

## **Narratology in Gina Prince-Bythewood's Film, The Woman King**

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### **Abstract**

This work was concerned with narratology in Prince-Bythewood's (2022, 02:14:49) film, *The Woman King*. It was specifically set to analyse the narrative structure inherent in the film. In doing this, the researchers formulated four research objectives to guide the narrative analysis of the film. The objectives were to: describe how the plot is structured to enhance the film narrative; explain how the director established dramatic elements such as setting, conflict, and denouement in enhancing the film narrative; critically examine the metaphorical and literary themes that help to enhance the film narrative; and to discuss how the director's use of cinematography enhance the film narrative. The theoretical underpinning of the Narrative Theory provided explications to the narratological exegesis attempted in the study. The study using, the qualitative content analysis and narratology methodologies, described and critically analysed Prince-Bythewood's (2022, 02:14:49) deployment of narratives and narrative structures in the story (plot) and discourse from settings; dramatic twists; themes (metaphorical and literary); dramatic conflict/climax; denouement; and other cinematographic elements such as visual effects; stunts; lighting and lighting effect; non-linear editing; sound and sound effect; and languages of dramatic dialogue.

**Keywords:** Narratology; Gina Prince-Bythewood; Film; *The Woman King*



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### **INTRODUCTION**

Films are stories or narratives (Cutting, 2016). Such stories or narratives are often told from the subjective and technical standpoints of cinematographers, directors, and other composite film makers. As storytellers using the film form, the cinematographer's visual support to the director's vision with the aid of camera and lighting help in developing narratives in films with an enhanced sophistication (Jani, 2016). It is from such storytelling approach that cinematographers make visual "attempts to elaborate the narration and the field of narrativity for the audience in order to evoke the audience's emotions and deliver the necessary information via imagery" (p.10).

This implies that for every narrative that is embedded in a film, the structure of such narrative is a construct of the director in accompaniment by the cinematographer and other film makers. It is from such hindsight that directors are often referred to as auteur which literarily connotes the idea of them being film authors, that is, the directors literally 'writing' their narratives using the camera as a writer would write with the pen (Astruc, 2009; Aydin, 2015).

This justifies why any attempt made to appreciate, dissect, and analyse film narratives must be accompanied by appropriate analytical approach that can unearth or demystify the narratives inherent in a film structure as constructed by the director. The essence for such justification stems from the fact that films, in all considerations, are artistic works of narrative nature. This informs the need for one to adopt narratology in attempting a criticism of a film narrative structure. Criticising a film narrative structure is a product of deep artistic and critical introspection and appreciation of what it is in a film that yield to the narrative paradigm.

To understand the narrative structures implicit in a typical artistic creation like film, Okafor (2020, p.13) notes that: ...the narrative structures are realised through the various shots, scenes and filmed sequence which make up a sequence and have been spun together during editing to make the film-story complete. Where the scenes mean the various places and locale that actions took place, to present and/or represent the world of the reality of the audience for easy understanding. A scene may consist of one shot or series of shots depicting a series of events. A shot is a continuous narrative filmed by a camera without any interruption...

When considering that films are stories 'written' by the camera and other cinematographic elements to purvey the intents of the film makers, then narratology, under benign circumstances, is best suited for analysing an artistic work like film when the main aim of the analysis is to understand, demystify, and unearth the composite structures of the film especially when such structures are considered to enhance the film narrative or story. As Cutting (2016, p.1713) notes, "Narratology is the study of stories and story structure and the ways these effect our perception, cognition, and emotion."

