful team-up between Harley Quinn, Huntress Dinah Lance, Renee Montoya and Cassandra Cain as they battle Roman Sionis or Black Mask Men. Set in a colorful and chaotic greenhouse ride, the visual elements reflect the films eccentric style. The labyrinthine and reflective environment adds to the challenge of the fight, with different strengths and skill on display to fight and protect each other. This scene is the culmination of their collective solidarity journey as a team and a perfect symbolization of the films main theme of the power of women's collaboration against tyranny with each individual contributing according to their strengths, emphasizing the theme of individual empowerment in cooperation.



Figure 8. Dinah Lance Activating the Canary Cry to Protect Collective Female Solidarity.

In BPFEOH, Dinah Lance ultimately employs her supersonic power to incapacitate Roman Sionis's forces and rescue her team, marking a decisive turning point in the narrative. In a moment of heightened vulnerability, when the group is surrounded and under pressure, Dinah chooses to utilize the ability she had previously repressed due to trauma and fear of exploitation. Dinah's choice to use this power not only ensures the safety of her group, but also marks her full acceptance of her identity and control over herself.

In a feminist framework, the voice is often used as a symbol of female identity and authority; therefore, Dinah's use of the Canary Cry reflects an effort to reclaim women's right to "speak" in a patriarchal order. It is also important that she uses this ability not for personal gain, but for the common good, thus reinforcing the theme of solidarity among women. This scene shows that authentic empowerment does not arise solely from individual recognition, but from the collective strength created when women unite in the face of oppression.

4. Collective Empowerment: Reclaiming Power and Creating New Systems



Figure 9. Montoya, Dinah, and Huntress forming the BPFEOH team

After the fall of Roman Sionis, Renee Montoya, Dinah Lance, and Huntress formed the “Birds of Prey” group. This event reflects institutionalized sisterhood, when women created a collaborative social structure outside the control of male authority. Instead of replicating patriarchal hierarchies, the group operated on the basis of mutual trust and collective agency, demonstrating that power could be achieved through solidarity rather than domination. This phase was consistent with (Firestone, 1970) assertion that true liberation required the complete dismantling of the patriarchal system, rather than merely integrating women into it. By establishing their own collectives, women reject dependence on male-defined institutions and design a new order based on equality, care, and collective resistance.



figure 10. Harley Quinn and Cassandra choose independence together.

In contrast, Harley Quinn and Cassandra Cain choose a different path. Their decision to remain outside any formal organization symbolizes personal autonomy the reclaiming of self-determination without reliance on institutional power, even one governed by women. Their relationship embodies intergenerational sisterhood, as Harley (an adult woman reclaiming agency) and Cassandra (a younger girl discovering her own power) unite across age and experience. This bond captures that female solidarity is both emotional and political it grows from empathy and shared struggle rather than from organizational structure. Through their mutual trust and protection, Harley and Cassandra demonstrate that empowerment can take both collective and personal forms.

4. Discussion

This study reveals that BPFEOH depicts sisterhood as an effective strategy for fighting the patriarchal system, in line with the main principles of radical feminism. From a radical feminist perspective, sisterhood is understood as a political force that plays an important role in challenging and fighting patriarchal domination. In her work *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett explains that patriarchy systematically divides women through social constructs such as class and race with the aim of weakening solidarity among them (Millett, 2016). This condition limits women's ability to unite and engage in collective resistance against systemic patriarchy, there by weakening their political position as an oppressed group. This view is reinforced by Firestone, (2015), who asserts that solidarity among women is a crucial element in opposing male domination, especially regarding issues of sexuality and control

over women's bodies and lives (Firestone, 2015).

