

The Future of Feminism is Slayed: Tomboyism in Joss Whedon's *Fray*

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In May 1997 *Time* magazine spoke with Joss Whedon about his creation, a teenage bubble gum chewing “girl power” vampire slayer named Buffy. Whedon explained, “If I can make teenage boys comfortable with a girl who takes charge of a situation without their knowing that’s what’s happening, it’s better than sitting down and selling them on feminism” (Bellafonte 82). Due to his ground - breaking work with the character Buffy, Whedon has gained enormous popularity and a reputation as a feminist. My concern is that Whedon’s authorship of *Fray*, a futuristic comic book extension of the “Buffyverse,” misleads many readers and reviewers to automatically perceive Melaka Fray as a powerful female fighter who, like Buffy, battles patriarchy. The difference is Melaka ultimately loses where Buffy always wins. Looking closely at the creation of *Fray*, her story, and the Buffy cross over, *Time of Your Life*, it becomes obvious that Melaka is a different kind of character. On the surface, Melaka’s apparent masculine nature gives her the illusion of being empowered, but when examining the character through the lens of Michelle Abate’s work on tomboyism, Melaka’s actions, and ultimate supplication, provide a strong argument for the prevalence of tomboy taming messages rampant in popular culture.

In this paper, I will examine Whedon’s comments about the comic and how his vision of a new comic book ‘heroine’ ultimately objectifies the character. Additionally, I will examine how her tomboy status concretizes messages about “ideal womanhood” while demonstrating that any perceived power the character has is male controlled or subverted by masculine influence. The *Fray* series warrants critical examination as a work that reads against messages of “girl power” established in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, rather than upholds them.

The comic series *Fray*, published by Dark Horse Comics in 2003, tells the story of Melaka Fray, the latest slayer in the Buffyverse. The story opens 200 years after Buffy. Melaka’s world is a futuristic city where “radies lurks” (brutal vampires), demons, and humans co-exist. As small time thief, she lives a hard life, one that has cost her a relationship with her older sister Erin, and caused the death of her twin brother, Harth. During one of her grabs, the dangerous lurk, Icarus, bites Harth. Melaka is unable to save her brother from the formidable Icarus. Later, it is revealed that Harth has been sired and is the leader of the lurks. His evil plan is to create a demon race to take over the city. Urkonn, a demon/watcher, looks for Melaka to help save the city. He teaches Melaka about her slayer powers, but quickly realizes she only has half the power; Harth also possesses slayer skills. Together, Urkonn, Melaka, and her sister Erin form their own arm of people prevent the demon uprising. Urkonn, however, proves duplicitous, using Melaka to perpetuate the evil agenda of his underground world. The comic makes vague references to Buffy, and Melaka appears in the Buffy *The Vampire Slayer* comic *Season Eight: Time of Your Life*. Despite these cross-overs between *Buffy* and *Fray*, the publisher Dark Horse Comics asserted adamantly that Melaka Fray and Buffy Summers are not the same.

Dark Horse claimed in an interview with Beau Yarbrough that the series could stand on its own merit, while many readers claimed that the comic was a spin-off or *Buffy* product extension:

It depends on what you mean by tie-in. It's definitely the same universe, definitely connected... And it is all the same mythology. But we didn't want the Buffy logo on it; we didn't want to try to sell it as a Buffy book. It's a Joss Whedon book, and that seems to be selling it quite nicely. (Yarbrough)

Dark Horse contradicts itself because while it claims the series is independent of *Buffy*, they clearly market it differently. Looking at the comic series reprinting in trade paperback form, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is printed directly on the cover. This matters because Whedon's *Buffy* forces viewers to contend with a feminist agenda throughout the series. The protagonist combats the notion that a girl must either be smart or pretty, feminine or strong. Therefore, when reviewers like *Wizard Magazine*, *School Library Journal*, and *Publisher's Weekly* all likened *Fray* to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, I was compelled to examine the comic series more closely.