As films yield themselves to the realm of artistic form considered as emotive and audio-visual narrative, their stories can never be told or understood in isolation of their social milieu, ambiance, and realities. To contextualise the narrative meaning inherent in a film structure of which a directors attempt to create through their creative use of cinematic elements calls for the deployment of narratological exegesis. Narratological exegesis allows a film critic to deliberately give critical focus on how a film story is developed through the film plots, sub plots, dramatic twist, characters, dialogues, conflicts, themes, climax, denouement, and the application of cinematographic elements to establish and sustain the film narrative from the beginning, middle, and to the end.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was anchored on the theoretical underpinning of the Narrative Theory. Narrative Theory, or Narratology, is the study of narrative as a genre (Amerian & Jofi, 2015). The preoccupation of narrative theory is to provide description and explication on "the constants, variables, and combinations typical of narrative and to clarify how these characteristics of narrative texts connect within the framework of theoretical models" (Fludernik, 2006, p.8)

As Fludernik (2006) notes, narrative is related to the verb 'narrate' and that narrative is not just confined to novels or historical writings but may be applied to other artistic creations including films. The boundary of narrative in a film can be broaden to 'narration' which explicitly suggests that whatever can be narrated yield itself to the realm of narrative (Fludernik, 2006).

According to Amerian and Jofi (2015, p.184) the narrative theory "...does not deal with the abstract levels of a specific narrative nor with the interpretative dimension of narratives; but it investigates narratives' structure and basic traits which ultimately give shape to what a narrative is and what distinguishes it from other forms." As films are considered as narratives or stories (Cutting, 2016), understanding the narrative structures inherent in films makes this theory relevant and suitable in providing explications on how narrative style and approach is deployed and enhanced in Prince-Bythewood's (2022, 2:14:49) film, *The Woman King*.

### **Conceptualising Narrative/Narratology**

Narrative simply means story. Narratology simply means the study of narrative structure. In every narrative, Parsa (2004) is of the view that two structural analytical paradigms subsist. The first structural analytical paradigm has to do with the story. The story portends a kind of cause and effect hypothesis. In such hypothetical construct is the question: 'What happens to

whom?' validated. In the story are actions of the protagonist and those of the antagonist and the circumstances that befall them as a result of their doing or undoing unveiled. The story embodies the plot. The plot is the story structure which informs the film narrative in terms of sequence, arrangement, and thematic preoccupation for identification, meaning, and the understanding of the viewers (Okafor, 2020).

The second structural analytical paradigm to narrative as noted by Parsa (2004) has to do with discourse. The discourse portends how the story is told. Hence, how 'what happens to whom?' is presented, portrayed, or purveyed by narrators, screen accompanying texts, or characters through dramatic dialogues or mimetic actions. It is at this point that the film makers inject their subjectivities, realities, figment of imagination, worldviews, and sentiments in creating a story that, in their intents, should be believable, emotive, and evincive once told.

The two structural analytical paradigms stems from two major sources of analysis which are the syntagmatic approach and the paradigmatic approach (Okafor, 2020). The syntagmatic approach is based on the sequential development of the plot, while the paradigmatic approach is based on the considerations of patterns of opposition that exist within the narratives and how they contribute to the story development (Okafor, 2020). Both approaches to the structural analysis of film aid in the understanding of the meaning in the narrative in terms of story and plot (Okafor, 2020).

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of this work is to assess narratology in Prince-Bythewood's (2022, 02:14:49) film, *The Woman King*. The specific objectives deduced from the main objective were to:

1. Describe how the plot is structured to enhance the film narrative;
2. Explain how the director established dramatic elements such as setting, conflict, and denouement in enhancing the film narrative;
3. Critically examine the metaphorical and literary themes that help to enhance the film narrative; and to
4. Discuss how the director's use of cinematography enhance the film narrative.

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study gathered data from two main sources: the primary and the secondary sources. The primary source of data for the study was empirically obtained by qualitatively coding the narrative structure of the film - *The Woman King* by Prince-Bythewood (2022, 02:14:49). The secondary sources of data were obtained through extant literatures published in books, journals, periodicals, websites, web portals as necessitated by search engines and the internet.

