

Gynocentrism: Discourses of Female Supremacy in *The Woman King***Qori Islami Aris¹✉, Essy Syam²**^{1,2}Faculty of Humanities, University of Lancang Kuning, Indonesia**Article Info***Article History:*

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This study examines how the film *The Woman King* constructs gynocentric discourse through cinematic narrative strategies. While contemporary cinema increasingly features strong female protagonists, the research gap lies in understanding how historical narratives are selectively reconstructed to naturalize contemporary ideologies of female supremacy. Using John Fiske's three-level semiotic framework (reality, representation, and ideology), this qualitative analysis examines character construction, narrative patterns, and visual representations in the film. Findings reveal that the film employs ideological techniques including historical transfer, selective framing, and testimonial to establish female dominance across physical, intellectual, and moral domains. Critically, the study identifies significant ideological ambivalence: despite systematically constructing narratives of female superiority, the film paradoxically requires patriarchal validation for female achievements, exemplified in the *kpojito* title conferment scene. This reveals that contemporary gender representation involves complex negotiations between progressive aspirations and persistent androcentric frameworks. The research contributes theoretical insights into how semiotic analysis can expose ideological contradictions within ostensibly progressive media content.

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary feminist discourse has witnessed a significant paradigmatic shift from gender equality movements toward a more complex and contested phenomenon: gynocentrism. Gamble (2004) identifies gynocentrism as a manifestation of feminist movement evolution that no longer merely advocates for equality, but constructs frameworks positioning feminine attributes and experiences as central, sometimes privileging them over masculine counterparts across various aspects of social life. This transformation represents a departure from egalitarian feminism toward ideologies that systematically valorize femininity while minimizing or problematizing masculinity.

This ideological shift becomes particularly significant when manifested through cultural representations that naturalize female supremacy as progressive advancement rather than hierarchical inversion. While traditional feminism sought to dismantle gender hierarchies, gynocentric discourse often reproduces competitive frameworks by reversing rather than eliminating power imbalances. Understanding this distinction is crucial for critically examining contemporary gender representations that claim feminist credentials while potentially perpetuating problematic domination patterns that hooks (2000) warns against—where empowerment movements inadvertently reproduce the very hierarchies they oppose.

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Mass media, particularly cinema, functions as a powerful ideological apparatus in constructing and disseminating gender discourse. Mulvey (1975) demonstrated how film shapes gender perceptions through visual mechanisms, while Sulistyani (2021) emphasizes that films construct "images that have logical social connections that can be accepted," becoming problematic when these naturalized representations contain values that privilege certain groups over others. In contemporary contexts, cinema's ideological function has evolved from merely reflecting patriarchal logic to potentially normalizing alternative hierarchical structures through gynocentric frameworks.

The Woman King presents a significant case study for examining how Hollywood cinema constructs gynocentric discourse within intersectional contexts. By depicting the Agojie female warriors from the Kingdom of Dahomey, the film systematically positions women as possessing superior physical, intellectual, and moral capacities while portraying male characters as comparatively incompetent or morally compromised. As Butler (1990) argues, gender representation in media possesses performative power capable of shaping social reality, making critical analysis of such constructions essential for understanding contemporary gender politics.

Kellner (2003) emphasizes how Hollywood systematically constructs visual spectacles that carry specific ideological content beneath entertainment formats. *The Woman King* exemplifies this through spectacular battle sequences and heroic narratives that naturalize female dominance as historical authenticity. The film's intersectional positioning—combining African setting, Black female protagonists, and post-colonial narratives—adds complexity, as Crenshaw (1989) reminds us that gender representation cannot be separated from contexts of race, class, and power relations. This layering enables the film to operate simultaneously within feminist, anti-racist, and post-colonial discourses, making its gynocentric constructions less visible and more easily naturalized.

While substantial scholarship examines patriarchal oppression and female empowerment in cinema (Mulvey, 1975) (Hooks, 2000), and post-

colonial representation in Western media (Crenshaw, 1989), limited attention has been paid to how contemporary films construct gynocentric ideologies—distinct from feminist equality—particularly within intersectional contexts of race and post-colonialism. Moreover, existing studies tend to frame strong female representation as unambiguously progressive, overlooking potential ideological ambivalences where films simultaneously challenge and reinforce patriarchal structures.