Instead of challenging the established patriarchy that dominates the comic world, *Fray* reads as a stereotype meant to entice adolescent male readers to embrace the series through the use of overtly sexualized images, and the *Buffy* brand on the cover serves merely as a lure to dupe female comic book readers into thinking the book is for them. This futuristic extension of the Buffyverse is celebrated as a comic in which, Ray Tate asserts in his review for *Comics Bulletin*, "Every little girl can read ...and feel empowered by the actions of Melaka Fray...*Fray* is as good as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*." I respectfully disagree. Reviews of *Fray* were positive, and Dark Horse Comics had so many requests for the series that they ordered a second printing. *Publisher's Weekly* described the book as a "stunning, irresistible package" (53). The reviewer's comment feels shallow, as if the cool graphics, flashy colors, and the name Whedon emblazoned on the cover trump the nature of the character and the plot of the story. With a lazy critical eye it is easy to be misled by Melaka Fray's tough girl exterior.

A slayer who only has half her powers cannot possibly be as strong a feminist character as Buffy. Moreover, Melaka is ineffective as a true slayer, both in the story's mythology, and as a combatant of anti-feminist messages if half her powers are appropriated by a male character. Critics and academics like Holly Chandler, a contributor to *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies* (2010), have established the Buffyverse as a place where "the fight between slayer and demon [represents] a physical manifestation of a more abstract, often subconscious battle between women and deep-rooted sexist attitudes" (4). Given the overwhelming positive reviews the comic received, the disappointing anti-feminist elements presented in the text appear to have gone virtually ignored. However, upon closer examination of the text and its images, I argue that the Whedon comic series serves to uphold the traditional anti-feminist messages popularized within comic books – a trend observed by critics like Sherri Inness who, in her *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* (1999), discusses the use of overly sexualized images of females in comics to appeal to a male target audience; and Danny Fingeroth in his *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Our Society* (2004) where he notes how the sales trend of comics drive the representations of female characters in comics: "Do these women –even the gay ones– have to be sexy in a manner appealing to straight men and boys? Probably, if the producers wish to have as broad an audience as possible" (93-94). Relying on traditional representations of women, Whedon's *Fray* perpetuates the trend of comic books and does so by mimicking the

historical arc of tomboys, as presented by Michelle Abate in her book *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History* (2008).

Tomboyism began in the United States with the Civil War era. The idea was to teach primarily upper-class white women how to be strong and healthy. By allowing girls a childhood full of fresh air, play, and good foods, they would be better prepared to procreate, and thus perpetuate the white race. Therefore, being a tomboy becomes simultaneously eugenic and circumstantial, not a choice that a girl makes willingly, but one she must make. It is this differentiation that makes being a tomboy socially acceptable. More importantly, a girl may exhibit boyish characteristics but must ultimately give these up to fulfill traditional female roles. This is referred to as tomboy taming. Melaka's journey follows this arch. Her brash criminal behavior is merely a way to survive in her harsh urban environment but has little to do with who she is, a caring, nurturing young woman. Melaka is loyal and trusting, and only uses her tough attitude when she has to. Tomboyism evolved with the decades. Melaka although created in 2003, fits the profile of a 1990s tomboy, popularly referred to as the "Riot Grrl" style. Her demeanor, dress, sexual appeal, and eventual submission to male influence support this idea.

She participates in stereotypical masculine activities like crime, and prefers pants to dresses and heels – unlike her predecessor, Buffy. The slayer chooses to be surrounded by men, a tomboy trait, as is her “sissy boy” pal, her brother, Harth. His death during one of Melaka's tomboy jaunts reads like a punishment for her masculine behavior. Her tomboyism keeps her alive and, therefore, is tolerated. Moreover, by acting like a tomboy she will be able to conquer Harth and save the human race, thus establishing that her ultimate purpose is to fulfill a eugenic practice.

In the first scenes of the comic, Melaka is running off with her “grab” all the while being chased by scary looking men. The heroine handles herself well and stays cool, fearless even, but this leads to her falling flat on her face. We rarely see the vulnerability of traditional male comic heroes like Superman or Batman, for example, but instantly Whedon makes us cognizant of this heroine's gender; Melaka may seem like a tough guy, but she's a girl, and girls who act like boys tend to proverbially fall on their faces. Instead of using this setting of the future, centuries ahead of ours, to push the boundaries of gender norm-ing, the book contradicts the feminist claims presented in *Buffy*.