The study adopts the qualitative research design. The qualitative content analysis and narratology were adopted in this study. The qualitative content analysis is considered very relevant to this study because it not concern with counting word but rather interfaces observation and document analysis and is primarily concerned with the study of the content of films with reference to the narrative structure, meanings, contexts, and intentions contained in in films so that inferences can be drawn about the content (Shava, Hleza, Tlou, Shonhiwa, & Mathonsi, 2021; Rose, Spinks & Canhoto, 2015; Prasad, 2008; Nachmias & Nachmias, 1976). It is a method of observation in the sense that instead of asking people to respond to questions, it takes the film content that people have produced and ask questions of the film content (Kerlinger, 1986; Prasad, 2008). It pays close attention to the unique themes that illustrate the range of the meanings of a phenomenon such as film narrative (Zhang & Wildemuth, n.d.).

Narratology was deployed to describe how the plot is structured to enhance the film narrative; explain how the director established dramatic elements such as setting, conflict, and denouement in enhancing the film narrative; critically examine the metaphorical and literary themes that help to enhance the film narrative; and to discuss how the director's use of cinematography enhance the film narrative.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Narrative Discourse One:** How is the plot structured to enhance the film narrative?

The *Woman King*, as directed by Prince-Bythewood (2022, 02:14:49), tells a story of the 'Agojie' led by a brave female general called Nanisca (Viola Davis). The 'Agojie' is presented in the film as being made up of the fiercest, bravest, fearless, brutal, and elitist all-female warriors. Narrative is sustained in the film that the 'Agojie' came to limelight in the 1820s by the ascension of King Ghezo (John Boyega) to the throne of his fathers. The narrative in the film has it that the 'Agojie' was instrumental to King Ghezo's (John Boyega) ascension to power as they militaristically assisted him to topple the reign of his elder brother through coup d'état.

Due to the influence of the Europeans on slave trade, the African kingdoms of Dahomey, Oyo Empire, and Mahi are treated as slave catchment centres by the European slave merchants in accomplice of African slave lords championed by the kings of these kingdoms. Considering the economic boom that the slave trade yielded to these kingdoms at the time, their kings thereby ventured full time into capturing their own subjects for sale to the European slave merchants. When some of the kingdoms could not meet up with the demand for slaves from their respective territories, they launched out in raiding of neighbouring kingdoms in a quest to meet the demand for slave supply.

It is on such quest that the Oyo Empire, being motivated by her superior military strength as evident by the possession and acquisition of horses and gun power, made vicious attempts to raid and annihilate Dahomey kingdom in order to capture slaves to trade with the Europeans. The Dahomey kingdom, before the ascension of King Ghezo (John Boyega), had been a tribute kingdom to the Oyo Empire whose military superiority kept the Dahomey people under control and subjection even to the extent of controlling slave trade, dominating the slave market as well as the forfeiture of the Port of Ouidah which belonged to Dahomey.

The Oyo Empire's excessive control and domineering influence on the slave trade economy to the extent of dictating the economic fortune of Dahomey would not be tolerated by the new king of Dahomey whose youthfulness, stubbornness, and aggressiveness coupled by political, economic, and cultural foresight drive his ambition to emancipate his kingdom from the whims and caprices of the Oyo Empire. To succeed in such ambition, the king made his words and actions against those of the Oyos and venturing into reprisals, tribal wars, battles, cleansing, and ethnic annihilation of any kingdom that stood on his way were inevitable. This very ambitious concern informed King Ghezo (John Boyega) of the necessity to set up, commission, and empower the 'Agojie' in order to achieve his cultural, political, and economic objectives through military strategy and aggression.

The military and political aims of the 'Agojie' were to protect the kingdom of Dahomey against external attacks (physical and cultural) as well as launching reprisals and military assaults on enemy nations (Oyo Empire and Mahi) so as to bring their enduring military, political, economic, and cultural influences on Dahomey to a halt. In achieving these objectives, General Nanisca (Viola Davis) is faced with the burden and responsibility of training and raising a formidable squad of women-only committed warriors that would match the Oyo all-male warriors led by General Oba Ade (John Odukoya).