The Woman King, with its depiction of African female warriors, presents a critical case for examining how Hollywood reconstructs historical narratives to naturalize female supremacy while paradoxically requiring patriarchal validation. This reveals complexities in contemporary gender representation that transcend binary frameworks of oppression versus empowerment. The film strategically employs what Jowett and O'Donnell (2018) term "historical transfer," what Herman and Chomsky (2002) identify as "selective framing," and what Debord (2007) theorizes as "spectacle"—discursive strategies that render ideological content accessible through entertainment formats. Understanding how these mechanisms operate to construct gynocentric discourse requires systematic semiotic analysis that can decode multiple layers of meaning-making in cinematic texts.

This research aims to analyze how *The Woman King* constructs gynocentric discourse through cinematic narratives that systematically privilege female supremacy, examining the shift from androcentric to gynocentric paradigms and revealing ideological ambivalences within ostensibly progressive gender representation. Using John Fiske's (2004) semiotic approach, this study unveils mechanisms through which the film builds and naturalizes gynocentric ideology in contemporary society through systematic analysis of sign systems in film narrative.

Fiske's triadic analytical framework—encompassing reality, representation, and ideology levels—provides methodological apparatus for decoding how meaning is constructed and transmitted through cinematic texts. At the reality level, analysis examines social codes embedded in dialogue, character behavior, and narrative events.

At the representation level, focus shifts to technical and conventional codes including cinematography, editing, and genre conventions. At the ideology level, analysis reveals how these elements coalesce to naturalize specific worldviews as common sense. This multi-level approach enables comprehensive understanding of how *The Woman King* systematically constructs discourses of female supremacy while simultaneously revealing internal contradictions that expose the complexity of contemporary gender representation in popular media.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using John Fiske's semiotic analysis method to examine the construction of gynocentric propaganda in *The Woman King*. The qualitative approach was selected for its capacity to explore meanings in depth and reveal the complexity of representation in media texts. As emphasized by Denzin and Lincoln (2018), qualitative research enables researchers to understand how social meanings are constructed within specific contexts. John Fiske's semiotic analysis method serves as the primary analytical framework due to its relevance in deconstructing layers of meaning in media texts. Fiske (2004) offers three levels of analysis - reality, representation, and ideology - that enable comprehensive understanding of how meaning is constructed and propagated through film narrative. Fiske's triadic model allows the analysis to trace ideological meaning across visual, narrative, and socio-cultural dimensions of the film, making it particularly suited for examining how gender ideologies are constructed and naturalized through cinematic representation. This approach aligns with Darma's (2022) conceptualization of semiotic analysis as "fundamentally an effort to sense something strange, something that needs to be questioned further when reading certain texts or narratives/discourses, with paradigmatic analysis aimed at discovering meanings including those hidden behind a text."

The primary data source is the film *The Woman King*, directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood with a duration of 135 minutes, released by Sony Pictures Entertainment. The film was accessed through official streaming platforms Netflix and Apple TV+, where it is legally available. Data

collection was conducted through systematic observation stages to ensure accuracy and completeness of analyzed data. Following Krippendorff's (2004) recommendations in Content Analysis methodology, observation was performed repeatedly to ensure comprehensive understanding of the analyzed content. The film was viewed a minimum of three times: first for general narrative overview, second for identifying key scenes, and third for detailed recording.

The data documentation process utilized logging sheet techniques, referring to methodology developed by Fiske (2004) in *Television Culture*. Collected data included time codes and duration of each relevant scene, complete dialogue transcription, narrative and plot descriptions, and contextual recording of each scene. To ensure data validity, this research conducted source triangulation using supporting materials such as the film's official script and published interviews with filmmakers. As suggested by Denzin (2012), triangulation helps provide more comprehensive understanding of the research object. Additionally, this research collected secondary data in the form of academic literature, film criticism, and articles relevant to gynocentrism themes and gender representation in film.

This research observes several interrelated variables in meaning formation, referring to John Fiske's (2004) television codes theory. The first observed variable is the film's narrative aspects, including story structure and development that demonstrates shifts from androcentric to gynocentric paradigms. This aspect encompasses observation of storylines depicting women's position transformation, dialogues representing gynocentric thinking, and characterization of female characters displaying strength and authority. The second variable focuses on ideological aspects, observing how the film constructs and naturalizes gynocentric ideology through various story elements. Observation focuses on messages challenging traditional patriarchal values, construction of meanings about female leadership, and representation of power relations in the film. The third variable examines propaganda techniques used by the film in normalizing ideas of female superiority, observing how the film uses historical narratives, heroism

construction, and framing strategies in building legitimacy for female power.