Even the title re-iterates this point. Certainly, the name, Buffy, connotes images of a 1950s sweater set adorned with a string of pearls. It is not a name of strength or one that warrants respect. However, Whedon appropriates the name and cleverly challenges all pre-conceived notions about feminine frailty. Thus the name transmogrifies from a punch line into a chorus of “I am Buffy; hear me roar.” Likewise, the name, Fray, on the surface is connected to the verb to fight, or to attack, but examining other definitions the word offers other images. For instance, Fray can be a noun meaning “a feeling of fear; alarm, fright, terror” (*The Oxford English Dictionary*). As a warrior, our lead heroine should not be terrified during the thick of the fight. If the name Fray is connected to this passive, object meaning, the reader is given a clue that this slayer is not like the ones before. Moreover, Fray represent an unraveling, an undoing. Whedon's character is a split from the previous slayers in many ways. She is of another time, she was born a twin and thus has half her slayer power, and she lacks the fortitude of a Buffy or Faith.

However, the most shocking definition is the obsolete meaning of “fray”: “to bruise. Also, to deflower” (*The Oxford English Dictionary*). The connection to violence and sexuality, or perhaps even rape, suggests that this comic heroine is being “deflowered” or sexually conquered by her male visionary creator, Whedon himself. If Melaka is a fighter who is terrified, divisive, bruises easily and is susceptible to male dominance and danger—and all this from her name alone—it stands to reason that this girl is no futuristic femme fatale. In fact, drawing her as a “Riot Grrl” of the 1990s gives Melaka a look that is inappropriately backdated.

Abate explains in her book, *Tomboys*, that this trend developed from the “grunge” movement, incorporating baggy cargo pants, and combat boots, and mixed it with a “tribal look” that involved feminized tattoos and piercings (223). Melaka sports this style exactly, making this futuristic slayer look surprisingly like a throwback to the alterna-teen era. She is drawn with a nose piercing, multiple ear piercings, and her jewelry accessories are African-esque bracelets and band necklaces, while a non-descript tattoo of an unfamiliar tribal pattern appears on her bicep. Although this tattoo placement is typically masculine, Melaka’s appears feminine because it is often kept in shadow, or is not visible. The image itself is also passive, a series of half moon shapes that it almost could be construed as a uterine representation.

Trim, tough girl bodies were the idealized standard, a blend of the masculine arms, toned abs with an impossibly slight frame. It was a tomboy image contingent upon appearing feminine and heterosexual at all times, as well as “edgy”. According to Abate:

These figures remained feminine in spite of being fierce and girlish in spite of being tomboyish. Thus, they were appealing to men: they wore tight-fighting clothes, had long hair and repeatedly demonstrated that they were not lesbians. For these reasons, beautiful women may have fought villains, but as Inness has aptly noted, “their fundamental purpose [was] to function as eye candy. (224-225)

Melaka is drawn with this former trend in mind, which makes her appealing and sexy for both the male audience who desire her, and the female audience who want to be desired like her. This appearance was specifically requested by the creator himself.

Whedon asserts his dominance and control over the character in the foreword of the book when he makes it clear that Melaka Fray satisfies a desire in him to see a certain kind of girl in a comic book - a girl who can all at once be modest, tough, and sexy: “there were certainly other things on my mind in my young adolescence. But almost certainly topping the list were girls and comics. And more specifically, girls *in* comics ... Where are the girls? Girls who can fight, who can stand up for themselves, who have opinions and fears and cute outfits” (Whedon n.pag.). Essentially, what he wants is a hot tomboy. Having Whedon’s own adolescent sexual fantasy become the populace perceived ideal of liberated woman warrior is problematic at best. First, Whedon’s own masculine preference for “cute” or girlish-girls sends a strong message to young women about what is attractive. Thankfully, he adds that having a mind of one’s own is an appealing quality, but this is short lived. When speaking about the vision he pitched to Dark Horse, Whedon continues:

No cheesecake. No giant silicone hooters, no standing with her butt out in that bizarrely uncomfortable soft-core pose so many artists favor. None of those outfits that casually-and constantly-reveal portions of thong. I wanted a real girl, with real posture, a slight figure (that's my classy way of saying "little boobs"), and most of all, a distinctive face. (Whedon n.pag.)

Whedon's efforts to avoid the type of comic "lady" prevalent in the "bad girl" comics is refreshing but does not go far enough.

