The Symbolic Annihilation Of Hegemonic Femininity in Black Panther

Film Review by
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FILM DETAILS
Film: Black Panther, Marvel Studios.
Date: 2018
Run time: 2hrs 20mins.

REVIEW
In its long history of breath-taking and suspense packed flicks, no Marvel comic movie has garnered such global reach, excitement and pride like the Black Panther. Released in February 2018, this so-called 'black movie' (because of its majority black casts and plot) had netted about 1.344 billion USD world-wide by the end of the year. This is not to include DVD and Blu-ray sales estimated at about 84 million USD. Already, this superhero movie has won several awards projecting it as a potential heavyweight at the forthcoming 2019 Oscars.

Black Panther, an adaptation of the comic book with the same name, is the eighteenth film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and is directed by Ryan Coogler. It follows a young King T'Challa who ascends to the throne of *Wakanda* after his father is assassinated. Wakanda is an isolated and technologically advanced African nation enriched with Vibranium. The problem arises when the King T'Challa's claim to the throne is challenged and he must rally his nation's technology, military and allies to defeat his enemies. A feat heavily impregnated with symbolic disruptions whose implication go beyond the fictive changes to this reclusive nation.

This Walt Disney distributed movie braves several fundamental disruptions to hegemonic traditions, of plot, race, gender. The movie is both technologically advanced and action packed. Its path-breaking efforts are visible in the state-of-the-art visuals, successfully combining technologically advanced artifacts with traditional African art and culture. It is modern yet unapologetically traditional African.

In its transcendence, the scenes effortlessly swerve between the cities of North America, Britain, Asia and Africa, instantly making it relatable and even palatable to different audiences across the globe. That the majority of the cast, especially the hero(ines) are Black is a fact not lost to any a Hollywood film critic and audience. This review centers on the gender contexts, the contestation of hegemonic femininity and implications for intersectional discourse on media.

The dominant representations in motion pictures surrounding non-white women, particularly black African women, in motion pictures has commonly been that of marginality, the ethnic, the exotic, victimhood and entrapment. Not only are sightings of Black women in mainstream motion pictures sparse, they often are in marginal or supportive roles, lacking agency or purpose. The history of motion pictures is doubtless one dominated by a patriarchal tradition where power and hierarchy collide but reside with the White male protagonist. In this historical trajectory, women generally, and Black women in particular, are represented through an established discourse of disempowerment otherwise akin to hegemonic femininity.

Hegemonic constructions of femininity require a woman to be gentle, kind, White, heterosexual and child-bearing. She would also not only be required to stay at home, she would keep the home clean, cook and be submissive and attentive to her husband's needs and desires. A woman who possesses these traits would likely be more dominant in the gender hierarchy. Black Panther disrupts such hegemonic notions of femininities through counter representations. We encounter the female protagonists in various embodiments rarely seen in western cultural frames.

Technological innovation has a young Black female face
One clear annihilation of Western hegemonic femininity is through representations of race, gender and technological proficiency. In the real world, numerous studies on gender, science and technology show a heavy underrepresentation of women and girls in STEM fields. In the real world, technology has a young, White male face. However, in Black Panther, where technology is the driving force of this wealthy nation of *Wakanda*, the tables are turned. The person in charge, Shuri, is the Princess and younger sibling to the King. She demonstrates through playful and highly cerebral manifestations what a young, black female (who is not adulterated by colonial and socially constructed Western hegemonic femininity and indeed toxic masculinity) can achieve when presented with opportunity, resources and a conducive environment. Shuri is in-charge of the high-tech transportation, science, medicine and warfare that characterizes the success of the nation, including spectacular battle manoeuvres.

An interesting intersection worth mentioning is when the deeply injured and unconscious FBI agent Ross is brought back to life by Shuri. When he doubts how this could be possible, she explains to him that the quick recovery was possible through technology and not magic, busting the voodoo and herbal medicinal stereotypes we often see associated with black female protagonists. Through Shuri's superb, multiple and almost care-free roles – because she also is a warrior – Ryan Coogler, invites us to think beyond established stereotypes about non-western concepts. In this case that a Black, young girl can be a complex embodiment of a princess; smart, playful, patriotic and fierce.

Dora Milaje, the fearless all-female National Army
Another disruptive re-presentation of women is through the military. Wakanda is protected by the Dora Milaje an all-female army, with a woman, Okoye, its commander-in-chief. Okoye is a badass fighter, strategist and fierce patriot. The King and everyone in the kingdom respect and revere the Dora Milaje. In real life, the military, is a male dominated profession, a representation carried over in many films. In Wakanda, all the key female protagonists, from the princess to the King's ex-girlfriend, are proud and fiercely patriotic Doras. One vivid example, is when, in one of the most decisive battles, Okoye draws her sword against her lover, the military head of security W'Kabi. He asks her: *"My love, would you kill me?".* And she answers without a flinch: "*For my country?*" and breathes deeply, *"Without a doubt!".* It is a powerful exchange that resolves when W'Kabi collapses on his knees in front of her as a sign of surrender.

No 'chicks in distress' rhetoric as women here have agency
Patriotism usually goes arm in arm with military duty. In Wakanda, it is a trait evident among all the key female protagonists. One deliberate character is Nakia the King's ex-girlfriend, who rejects the King's romantic advances and subsequent life of privilege and luxury. She does so for a purpose. She is a self-proclaimed freedom fighter and spy for the kingdom. She repeatedly tells the king "*I found my calling*" and that calling was to help oppressed people break from bondage. She tells the King: "*I cannot live knowing there are people who have nothing*". In the movie, we see Nakia as a lone spy, as a wise counsel to a burdened new King, as a patriot who saves the sacred heart-shaped flower from annihilation, as a multilingual combatant, and more. All these representations counter symbolically the pervasive discourses on hegemonic femininity in the Western context. Also, in juxtaposing Nakia both as a fierce warrior, and at the same time as caring person, Ryan Coogler disintegrates the commonly held notion in hegemonic feminism that a woman cannot be both fierce and kind and that this kind of duality is neither desirable nor sustainable.

Yes, women can have both beauty and brains
Nakia is beautiful and she had agency, something that departs from the conventional depictions of women in general. In Black Panther, the women we encounter have beauty, intellect and strength. Doubling with the Afrocentrism of the movie, authenticity and realism is attained through their attire, language and distinct African hair styles (the Dora are bald). Because the women 'have it all', we see fewer instances of toxic masculinity and fewer stereotypically masculine traits – even with the King T'Challa, who frequently seeks Nakia's, Shuri's and Okoye's counsel and protection.

Here, the film establishes a discourse indicative of neither neutral nor objective representation of Black women. Instead, it is a subjective prerogative that contests hegemonic discourses in a bid to influence and re-appropriate discourse, knowledge production and individual and collective consciousness. Specifically, this film's critical contribution lies in its interrogation of hegemonic gender (and racial) stereotypes and reductionist misconceptions of what constitutes a Black woman, and how this essentialism contributes to concealing and sometimes constraining their individual and collective agency.

In Black Panther, the director invokes the power of imagination when he reminds the viewer and hopefully young Black girls starved of representation (and

representative role models) on the big screen that: women, particularly Black women, can transcend their 'ascribed roles' and make legitimate claims to power in different contexts. And to the movie industry, here's a heuristic and socially responsible way of movie making; and don't worry, it sells too. Globally.

By offering a powerful, alternative and unapologetic lens to these dominant discourses, the director and his partners have been able to pull-off a poignant, empowering, timely and most welcome media undertaking that will benefit and inspire many for years to come.

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