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# Beyond Good and Evil: Power, Identity and Otherness in He-Man and the Masters of the Universe

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## Abstract

*He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* is an American animated series often remembered as a simple morality tale of good triumphing over evil. However a closer analysis shows that it functions as a cultural text embedding complex ideologies. Drawing on the theories of Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, and others, the paper explores how the series operates as an ideological apparatus, naturalizing hierarchical binaries of power, gender, and morality. Gender representations, including characters such as Teela, the Sorceress, and She-Ra, illustrate both the assertion of female agency and the reinforcement of patriarchal norms through sexualisation and containment. Similarly, racial and colonial undertones are evident in the depiction of Eternia's white rulers versus monstrous or hybridized "Others," reflecting Eurocentric hierarchies and the normalization of settler dominance. The central binary of He-Man and Skeletor exemplifies structuralist myth-making, where good and evil are mutually constitutive, sustaining social and cultural hierarchies. Finally, the paper examines the nostalgic and postmodern afterlife of the series, highlighting its continued relevance in shaping cultural memory, global fandom, and consumerist practices. *He-Man* thus serves as both a nostalgic icon and a site for interrogating ideology, power, and representation in popular culture of the 1980s gained widespread popularity in India during the 1990s.

**Keywords:** Binary opposites, cartoon, fandom, gender, ideology, power

## Introduction

*He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* is an American animated television series produced by Filmation, originally based on Mattel's *Masters of the Universe* toy line. Widely popular in the 1980s, the series has often been remembered as a simple tale of the triumph of good over evil. However, revisiting it today complicates that perception. Beneath its vivid animation and moral clarity lies a network of power structures shaped by binary oppositions, gender norms, racial hierarchies, consumerism, and commercial interests. Such a re-examination is necessary because *He-Man* was not merely entertainment; it functioned as a cultural text that shaped children's imagination while subtly transmitting broader socio-political ideologies.

A closer analysis reveals how the series constructs a world that appears fantastical yet is deeply embedded in ideological assumptions. Its portrayal of heroism, villainy, and order reflects specific cultural notions of masculinity, authority, and morality. The appeal of its magical settings, heroic figures, and dramatic conflicts masks the ways in which these narratives normalize certain hierarchies while marginalizing others. What once seemed like an innocent fantasy now emerges as a layered text that invites critical scrutiny.

Moreover, the series must be situated within the broader framework of cultural production and consumer capitalism. As an extension of Mattel's toy line, it exemplifies the convergence of entertainment and marketing, where storytelling operates alongside commodification. In this sense, the show can be understood through Louis Althusser's concept of the "ideological state apparatus," as it conditions viewers to accept dominant ideologies as natural. Similarly, Michel Foucault's notion of power/knowledge illuminates how the series defines what is "good," "civilized," and "righteous," while casting Skeletor and his allies as embodiments of disorder and evil.

Revisiting *He-Man*, therefore, is not simply an act of nostalgia but a critical engagement with popular culture as a site of ideological formation. It demonstrates how narratives often dismissed as children's entertainment can encode complex assumptions about power, gender, race, and consumption. This paper seeks to explore these dimensions by analyzing the representations of gender, race, and power in *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe*, revealing the deeper ideological currents that underlie its enduring appeal.

## Structure of Power and Ideology

At first glance, *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* appears to be a straightforward morality tale: good triumphs over evil, with He-Man and his companions protecting Eternia from the sinister ambitions of Skeletor. However, beneath this veneer lies a deeper ideological framework. The show does not simply entertain; it constructs a worldview for its audience, subtly shaping perceptions of morality, authority, and power. A critical analysis using the theories of Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and Antonio Gramsci reveals how *He-Man* functions as an apparatus of ideology, normalizing particular social values and structures.

The concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) provides a crucial framework for understanding how *He-Man* operates ideologically. According to Louis Althusser, institutions such as schools, churches, and media function to reproduce the ideology of the ruling class by interpellating individuals as subjects (Althusser 117). From this perspective, *He-Man* functions as an ISA disguised as entertainment. The repeated narrative of He-Man defending Castle Grayskull not only instils the value of righteousness but also naturalizes hierarchical binaries – He-Man as protector and Skeletor as disruptor, civilization as order and the monstrous as chaos. Children watching the series unconsciously internalize these binaries, learning to identify with the hegemonic vision of order represented by He-Man. The cartoon thus serves as a tool of ideological conditioning, aligning young audiences with the values of strength, discipline, loyalty, and obedience to authority.