The stereotypical "soft-core" images frequently found in comic books are what Sherri Inness made note of in her book, *Tough Girls*: "Since the majority of comic book purchasers are boys and men, their tastes are catered to, resulting in many women characters who are still little more than overly endowed male fantasies who would be right at home in Hugh Hefner's mansion" (142). If Inness is correct, then perhaps Dark Horse's concern for making *Fray* sellable drives the creation of this submissive character. My issue with Whedon then is twofold. On one hand, I empathize and champion his efforts to change the images of girls in comics, but the creation of Melaka is a misogynistic act in that she is crafted to match an appropriately modest yet sexy ideal. Additionally, his preference for "little boobs" and a "slight figure" is at once alienating, as well as unrealistic, for girls who admire Whedon and don't have those features: "Melaka's every pose is real, lived-in". Whedon's definition of "real" is eschewed. Most women cannot leap from buildings, land on their faces, and look pretty moments later. He adds, "She is hard, defensive, vulnerable, goofy, and yes, wicked sexy". It does not seem reasonable to expect a girl to encompass the binaries hard and vulnerable, sexy yet innocent.

In the essay, "Fighters and Cheerleaders: Disrupting the Discourse of 'Girl Power' in the New Millennium" (2005), Natalie Adams references Susan Douglas who discusses these mixed messages of extremes being sent to young women via our pop culture: "Girls today are being urged, simultaneously, to be independent, assertive, and achievement-oriented, yet also demure, attractive, soft-spoken, fifteen pounds underweight, and deferential to men." Or put more simply by a group of early-adolescent girls: "A girl could be anyone as long as she is pretty" (110). Clearly, these young girls understand exactly what Whedon does; for a woman to be a fierce fighter, she must not appear, at least physically, as if she is a fighter. Whedon's foreword reinforces the chilling statement made by these girls. The character's objectification begins with the writer's last sentiment wherein he offers the work that embodies his own pre-pubescent fantasy to his son and asks his son to "Try not to spill anything on it," (Whedon n.pag.) which suggests masturbatory ejaculation.

Melaka's objectification is reinforced when examining the images of the slayer in the book itself. In the opening of the book, Fray is positioned in a squatting pose, legs open, with domineering muscular biceps that would appear mannish and reminiscent of the tough girls seen in popular 1990s films like Linda Hamilton in *Terminator 2*. Her phallic blaster is conveniently aligned with her crotch and pointed down toward the ever encroaching monsters known as lurks, but her gaze is elsewhere. She does not seem present in the action; she remains detached from what is happening to her and around her. Despite her toned body, Melaka appears unprepared and distracted. The vacant gaze allows the viewer to ogle her body without feeling connected to

her. Her open legs suggest a sexual readiness and her diverted glance reinforces that she is not going to challenge the reader's sexual desire for her, nor will she take offense to the appreciation of her figure by male characters.

Gunther, Melaka's boss, lives in a tank of water. To see him Melaka must stand over him on a plate glass floor. To ensure the viewer / reader does not take this positioning as giving Melaka authority, we are quickly reminded who has the power when Gunther says that he wishes Melaka would "just once...come see [him] in a ssskirt [sic] ..." (Whedon n.pag.). Gunther's remark signifies the objectification with which the reader is expected to view her. It does not matter how much money she has just earned for Gunther, the risks she took in pulling the job, or how good she was at it; ultimately Gunther, like the male readership, and authorship in this case, only wants a glimpse at her panties. This scene is revisited in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer Season Eight: Time of Your Life*. Melaka takes Buffy, who has been sucked into Melaka's world sporting a cute shift dress and heeled boots, to visit Gunther. Despite Buffy's squatting and covering after she realizes she is standing over the fishy demon, it is too late. Her privacy has been violated and her body ogled. Buffy asks, "How long has he been down there?" "Orange polka dots" the demon answers letting the audience and Buffy know that he has taken full advantage of his uninhibited view of her underwear (Whedon, 2009: 49). Buffy, used to her world "where the male form in *Buffy* is 'objectified for the female audience' and Buffy is covered most episodes" as observed by Gwyn Symonds in "Solving Problems with Sharp Objects" (2004), it is made clear to the reader that in Melaka's world the rules are different. Girls are not in charge here. Despite being two centuries in the future from Buffy's realm, the gender roles have not advanced and, in fact, have arguably regressed.