Data analysis employs semiotic analysis using John Fiske's approach to interpret meanings in *The Woman King*. Analysis is conducted systematically through three interconnected levels of meaning to reveal how gynocentric propaganda is constructed in film narrative. At the first level, analysis focuses on the reality level by identifying and categorizing dialogues, narratives, and character behaviors that demonstrate gynocentric aspects. Data in the form of dialogue transcripts and scene descriptions are analyzed using coding techniques to identify emerging main themes. At the second level, analysis moves to the representation level to examine how technical and conventional codes are used to construct meaning. Analysis focus is given to narrative structure, character development, and conflict construction supporting gynocentric agenda. The third level of analysis touches on ideological dimensions, revealing how social codes are organized to support female superiority propaganda. At this stage, data interpretation is conducted considering socio-historical and cultural contexts that background film production.

To ensure analysis depth, data is interpreted iteratively by continuously moving between data, theory, and context. This process aligns with hermeneutic approaches suggested by Thompson (1990), where understanding of meaning is achieved through continuous dialogue between researcher, text, and socio-historical context. Interpretation validity is strengthened through triangulation with secondary sources and relevant theoretical discussions. Analysis results are then synthesized to produce comprehensive understanding of how the film constructs and propagates gynocentric ideology.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Semiotic analysis of *The Woman King* reveals that the film systematically constructs gynocentric discourse through representations that position women as the center of social, political, and military power. The film demonstrates systematic privileging of feminine attributes while minimizing masculine competence through ideological mechanisms operating across multiple semiotic levels.

Reality Level: Construction of Superior Female Characters

The film constructs gynocentric discourse through two central figures who embody different aspects of female supremacy: General Nanisca and Nawi. These characters function not merely as narrative protagonists but as ideological instruments designed to naturalize female dominance across multiple domains traditionally associated with masculine authority.

General Nanisca represents the apex of feminine leadership, combining physical prowess, strategic intelligence, and moral authority. Her characterization systematically deconstructs traditional gender hierarchies by demonstrating capabilities that exceed male counterparts. At the reality level of Fiske's framework, Nanisca's physical dominance is established through her tactical superiority when interrogating enemies. Her interrogation scene (TWK 00:04:31) establishes female capacity for strategic violence through both denotative military technique and connotative challenge to gendered violence associations.

Nawi functions as the embodiment of generational transformation, representing emergent feminine consciousness that actively rejects patriarchal subordination. Her rejection of marriage in favor of military service (TWK 00:21:49-00:22:12) functions as ideological manifesto asserting female autonomy over traditional gender roles. At the representation level, this dialogue constructs narrative frameworks that position marriage as constraint and military service as liberation, inverting conventional gender associations.

The characterization of both figures demonstrates what Barthes identifies as mythological construction, where ideological messages are naturalized through repetitive representation. The film systematically presents female superiority not as exceptional but as normal, creating what O'Shaughnessy terms "normalized discourse" where ideological content appears as objective reality rather than constructed narrative.

Representation Level: Manifestation of Female Superiority Through Semiotic Domination

The film's discourse operates through systematic demonstration of female superiority across physical, psychological, and intellectual domains. These manifestations function as semiotic evidence for gynocentric ideology, providing visual and narrative support for female supremacy constructions.

Physical Superiority

Physical superiority is established through multiple action sequences that position female bodies as sites of power rather than vulnerability. Nawi's combat proficiency (TWK 00:27:48, 00:28:07) serves as visual testimonial to female physical capacity. These sequences employ what Mulvey identifies as scopophilia, but invert traditional gender dynamics by positioning female bodies as subjects of power rather than objects of desire. The visual pleasure derived from watching female combat prowess functions as discursive mechanism, making audiences complicit in celebrating female dominance.

Psychological Superiority

Nawi's composure during the blood ritual (TWK 01:09:07) transcends conventional courage, suggesting superhuman psychological capacity. This representation functions at Fiske's ideological level by constructing narratives of female mental superiority that exceed normal human parameters, creating what Ellul identifies as "discourse of transcendence" where ideological subjects are elevated beyond ordinary human limitations.

Strategic and Political Superiority

Strategic and political superiority emerges through Nanisca's role as policy visionary challenging entrenched economic systems. Her argument against the slave trade (TWK 00:16:26) positions her as possessing moral and economic intelligence superior to male leadership. This dialogue operates ideologically by attributing progressive political consciousness exclusively to female characters while portraying male leadership as morally compromised and strategically limited.