Michel Foucault's notion of power/knowledge further illuminates the dynamics of the series. Foucault argues that power is not merely repressive but "It needs to be considered as a productive network", shaping knowledge systems and constructing categories of truth (Foucault 119). Within *He-Man*, knowledge and power are fused in Castle Grayskull, a site of hidden truths guarded by the Sorceress. Whoever controls this knowledge wields absolute authority over Eternia. Skeletor's relentless attempts to access the secrets of the castle demonstrate the centrality of knowledge in sustaining power. Meanwhile, He-Man's role as protector of Grayskull positions him not just as a warrior but as custodian of the "truth" of Eternia. By monopolizing both physical might and access to mystical knowledge, He-Man embodies the

fusion of power and knowledge in Foucault's sense, reinforcing the legitimacy of the existing social order.

Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony establishes an additional dimension to this analysis. For Gramsci, the ruling class maintains control not only through coercion but by gaining the consent of the governed through cultural means "in the sense of government with the consent of the governed" (Gramsci 12). In *He-Man*, this hegemony manifests in the portrayal of Prince Adam's transformation into He-Man. While Adam is effeminate, indecisive, and passive, He-Man embodies virility, decisiveness, and courage – the traits valorised as necessary for leadership. The implicit message is that true authority rests in a particular form of masculinity. By repeatedly showing He-Man's triumph over Skeletor, the series invites viewers to consent to a hegemonic construction of masculinity as dominant and legitimate. This normalization of gendered power emphasises wider patriarchal values, aligning with Gramsci's insight that hegemony operates most effectively when it appears natural and unchallenged.

These theoretical perspectives collectively reveal *He-Man* as something far beyond a mere medium of nostalgia. It is a cultural text that functions to reproduce dominant ideologies valorising specific constructions of masculinity, legitimizing hierarchical binaries, and embedding consumerist values within everyday play. As such, the series exemplifies how popular culture acts as a powerful ideological apparatus, shaping social consciousness while masking its underlying economic and political motivations.

## Construction of Gender Identities

The representation of women in *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* offers a paradox. While the series introduces strong and independent female characters such as Teela, the Sorceress, and She-Ra, their portrayals remain entangled in stereotypical frameworks of femininity, sexualisation, and dependence on male authority. This tension reflects broader cultural anxieties about gender roles in the 1980s, when women were increasingly asserting visibility in the public sphere, yet popular culture continued to contain that visibility within patriarchal boundaries.

Teela, for instance, is introduced as a courageous warrior skilled in combat and entrusted with the responsibility of protecting Prince Adam. This inversion of the conventional gender role, where the woman protects the

man, appears progressive at first glance. Yet her independence is consistently undercut by her ultimate reliance on He-Man, who often rescues her in moments of crisis. This reflects what feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey calls the male gaze, where female characters are given agency only insofar as it enhances the male hero's narrative centrality (Mulvey 11). Teela's costume, a revealing monokini, further frames her body as an object of visual pleasure, reducing her strength to spectacle. Even when she acts heroically, her representation remains mediated through a lens of sexuality.

The Sorceress offers another example of gendered contradiction. As the guardian of Castle Grayskull, she wields immense mystical power, serving as the source of He-Man's transformation. However, her strength is strictly confined within the castle walls. Beyond its boundaries, she becomes vulnerable and requires protection, as the Sorceress says "I would go myself, but as you know I have no power outside this castle" (Masters *He-Man and She-Ra* 3:56-4:02). This geographical limitation functions as a metaphor for the cultural restriction of women's agency within the domestic or symbolic "private" sphere. As Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* argues that "humanity is male and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being ... He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other." (Beauvoir 5-6). The Sorceress embodies this paradox, indispensable to He-Man's existence yet denied independent mobility or authority outside her circumscribed domain.

The creation of She-Ra, Princess of Power, in the mid-1980s seemed to offer a corrective to this imbalance. As Adora, He-Man's twin sister, she transforms into a powerful warrior who leads a rebellion against Hordak's tyranny on Etheria. She-Ra's characterization initially suggests a breakthrough; she is strong, independent, and central to her own narrative. Yet even here, the show reinscribes conventional gender traits. She-Ra's costume, a short skirt and low-cut bodice sexualizes her body, while her additional powers, such as healing and communicating with animals, encode "feminine" qualities of compassion and nurturing absent in He-Man. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity clarifies this duality that "the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence." (Butler 34) She-Ra performs both the masculine-coded role of warrior and the feminine-coded role of healer, embodying a hybrid form that reflects cultural unease about women who transcend traditional boundaries.