To further this notion, Melaka's naked body is shown gratuitously in the shower. She is not shown in her own apartment bathroom. Instead, she bathes straddling two buildings, several stories up and washes herself in the water that comes out of a broken pipe overhead. We see the back of Melaka's body, the bottom in shadow with legs spread and a shaft of light literally highlighting the path to her vagina. The ominous disappearing shaft of darkness below her is long and lean and capped off with this glowing light drawn in between her legs creating an overtly phallic image. Shower scenes occur in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the television series, but they show shoulders, feet, and blood being washed away. These scenes are about vulnerability, fear, and renewal. This moment is about body. Whedon uses Melaka's tomboyish behavior as a rationale for her comfort with reader's gaze and soon Urkonn's; it is as if the protagonist is unaware she possesses female body parts. This demonstrates the implied immaturity of the fledgling slayer, which feels inappropriate given that she is already in her late teens. In order to complete the arch of her tomboy journey she will have to come to terms with her womanhood, which means accepting her subservience to the patriarchy. She does this willingly in the following frame.

Her body is there for the viewer to gaze at and in the next scene when she returns to her apartment wrapped with only a towel around her waist, Urkonn surprises her. He is able to gaze on her breasts without impediment. He does not shy away from looking at her full on and she permits him to look while she changes. Urkonn's role as her quasi "watcher," a job that suddenly has a dual meaning, puts him in a position of authority over Fray as a paternal figure, teacher, and boss. Her body, along with her wants and desires (she has no desire to fight lurks at the

beginning) all belong to him. She accepts that her female form does not belong to her, but rather must function to fulfill the needs of her world.

Conversely, the last image of Melaka in the book shows a much cuter feminine smiling girl. She is not a sexual object but a darling. Toned arm muscles are gone, her commando boots replaced with sneakers. Even cargo pants are turned to shorts. Fray is much more feminine, and youthful. Gone is her "Riot Grrl" gear. Her vacant gaze is replaced with a satisfied grin as she looks to the horizon and understands her purpose. The warrior seems tamed and wholesome, a fate unavoidable for tomboy characters. She no longer needs to act boyish, she can be a mature female, ready to protect and serve others. In this last scene, the slayer's heterosexuality is confirmed. Melaka's tomboyism is solidified because she ultimately appears hetero-normative. Natalie Adams explains, "The discourse of Girl Power is still very much couched in the expectation that only one sexual orientation is appropriate for ideal girls -- that is, heterosexual" (109). Fray's tough rugged looks, as discussed earlier, walk the fine line between heterosexual femininity and the sexual appeal of the quasi-lesbian for the masculine viewer.

If *Fray* and, likewise, *Buffy* were merely two stories in a veritable sea of female warriors, the attention to her body and her lack of control over her own destiny would not be significant. However, because Whedon has become somewhat trusted by the female community as a writer who will work to perpetuate positive connotations of feminism, it is disappointing that his first foray into comics writing may on the surface present a character who contradicts the stereotypes of women in comics but ultimately creates an end product that does the opposite through its description and design. Reviewers like *The School Library Journal* therefore, miss the mark when they make comments such as: "it will also find an audience with anyone who appreciates girl power" ("Whedon," 2004). The only problem is this girl has no power.

Yes, she heals quickly, can leap and bound, crash and slash around villainous lurks, she does have some physical strength, but what she lacks is agency. In the opening of the comic series, Melaka steals an expensive piece of jewelry not for herself, but for the male fish demon she works for. Although she has the skills to steal and get away, she does not seem to possess the mental capacity to turn a profit on these pilfered items; she needs a middle-*man*, to do this for her. She only takes a small portion of the profits Gunther will likely glean from her hard work. In her negotiations with Gunther, she tells herself to "stay calm" when he offers her more than she is expecting. She cannot deduce that Gunther is sending her some kind of message, warning about trouble ahead: "A contract? To bind me to him, make sure I don't stray?" she ponders (Whedon). Her passivity here is shocking. Melaka does not say, "he can't pay me enough to bind me to him, I'm my own free agent." She appears comfortable with the idea that she could be bound to her male boss.