Ideology Level: Discursive Strategies and Ideological Transmission

The film employs discursive strategies identified by media scholars as particularly

effective in contemporary contexts. These mechanisms operate subtly through entertainment formats, making ideological transmission less visible and therefore more effective.

The primary technique involves what Jowett and O'Donnell (2018) term "historical transfer," where past events are reconstructed to support contemporary ideological positions. The film transfers the historical existence of Dahomey's female warriors into evidence for contemporary female supremacy arguments, conflating historical fact with ideological interpretation.

Selective framing, as identified by Herman and Chomsky (2002), operates through systematic omission of contradictory evidence. The film presents female warriors as uniformly superior while minimizing or eliminating representations of female vulnerability, failure, or dependence. Male characters are consistently portrayed as incompetent, morally compromised, or physically inferior, creating what Lippmann identifies as "pseudo-environment" where selective representation shapes audience perceptions of reality.

Visual spectacle functions as ideological delivery mechanism through what Debord terms "society of the spectacle." Battle sequences demonstrating female combat superiority create spectacular entertainment that simultaneously delivers ideological content. The audience's pleasure in viewing female warriors' victories becomes inseparable from acceptance of female superiority narratives, demonstrating how contemporary discourse operates through pleasure rather than coercion.

Alternative Heroism Models and Gender Paradigm Reconstruction

The Woman King constructs feminine heroism as fundamentally different from and superior to traditional masculine heroism models. This construction functions ideologically by suggesting that feminine approaches to heroism represent evolutionary advancement beyond masculine limitations.

The following table synthesizes contrasting heroism characteristics observed in the film, drawing on established frameworks of gender role theory and cultural archetypes of heroic narratives:

Table 1. Heroism Models in *The Woman King*

Aspect	Feminine Heroism (Privileged)	Masculine Heroism (Minimized)
Motivation	Collective welfare, protection of community	Individual glory, personal achievement
Leadership	Mentorship, knowledge transmission	Command authority, hierarchical control
Combat approach	Strategic planning, emotional intelligence	Brute force, aggression
Moral orientation	Ethical consciousness, long-term thinking	Pragmatic, short-term focused
Representation	Naturally superior, historically validated	Morally compromised, strategically limited
Outcome	Sustainable, community building	Destructive, inequality-generating

The film systematically privileges feminine heroism characteristics while portraying masculine alternatives as primitive or destructive. Nanisca's statement "We fight for those who cannot fight for themselves" establishes collective orientation as morally superior to individual achievement motivation. This construction operates ideologically by presenting feminine approaches as naturally more ethical and effective than masculine alternatives.

The mentorship relationship between Nanisca and Nawi demonstrates feminine heroism's emphasis on knowledge transmission and community building. Unlike traditional masculine heroism that emphasizes individual achievement, feminine heroism in the film focuses on developing collective capacity and ensuring continuity across generations. This representation functions ideologically by suggesting that feminine leadership naturally produces sustainable and ethical outcomes while masculine leadership generates destruction and inequality.

Ideological Contradictions and Ambivalence

Despite intensive efforts to establish female supremacy, the film reveals significant ideological contradictions that undermine its gynocentric discourse. These contradictions emerge from the film's inability to completely escape androcentric frameworks it attempts to challenge.

The most significant contradiction involves dependence on patriarchal legitimization for female achievement recognition. The conferment of the kpojito title requires validation by King Ghezo: "Heroes of Dahomey, behold the bravest of the brave... elevated to the sacred title of kpojito, Nanisca, the Woman King" (TWK 02:01:15). This scene reveals fundamental ambivalence in the film's ideological construction. While celebrating female achievement, the narrative simultaneously confirms that ultimate authority remains with male leadership. Without royal recognition, female accomplishments lack social meaning, suggesting that even in gynocentric narratives, patriarchal approval remains necessary for female legitimacy.

This contradiction manifests what Butler identifies as performative paradox, where attempts to subvert gender hierarchies inadvertently reinforce the very structures they seek to challenge. The phenomenon reflects broader patriarchal dynamics where, as You observes, "public patriarchy allows women to take jobs, but women are pressured by gender inequality in positions of power, education, promotion, job requirements and wages." The *Woman King* attempts to invert these power structures, yet paradoxically requires male validation for female achievements, suggesting that even gynocentric narratives cannot fully escape androcentric frameworks they purport to challenge.