The depiction of these women characters is further complicated by the production history of *He-Man*. As the 2017 documentary *The Power of Grayskull: The Definitive History of He-Man* highlights, female animators such as Gwen Wetzler faced systemic marginalization within Filmation, the production company. Filmation Animation Director Tom Tataranowicz commented on the role of female Animation Director of Filmation Gwen Wetzler as:

> Gwen Wetzler was a really good director and part of it was she really had a good eye for cinematics and she really liked what she was doing. It wasn't just a job and a part of that was her and a part of that was probably to prove that a woman should be a director because back then it was a boys club. (Stash Movies 34:45 – 34:49)

Gwen shares her experience at Filmation that, "Lou (Filmation President) was very progressive. The other directors and some of the animators, man, did not like the idea of working with a woman... and refused to work with me" (Stash Movies 35:00 – 35:10). Further, animator Tom Sito recalls that "if you are a woman, even if you drew like Michelangelo, they still would give you a minor role" (35:10 – 14). Thus, the gendered imbalance onscreen mirrors the male-dominated power structures offscreen, reinforcing how women's creativity was circumscribed even within supposedly progressive spaces of popular culture.

Despite these limitations, female characters in *He-Man* also opened pathways for reimagining female heroism in children's media. Carol J. Clover's concept of the "final girl" in horror films, the resourceful female survivor "who not only fight back but do so with ferocity and even kill the killer on their own", resonates with She-Ra, who in many episodes acts as the decisive agent of liberation rather than the protected victim (Clover 37). She-Ra's presence at least partially disrupted the monopoly of male heroism in children's programming, inspiring young female viewers with an alternative role model, even if her characterization remained burdened by patriarchal compromise.

The gender politics of *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* reflect a transitional cultural moment. The show introduced strong women but simultaneously sexualized and constrained them, revealing popular culture's ambivalence toward female empowerment. These representations highlight the ideological function of the series: to acknowledge women's growing social visibility while reasserting male dominance through narrative centrality and visual framing. By examining Teela, the Sorceress, and She-Ra through

the lenses of Mulvey, Beauvoir, Butler, and Clover, it can be seen how *He-Man* not only reflected but also reinforced the cultural tensions of its era, embedding in its fantasy world the enduring struggles over gender, power, and representation.

## Racial and Colonial Depiction

One of the less discussed but crucial dimensions of *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* is its racial imagination. While at first glance the series seems to create a purely fantastical world populated by humans, beasts, and magical beings, a closer analysis reveals that the show reproduces familiar colonial hierarchies of race and civilization. The inhabitants of Eternia are divided along lines that reflect colonial binaries. On one side are the white, human rulers, who represent order and rationality. On the other are monstrous or hybrid beings, marginalized as uncivilized, irrational, and threatening. This racialized imagination embeds colonial discourses within the cartoon, shaping young viewers' perceptions of hierarchy and difference.

The ruling class of Eternia, led by King Randor and Queen Marlena, consists of white, human figures with distinctly "Eurocentric" features like light skin, straight noses, blond or auburn hair. Their physical appearance and cultured demeanour contrast sharply with the beast people, snake people, bird people, and other hybrid races who populate the kingdom. The humans, though a numerical minority, rule as if by natural right, establishing a system that mirrors the logic of colonial settler societies. Queen Marlena herself is from Earth, suggesting that humans are not even native to Eternia but "settlers who landed upon a broken world and set themselves up as its de facto rulers, using the might of He-Man..." (Andreakos), and established dominance through martial and technological superiority. Jimmy Andreakos further argues that "only the virile, sonorous He-Man is tanned, while his foppish alter ego, Prince Adam, is as white as paste – a reflection of a popular racial bias" (Andreakos). This contrast reflects how whiteness is naturalized as a marker of civility and legitimacy, while other beings are marked as inferior or expendable.

The colonial logic of *He-Man* resonates with Albert Memmi's analysis in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. Memmi notes that colonial ideology constructs the colonized as "lazy and backward" while simultaneously depicting them as "wicked and dangerous" (Memmi 127). This contradiction

is visible in Skeletor's minions like Beast Man, Mer-Man, and others who are shown as brutish and unintelligent, incapable of independent strategy. They are reduced to stereotypes of bestial savagery, useful only as tools of Skeletor's schemes. Yet at the same time, they are portrayed as dangerous hordes threatening the stability of Eternia, justifying He-Man's role as protector of civilization, as Samir Amin recalls, the "dominant culture invented an eternal West" who "had as its counterpart an equally artificial conception of the Other" (Amin 165). The cartoon thus mirrors the colonial practice of dehumanizing the colonized while portraying them as a perpetual menace.