This theoretical framework is reflected in BPFEOH through the portrayal of the character Roman Sionis as a symbol of male domination, whose actions reflect the concept of systemic patriarchy as described by (Firestone, 2015; Millett, 2016)

This film shows that the experiences of vulnerability and oppression experienced by Harley Quinn, Dinah Lance, Renee Montoya, Huntress, and Cassandra Cain initially caused them to separate and then take their own paths. However, over time, these experiences gradually formed a collective strength that drove collective empowerment. This is in line with Rich, (2003) view that patriarchy tends to isolate women, while rebuilding relationships between women is an important basis for resistance (Rich, 2003). In BPFEOH, these relationships are built through empathy, cooperation, and shared experiences of oppression, transforming personal suffering into a collective struggle against patriarchal structures.

This view is also inline with Ang-Lygate, Henry, & Corrin, (1997), who emphasize the importance of reviving sisterhood as a response to the fragmentation of women's identities (Ang-Lygate et al., 1997). Although the concept of sisterhood in radical feminism is often criticized for being insufficiently inclusive of class differences and non-binary identities, this film presents a contextualized portrayal of sisterhood, highlighting cooperation across differences as a path to emotional and political freedom through collective action.

From the perspective of popular media, BPFEOH shows that the portrayal of sisterhood is capable of challenging the gender norms that have long dominated society. States that media representation has the ability to dismantle deep-rooted gender stereotypes while critically presenting female agency (Butler, 1990). However, this is a form of collective political resistance. This is clearly seen in the climactic scene where the female characters work together to overthrow Roman Sionis, affirming that media can serve as a space for critical and subversive feminist representation. Dinah Lance's decision to use her supersonic voice reflects women's efforts to reclaim their power and voice within patriarchal structures, while also emphasizing that women are not always passive, but capable of actively resisting domination. In addition, this film also challenges the idea of "feminism lite" as proposed by Gill, (2007), by presenting sisterhood not merely as an emotional bond. The novelty of this study lies in its emphasis on solidarity rather than individual empowerment (Gill, 2007).

Unlike previous studies by (Ni'mah & Karima, 2022) and (Lubis, Siregar, & Matondang, 2022), which focus primarily on Harley Quinn's individual emancipation, BPFEOH places sisterhood at the center of its narrative. This approach aligns with Rowland & Klein, (1996) argument regarding the importance of collective experience in radical feminism (Rowland & Klein, 1996). The film further illustrates that sisterhood is not formed instantly, but develops through a process marked by doubt and tension, as warned by Millett, (2016), before ultimately evolving into a unified struggle against inequality (Millett, 2016). Beyond emotional support, sisterhood in BPFEOH also encompasses practical strategies, such as Cassandra Cain's actions, which affirm that diverse forms of female agency can unite to dismantle patriarchal power.

These findings demonstrate that BPFEOH positions sisterhood as a form of feminist resistance, challenging the common pattern in superhero films that typically place women in supporting or motivational roles, as identified by (García-Muñoz et al., 2022). By placing women at the center of both narrative and action, the film contributes to the redefinition of gender relations in popular media. Although Modiri, (2012) warns that popular culture can reduce feminist struggles to mere entertainment, BPFEOH successfully combines entertainment with a strong feminist message, showing that popular media can also serve as a meaningful space for the articulation of collective female resistance and emancipation (Modiri, 2012).

5. Conclusion

women's solidarity in BPFEOH is a symbol of collective empowerment that emerges as a form of resistance to the oppressive patriarchal system. Where in the movie BPFEOH features female superheroes with different backgrounds but in the same experience as the main character in the movie. Usually in popular media, especially in movies, the presence of women only serves to complement and motivate male characters and women as weak characters without men. However, this movie presents a strong female character who fight against male domination that oppresses women and try to destroy the patriarchal structure portrayed by the main evil character, Roman Sionis.

Using their own strengths and skills, Harley, Dinah, Renee, Huntress and Cassandra decide to work together to form alliances and solidarity to build more power with the greater goal of destroying the Black Mask and the power that represents systemic inequality. In Radical feminism framework, this collaboration illustrates that to overcome systemic oppression, women need to acknowledge their experiences are not just about revenge or individual salvation, but also about breaking the cycle of oppression through alliances based on shared experiences, vision goals.

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