The film also demonstrates excessive proof standards for female characters compared to male counterparts. Female characters must demonstrate extraordinary capabilities across multiple domains to receive recognition, while male characters are granted authority based on traditional role expectations. Nanisca must excel as warrior, strategist, and moral leader simultaneously, while King Ghezo's authority derives from inherited position rather than demonstrated competence. This disparity reveals ideological ambivalence about female capacity,

suggesting that extraordinary proof is required for female authority while male authority remains naturalized.

Implications for Contemporary Gender Representation

The analysis reveals that *The Woman King* represents a transitional moment in gender representation where gynocentric aspirations encounter persistent androcentric structures. The film's discursive efforts illuminate broader dynamics in contemporary media where progressive gender representation must negotiate with established patriarchal frameworks.

The film demonstrates that media representations of female empowerment often reproduce the very hierarchical thinking they claim to challenge. Rather than dismantling gender hierarchies, the film inverts them while maintaining hierarchical structures. This pattern suggests that contemporary "feminist" media may perpetuate competitive gender frameworks rather than developing genuinely egalitarian alternatives.

The ideological ambivalence revealed in this analysis indicates that transformation of gender representation in popular media remains incomplete and contradictory. Progressive representation coexists with traditional gender assumptions, creating hybrid narratives that advance and constrain gender equality simultaneously. This finding suggests that critical analysis of apparently progressive media content remains essential for understanding actual versus claimed gender representation progress.

The film's use of historical narrative to support contemporary ideological positions also illuminates how popular media reconstructs history to serve present political purposes. The selective interpretation of Dahomey's female warriors demonstrates how historical events become resources for contemporary identity politics rather than subjects of balanced historical understanding.

Synthesis: Gynocentric Discourse as Complex Ideological Negotiation

This research reveals that gynocentric discourse in *The Woman King* constitutes a complex phenomenon reflecting dynamics of contemporary gender discourse transformation

rather than simple advocacy for female supremacy. The film successfully opens representational spaces for female power through character construction, alternative heroism models, and systematic demonstration of female capabilities across traditional masculine domains.

However, the persistent ideological ambivalence demonstrates that gender transformation in popular media involves ongoing negotiation between progressive aspirations and established patriarchal structures rather than linear progression toward gender equality. The film's dependence on male legitimation reveals how deeply androcentric assumptions penetrate even explicitly feminist narratives.

These findings confirm that discourse in contemporary popular media operates through complex ideological negotiations rather than straightforward persuasion techniques. The film's contradictions reflect broader social tensions about gender transformation, suggesting that media representations simultaneously advance and constrain gender equality depending on their relationship to existing power structures.

The research demonstrates that critical semiotic analysis remains essential for understanding how contemporary media constructs and transmits ideological content through entertainment formats. The discursive strategies identified in this analysis operate below conscious awareness for most audiences, making critical media literacy increasingly important for democratic discourse about gender representation and social transformation.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that *The Woman King* systematically constructs gynocentric discourse through semiotic mechanisms operating across Fiske's three analytical levels. The film employs ideological techniques—including historical transfer, selective framing, and visual spectacle—to naturalize discourses of female supremacy through the construction of superior female characters and alternative heroism models that explicitly privilege feminine approaches over masculine paradigms. Central characters Nanisca and Nawiri function as ideological instruments demonstrating female capabilities across

traditionally masculine domains of physical combat, strategic leadership, and moral authority.

However, the research identifies significant ideological ambivalence as the film's most critical characteristic. Despite intensive efforts to establish gynocentric ideology, the narrative demonstrates persistent dependence on patriarchal legitimization mechanisms, particularly evident in the kpojito title conferment requiring male validation. This contradiction reveals that contemporary gender representation in popular media often reproduces hierarchical frameworks while claiming to challenge them, creating hybrid narratives that simultaneously advance and constrain gender equality. The film's discourse thus operates through complex ideological negotiations rather than straightforward feminist advancement.

These findings contribute to gender and media studies by demonstrating how semiotic analysis can reveal ideological contradictions within apparently progressive content and establishing ideological ambivalence as a persistent feature of contemporary gender representation. For media practitioners, the research suggests that genuine gender equality may require abandoning competitive frameworks entirely rather than merely inverting traditional hierarchies. Study limitations include single-film focus and absence of audience reception analysis. Future research should examine similar patterns across multiple contemporary films and investigate how audiences interpret and respond to gynocentric discourse in popular media.

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