Frantz Fanon's work in *Black Skin, White Masks* is equally instructive. Fanon describes how colonial culture constructs the racialized Other as simultaneously subhuman and hypersexual, while elevating whiteness as the ideal of beauty and order: "The black man naturally feels that he is in closer touch with the 'lower animals' than with the white man, who is so far superior to him in every respect" (Fanon 112). In *He-Man*, the beast-like features of Skeletor's allies – scales, claws, flat noses, aquatic or reptilian bodies – visually reinforce their inhumanity. By contrast, the whiteness of Eternia's ruling class is aligned with heroism, beauty, and rationality. This visual coding of race embeds a Eurocentric aesthetic into the very design of the series, shaping children's imaginations around binaries of white/civilized versus colored/primitive.

Skeletor himself complicates this dynamic. In some backstories, he is presented as Keldor, Randor's estranged brother, suggesting a rivalry within whiteness itself. In other interpretations, he is depicted as a sorcerer from another dimension, an outsider whose intrusion destabilizes Eternia. His skeletal face can be read as a metaphor for racialized monstrosity, an image that marks him as alien and illegitimate. Yet Skeletor also functions as a leader for the marginalized races of Eternia, gathering beast men and other outcasts into his fold. In this sense, he resembles what Edward Said describes as the "Other" who defines the boundaries of the West "as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Said 1-2). Thus, Skeletor's threat provides the condition for He-Man's existence as protector of civilization. Skeletor's rebellion, however compromised, signals the suppressed possibility of native resistance against settler dominance, even if the show ultimately demonizes such resistance.

At the same time, the depiction of Skeletor's followers exposes another colonial trope: the false promise of liberation. While Skeletor rallies beast men and fish people against Randor's monarchy, he does so not to free them but to exploit their labor in his quest for power. In this sense, Skeletor reflects what Memmi describes as the "colonizer who refuses" (Memmi 89), one who claims to stand against colonial order but ultimately replicates its exploitation. For the subaltern populations of Eternia, whether they align with Randor or Skeletor, there is no true emancipation; both sides reproduce the logic of domination.

The series also raises the question of whether He-Man himself is a settler-hero, legitimizing human dominance over Eternia through his monopoly of power. As Queen Marlena is from Earth, one could interpret Eternia's human rulers as descendants of colonizers who imposed their authority on the native populations. This aligns with Aníbal Quijano's concept of the "coloniality of power," where colonial structures persist in the cultural imagination long after formal colonialism ends (Quijano 545). The cartoon thus naturalizes a Eurocentric worldview in which whiteness and civilization are synonymous, while the monstrous racialized Other exists only to be contained or subdued.

Thus, a postcolonial reading reveals that *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* embeds colonial hierarchies within its fantasy setting. By aligning whiteness with civilization and relegating non-human races to the periphery, the series reproduces Eurocentric notions of superiority. It simultaneously demonizes native rebellion while presenting the settler-hero He-Man as the guardian of order. For its 1980s and 1990s audiences, these messages were rarely questioned, yet they served to normalize racial and colonial hierarchies in subtle but powerful ways. Re-examining these racial depictions today allows us to uncover the colonial undertones of a series that continues to occupy a nostalgic space in popular culture.

## Contrasting forces: He-Man vs Skeletor

The central tension of *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* rests on the binary opposition between He-Man and Skeletor. Their struggle provides the narrative engine for the series and encapsulates deeper cultural myths about good and evil, civilization and savagery, and order and chaos. While the show presents He-Man's victories as triumphs of morality and justice, a structural analysis reveals that his very identity is inseparable from his

opposition to Skeletor. In this sense, the series exemplifies what Claude Lévi-Strauss described as the structural logic of myth that meaning is produced not in isolation but through the interplay of binary opposites (Lévi-Strauss 211).