This submission is useful for Urkonn who in a few frames will tell Melaka that she is the chosen one and ask her to train with him to fight lurks. When Melaka hesitates to accept her duty as the chosen one, Urkonn manipulates her. He plays on her maternal instincts by murdering a young disfigured girl named Loo that Melaka protects and mothers. Urkonn knows this is the only way to get the reluctant slayer to fight the vicious vampires and fulfill her destiny. According to Natalie Adams who examined the motives for girls who fight in her book, *Geographies of Girlhood: Identities In-Between*, "One of the primary reasons why girls fight is

to prove their loyalty to a friend, boyfriend, or family. In this way they are demonstrating ‘the importance of friendship, unity, and togetherness’” (1018). Melaka models this when her anger over losing her beloved Loo serves as the catalyst for accepting her slayer powers, a moment which proves that Melaka’s tomboy behavior is circumstantial not conditional; she is in fact a traditional female with typical nurturing qualities. This fits not only with Abate’s study of tomboyism but also with Inness’ observations about females in comic books. Inness notes, “Comic books are uneasy in presenting a tough woman... without reassuring the audience that she has been forced by circumstances to adopt traits that are usually seen as the prerogative of men” (151). By establishing Melaka as an apprehensive warrior, Whedon maintains the comic book status quo when it comes to female heroines. Melaka’s fighting instincts spring from losing those closest to her, her brother and Loo, as well as from her sense of guilt and responsibility for taking care of those around her. This is a stereotypical phenomenon according to Inness: “Often toughness indicates that a character has been warped or twisted by some awful event in her life, conveying the message that a woman may be tough, but only if toughness is forced upon her” (150). Luckily, given the overwhelming circumstances, Melaka’s tomboyish behaviors will be beneficial to her and the human race.

To assist her with her fight, Urkonn gives Melaka the slayer scythe that Buffy pulled from a stone in the seventh season, a moment not drawn for the reader, but implied. Being “given” the weapon rather than earning it diminishes the value. The red axe no longer serves as the same weapon that Buffy used to defeat the misogynistic Caleb, but rather, as a shiny object or pretty thing given to a girl being courted to save the human race. Ignoring the moment when she acquires the scythe significantly downplays its importance as a powerful weapon. *Buffy* fans will recall that this battlement not only connected Buffy to a lineage of slayers, but also made it possible for her to win a war against the vampires and stop an apocalypse. Never really understanding the significance of what she’s been given further inhibits the slayer’s potential. Urkonn never shares this knowledge with Melaka either, possibly because Melaka never would have been able to pull the blade out of the stone herself, as Buffy easily does in Season 7 of the television series. Melaka is after all only “half a slayer.” As a twin, her brother Harth has all the slayer dreams and memories while Melaka has the slayer strength.

By possessing intimate knowledge of the warrior women lineage, this male character, in essence, appropriates the history and reclaims it as masculine. Harth states, “Before my earliest memories...there were the dreams. There was the girl. She was me. She wasn’t me. I loved her” (Whedon n.pag.). At the start of the book, he is the weakest character, yet his masculinity trumps any female strength. Presumably, the slayer line is now tainted because it is no longer purely feminine – or worse, it is over because of this masculine ubiquity. My frustration here stems from the very little presence and power female heroines have already in the comic world. Whedon’s first foray into comic writing reinforces the status quo of comic books as observed by Sherri Inness: “Inness explains that patriarchal society can allow some flexibility in redefining what constitutes normative femininity as long as men’s power and privilege isn’t challenged” (Adams 111). Harth’s actions model this phenomenon. Despite his alleged weakness, he outwits Icarus, who is drinking the boy’s blood, by biting the fierce lurk in the face. Now sired by the vampire, the twin brother becomes immortal. With immortality comes strong leadership skills and powerful influence. Consequently, demon Harth trumps his human sister. His newfound talents allow him to rise through the ranks and become the leader of lurks; the vampires willingly

follow his orders, including Icarus. Harth tells his army, "I'm leading you to glory. I'm taking you straight to hell" (Whedon n.pag.). His immortality, demon strength, and slayer dreams give him unstoppable power. His mind is stronger than Melaka's body and she will not be able to defeat him. When the two are drawn together in the story, it is Harth who has control. The former sissy controls the slayer, manipulates her, deceives her, and eventually escapes from her. She is not able to conquer him in the end.