He-Man is defined as the epitome of strength, virtue, and selflessness, but these traits acquire significance only when contrasted with Skeletor's cunning, selfishness, and cruelty. Without Skeletor's threat to Castle Grayskull, He-Man's powers would lack purpose. This is made explicit in the episode *The Arena*, where He-Man spares Skeletor's life, declaring, "Even though Skeletor is my enemy, I couldn't allow him to perish. I believe in the sanctity of all life" (*Masters, He-Man The Arena 18:21 – 18:28*). While this is framed as moral nobility, it also underscores He-Man's dependence on Skeletor for existential meaning. If Skeletor were to perish, the rationale for He-Man's existence, and by extension the show's narrative, would collapse. As Roland Barthes argues in *Mythologies*, myths naturalize contradictions by concealing their constructedness beneath the illusion of eternal truths (Barthes 142). He-Man's righteousness appears natural, but it is in fact constructed through the perpetual presence of Skeletor as a necessary opposite.

The binary of He-Man/Skeletor also resonates with Jungian archetypes. He-Man embodies the archetypal Hero – courageous, noble, protector of civilization. Jung argues that the "shadow is a living part of the personality and therefore wants to live with it in some form. It cannot be argued out of existence or rationalized into harmlessness", thus Skeletor with his skull-like visage and lust for power, functions as the archetypal Shadow representing repressed desires, chaos, and the unconscious forces that threaten the Hero's world ( Jung 19). Their relationship is symbiotic where the Shadow defines the Hero as much as the Hero contains the Shadow. He-Man's refusal to kill Skeletor reflects this archetypal necessity that to destroy the Shadow would be to annihilate the Hero's own symbolic identity.

From a structural perspective, the opposition between He-Man and Skeletor extends beyond morality into broader cultural binaries. Eternia is structured around opposites such as civilization/savagery, masculinity/effeminacy, order/chaos, and even whiteness/otherness. Prince Adam, effeminate and comic, becomes He-Man, virile and commanding, only when Skeletor threatens the stability of the kingdom. The narrative suggests that masculinity itself is actualized only in the face of an external Other. This reflects Lévi-Strauss's concept that myths function to mediate contradictions within

culture by structuring them into comprehensible pairs (Lévi-Strauss 229). He-Man and Skeletor mediate the contradictions of power, demonstrating that the struggle between good and evil is less about resolution and more about maintaining equilibrium.

Interestingly, Skeletor's singularity as a villain often appears more compelling than He-Man's repetitive righteousness. Skeletor's plots, though doomed to failure, demonstrate creativity and ambition, whereas He-Man's role is largely reactive, defined by defense rather than innovation. This dynamic recalls Barthes's notion that myth often sanitizes conflict by presenting one side as natural and the other as aberrant, "What the world supplies to myth is an historical reality,... and what myth gives in return is a natural image of this reality." (Barthes 169) Skeletor's failures reinforce He-Man's status as guardian of order, yet they also make visible the constructedness of He-Man's virtue – his power exists only as long as Skeletor challenges it.

The binary opposition also has political resonances. Skeletor, with his monstrous allies, represents the perpetual threat of the marginalized, coded as dangerous and irrational. He-Man, allied with a minority but ruling elite, represents the consolidation of hegemonic order. Gramsci's concept of hegemony helps explain that the show constructs consent around He-Man's authority by portraying Skeletor's rebellion as illegitimate, even though it emerges from the dispossessed (Gramsci 12). By positioning rebellion as villainy and order as morality, the binary of He-Man and Skeletor functions ideologically to naturalize existing hierarchies.

Ultimately, the He-Man/Skeletor binary is not about the annihilation of evil but about the reproduction of power. The refusal to resolve their conflict maintains a dynamic equilibrium that sustains both characters' identities. As Lévi-Strauss observed of myths, the resolution is never final but cyclical, replayed endlessly to reassure audiences of cultural stability (Lévi-Strauss 229). In *He-Man*, the endless struggle between hero and villain reassures viewers that good will prevail, while concealing the structural dependence of good upon evil. Thus, the series exemplifies how binary oppositions, far from offering simple moral lessons, encode complex ideological functions that sustain cultural myths of power, order, and legitimacy.

## Cultural Memory and Legacy

Although *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* was produced in the 1980s primarily as a marketing vehicle for Mattel's toys, its influence has endured well beyond its original broadcast. For many audiences, especially in India where the show aired on Doordarshan in the 1990s, *He-Man* is not just a cartoon but a cultural memory tied to childhood. The chant "By the Power of Grayskull! I have the Power!" functions today as a nostalgic marker, instantly evoking memories of schooldays, early television culture, and the excitement of limited yet cherished media access. This nostalgic pull demonstrates how cultural products become embedded in personal and collective identity, functioning as what Svetlana Boym calls "restorative and reflective nostalgia", the former seeking to recreate the lost past, and the latter engaging critically with memory as a mode of cultural reflection (Boym 49). For many Indian viewers, the nostalgia for *He-Man* is reflective, tied not only to childhood innocence but also to the recognition of how foreign media shaped their imaginations.

This nostalgic value has been actively cultivated through media revivals. The 2002 reboot of *He-Man* modernized the animation while retaining the core mythos, targeting a new generation of children while also appealing to the adults who grew up with the original. More recently, Netflix's *Masters of the Universe: Revelation* (2021), produced by Kevin Smith, sought to reimagine the franchise with a more inclusive and diverse sensibility. Characters like Teela and Andra (a Black female warrior) were foregrounded, while storylines explored themes of trauma, responsibility, and legacy. These changes reflect contemporary cultural pressures to diversify representation and challenge traditional gender roles. Yet the polarized reception of the reboot praised by some for its inclusivity and condemned by others for "betraying" the original, illustrates what Lincoln Geraghty terms the "cult collectors" phenomenon, fans who view nostalgic texts as cultural property, fiercely defending their authenticity against reinterpretation (Geraghty 29).

In the digital age, *He-Man* has also found renewed life through online fandom and participatory culture. Henry Jenkins's concept of "textual poaching" helps explain how fans engage with *He-Man* not just as consumers but as co-creators, producing fan fiction, artwork, and online debates that reinterpret and extend the franchise (Jenkins 24). YouTube and fan forums

preserve old episodes, circulate critical commentary, and allow global audiences to reconnect with a show that once reached them through limited television exposure. For Indian fans in particular, revisiting *He-Man* online is part of reconstituting the cultural memory of the 1990s, an era of transition from state-controlled broadcasting to globalized media.

At the same time, nostalgia for *He-Man* reflects broader postmodern dynamics. Fredric Jameson famously argued that nostalgia in postmodern culture often results in "the loss of historicity," where the past is consumed as aesthetic style rather than critically examined (Jameson 17). The retro revival of *He-Man* merchandise, from collectible action figures to T-shirts, demonstrates this commodified nostalgia. What once began as a marketing strategy for toys now returns as a consumer product for adults who relive their childhood through purchases. Nostalgia here is not merely emotional but economic, sustaining the franchise as a transgenerational commodity.

Thus, the cultural afterlife of *He-Man* illustrates the complex interplay between memory, fandom, and commerce. For Indian audiences, it remains a marker of the early television era, tied to both personal childhood experiences and the globalization of popular culture. For Western audiences, it functions as both retro kitsch and a site of ongoing ideological negotiation. Across contexts, *He-Man* endures because its fantasy of power, morality, and adventure remains endlessly recyclable, adapting to new cultural demands while retaining its nostalgic allure. In this way, the franchise demonstrates how nostalgia is not simply about remembering the past but about reshaping cultural identity in the present.

## Conclusion

Revisiting He-Man and the Masters of the Universe shows it is more than nostalgic entertainment; it is a cultural text shaped by power, ideology, and representation. Beneath its simple morality lies a narrative that reinforces social hierarchies and cultural myths. Through ideology, the series functions as Louis Althusser's "ideological state apparatus," training viewers to accept binaries of good/evil and masculine/effeminate. Michel Foucault's concept of power/knowledge highlights Castle Grayskull as a source of authority, while Antonio Gramsci's cultural hegemony explains why audiences accept He-Man's dominance as natural and Skeletor's resistance as illegitimate.

Gender politics reveal a similar tension. Though Teela, the Sorceress, and She-Ra display strength, their roles are limited by sexualization and male dependence. Laura Mulvey's male gaze and Judith Butler's gender performativity expose how female agency is acknowledged yet constrained within patriarchal norms, a contradiction mirrored in Filmation's production context. Race and colonial discourse further structure the narrative. Eternia's human rulers contrast with marginalized "others," reflecting colonial hierarchies analyzed by Fanon, Memmi, and Said. Even Skeletor embodies the paradox of resistance that reproduces domination rather than liberation.

The opposition between He-Man and Skeletor illustrates Claude Lévi-Strauss's idea of mythic binaries, where each defines the other in an endless, stabilizing conflict. Meanwhile, the show's afterlife reflects nostalgia's power, aligning with Fredric Jameson's postmodern critique and Svetlana Boym's distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia. Ultimately, He-Man demonstrates that popular culture is never innocent: it embeds ideology, naturalizes hierarchy, and shapes imagination. Revisiting it reveals both the pleasure of memory and the deeper structures of power, gender, race, and consumerism that it helped sustain.

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