The root of Harth's power rests in his ability to dominate lurks, Melaka, demons, and himself. Unlike the other lurks, Harth is able to appear "normal" and non-threatening. He explains: "Any vampire can appear perfectly human if they try. Most of them are too primitive to know it...But I am more than beast. I am the one who will lead" (Whedon n.pag.). Again, the young man has control over every aspect of his world. Of all the characters in the comic, it is Harth who most resembles something out of Sunnydale in that he is dynamic, smart, and fierce. The majority of the characters in this futuristic world read like secondary characters from the *Buffy* series.

In Melaka's world, the villain identity shifts from vampire to lurk. The lurks seem less human than the vampires Buffy dusted. Harth confesses: "Most of them are too primitive to know it. Icarus he chooses the face of the beast because he's proud" (Whedon n.pag.). Paralleling the backpedaling from the feminism established in the Buffyverse, Whedon takes his antagonists from multi-dimensional to "primitive." These villains, with the exception of Harth, are fierce for fierceness sake. They lack the poetry of the evil Angelus, who once harassed Buffy, and show no finesse. Additionally, it is significant that the criminal underworld also lacks females. The lurks are all portrayed as muscular male figures. Thus, in addition to trumping the "girl power" established in *Buffy*, the creation manages to become completely stereotypical and deny females the option to be wicked and villainous. There are no devious characters with the complexity of Drusilla or Darla. Having established the antagonists as traditional, patriarchal, and brawny, Whedon creates an opportunity for Melaka to triumph over them and reclaim her matriarchal power in one pinnacle scene.

The reader waits for the pinnacle scene where the warrior will face her fears and slay Icarus. Any Whedon follower recognizes this as part of the *Buffy* formula. The heroine must always face the "big bad" one on one. Such a showdown will solidify her status as a slayer and help the young woman regain her self-confidence. Yet, when it comes to fighting the terrifying lurk who has terrorized her for years, the scene is a disappointment. Melaka and Icarus face off in the middle of a street, giving the moment the feel of an old western, but before either can make their move, Erin, Melaka's sister, drops a flying car on Icarus' head killing him instantly. The moment of empowerment is downgraded to a cartoon-ish joke; the car might as well have been an anvil falling from on high. By allowing this moment, Melaka could have been read as an empowering character. Taking away Melaka's moment is detrimental at best. By denying the slayer the opportunity to defeat Icarus and conquer her fears, the character cannot establish that she has influence over her world. This is reiterated in Adams' research on girls who fight: "the girls in this study who engaged in physical fighting viewed the affirmation of themselves through their fists as a way to demonstrate their own sense of agency and control of their environment" (108). As stated before, this is a world where the female heroine has no agency and lacks control of her situation.

The control rests entirely with male characters. Harth created a literal dragon that Melaka must slay. The dragon, also female, is ridden by this tiny man who directs the battle from on high and is powerful enough to make the demons do as he says. Both Melaka and the dragon are being manipulated by his dominate masculine presence. He is always in charge of the situation, even when it appears that Melaka has won. After she slays the dragon, Harth shocks her saying, "You closed the gateway. Saved the Warren. Maybe even all of Haddyn. Maybe the world. You'll never guess what's coming next" (Whedon n.pag.). Harth tells Melaka this as she lays prostrate on the ground. He then asserts himself over her and objectifies his sister even more concretely when he kisses her like a lover and dashes away. This scene reinforces the idea that Melaka is not meant to challenge the male ego but rather be a sexual icon for it. Powerless to stop her brother and speechless and shocked after the incestuous kiss, she remains on the ground with Erin and the dragon, while Harth runs off into the darkened ally. Only the male in the frame has mobility. Despite this defeat, Melaka is optimistic at the end of the comic. She even sounds tough:

they'll be watching. The demons, Harth ... things I don't even know about yet. They'll be waiting. Waiting for me to fall. So come on guys. I'm just one girl. No big hero, no protector of justice, not even a bona-fide one-hundred-percent slayer. So what are you waiting for? Take me on. Hurt my world. I dare you. (Whedon n.pag.)

However, she ultimately becomes a tamed tomboy. By accepting her destiny to protect the survival of the human race in this futuristic world, Melaka embraces her eugenic duty.

Adams examined the post-apocalyptic stories of popular culture, "In such a universe, girls are sometimes free to act like boys. Yet at the same time, such a fictional world can be used to reaffirm traditional stereotypes" (123), and this is the case of *Fray*. Melaka's criminal behavior cost the life of a brother and a relationship with a sister. She is punished for her tomboyishness early on because it is misguided. It isn't until Urkonn sees the potential in Melaka's tomboy behavior that she is "rewarded." The price for this prize of course meant being betrayed by her teacher Urkonn and the death of the child, Loo, but she gains leadership in her community, a renewed connection with her sister, Erin, and the smile on her face in the last frame suggests an inner peace all tamed girls can obtain if they succumb to patriarchy.

Melaka now accepts her true calling to rid the world of lurks and other demons, in order to protect mankind and the few "radies" that exists in her world. Urkonn tells the young girl, "I was sent to train you. To prepare you for the coming battle. You are the chosen one, Melaka Fray. It is your destiny to lead humankind in the war ... against the vampires" (Whedon n.pag.). At first she resists but eventually she accepts that she can save the humans from the demon army her brother leads, a demon army that has the capacity to birth a whole legion of new demons who will take over the earth. Thus, her eugenic purpose as a tomboy can be fulfilled.

Humanity may be united against evil, but ultimately Melaka's tomboyism, like the tomboyism of the antebellum south, is about strengthening the race. Harth rides in to the center of the city on his "Gateway," a demon dragon that functions like his gigantic external uterus

pregnant with a demon army. Urkonn, shouting orders, instructs his young slayer, “Melaka! Its womb is the gateway! It will birth legions of demons! It is the portal into our world! It must be stopped” (Whedon n.pag.). Getting swallowed whole by the creature gives the slayer an opportunity to defeat the monster from the inside. She literally chops her way out of its head like an Athena figure, giving rebirth to herself as the heroine who will save mankind and put an end to the threat of demon over population on the world. Now, born again, not as a tomboy but as a tamed woman who has performed the duty assigned to her by men, Melaka’s sexuality must be reaffirmed.

Thus, shortly after emerging from the “Gateway,” Harth kisses Melaka. Harth’s kiss functions as a signal to the reader that this female will allow herself to be sexually advanced upon by a male, even if he is her brother – a character whose own heterosexuality needs to be established for the reader. After the battle, where Melaka performs her service to mankind, we see her re-establishing a family connection with her sister, protecting her community, and learning more about her slayer powers. Melaka finally has her priorities of tradition, family, and service in order. Taming offers her fulfillment. Meanwhile the demon friends of Urkonn watch her from afar and wait. She is still being used, observed, they have the information, they have the power. They know more about what she is capable of than Melaka or the reader.

In her article “Buffy the Feminist Slayer?” Gwennyth Bodger quotes Andrea Dworkin’s examination of the Buffyverse: “what we are seeing is not necessarily what women want to do” but rather “the will of women as men want to see i[t]” (2). In *Fray*, this is exactly the issue. Melaka is not strong enough as a female heroine, she does not challenge the definitions of gender but rather upholds gender stratification established in the 1990s and as such takes steps backwards from the progression made within the story lines of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. By following the traditional trajectory of tomboys from their conception in the antebellum south, this story contains very specific messages about the new “ideal womanhood” that are rooted in the Riot Grrl style. Moreover, *Fray* conveys a very clear message to readers, particularly young girls, that working within the established patriarchy will ultimately lead to inner peace. Whedon’s first attempt as a comic writer falls short of reiterating the feminist agenda he admits to crafting in the *Buffy* series. Dark Horse’s *Fray*, although marketed under the Whedon name and touted as a “girl power” comic, proves ultimately to be about a female heroine who must learn to appease the desires of men in order to find a fulfilling life. Although a tomboy character may, at first read, appear liberating, her ultimate taming reaffirms the message that every heterosexual woman will best be served by sloughing off her masculine habits and embracing the traditional roles of nurturer and provider. Melaka’s acceptance of her slayer identity at the end of the comic becomes a willingness to mother the human race.

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