After bringing the Oyo Empire to its knees and sacking the European slave merchants from the Port of Ouidah, Dahomey has gained her military, political, economic, and cultural independence and thereafter trade or transact with the Europeans on products such as palm oil, gold, and other commodities apart from human beings to be sold into slavery. The victories delivered to Dahomey through the instrumentality of the 'Agojie' under the leadership of Nanisca (Viola Davis) propelled King Ghezo (John Boyega) to elevate the woman war general to the highest position and honour of the 'Opojito' (woman king). The 'woman king' is supposedly the equivalent of her male counterpart and exercise same powers unlike a 'queen' which is subservient or submissive to her husband, the king.

The idea of the woman king is inspired by the principle of gender equality which is inspired by the Dahomey's legend and mythology of a twin god known as 'Mawu and Liza'. It is on the strength of gender equality that the title 'Woman King' is considered befitting to Nanisca (Viola Davis): who have defied all odds, battles, emotional setbacks, limitations, fears, nightmares, travails, trials, and feminine weaknesses to carve a niche for herself among patriarchal warriors of her time. As this is where the movie derive its title, it has also bring out the narrative of the film in a nutshell by suggesting metaphorically that the film is a narrative of gender equality, feminists struggle, and the travails for the liberation of women from external and self-imposed limitations.

Though the film centres on narratives peculiar to tribal wars, battles, and ethnic annihilation, cleansing and attempted genocide fueled by unending vicious cycle of slave trade, Prince-Bythewood (2022, 02:14:49) introduces series of sub-narratives to make the two hours and 15 minutes flick an interesting one. There is a sub-narrative of love and romance between Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) and Malik Diallo (Jordan Bolger). It is on this sub-narrative that the main narrative of war, slave trade, and attempted abolition of slave trade are anchored and divulged. For instance, if it was not for the platonic love shared by the duo, the 'Agojie' would not have known of the Oyo Empire's intended plan to join force with the Mahis and other concerned kingdoms to put Dahomey under siege. Such disclosure of military intelligence of their enemy's war strategy put the 'Agojie' on their toes to march on their enemies to their utmost surprise.

By introducing this sub-narrative, the main narrative of the film is structurally extended in sequences. Hence, the film follows a syntagmatic approach in unveiling its narratives. The syntagmatic approach is basically concerned with the sequential development of a film narrative. In the *Woman King* by Prince-Bythewood (2022, 02:14:49), the narrative was structured syntagmatically because one event sequentially leads to the other and was not in opposition to subsequent events. By this approach, the narrative in the film was sustained coherently and in logical sequence.

**Narrative Discourse Two:** How does the director establish dramatic elements such as setting, conflict, and denouement in enhancing the film narrative?

**On Setting of the Film:** Though the film is shot in present day locations in South Africa, the temporal setting of the film dates back to 1823 West Africa: A period in the history of the continent where slave trade was booming and was considered to be in its prime. The spatial setting of the film are the African kingdoms of Dahomey, Oyo Empire, Mahi, and the Port of Ouidah. The costumes and properties in form of motifs were designed to paint a picture of the temporal and spatial settings.

Motifs such as the slave cages, chains, and slave bidding stands or squares suggest that the temporal setting of the film is that of slave trade period. Horse shoes, gun powders, and Dane gun fires were motifs that suggest the sophistication of the Oyo Empire's military strength in the slave trade period. Cowries worn by the 'Agojie' on their military uniforms suggest sacredness, spirituality, bravery, luxury, and elitist nature of the women warriors. Cow horns

attached to the fence in King Ghezo's palace suggest elegance of the 1820s kingship. Clay or mud houses with thatches, paved streets, and untarred roads suggest un-modernity, primitive, rustic, bucolic, pastoral, and unsophisticated nature of African architectural masterpiece and landscape of the time. Lanterns and wooden torches suggest lack of electricity and speak of traditional or bucolic African cultural setting. All these motifs, apart from enhancing the spatial and temporal setting of the film, are symbolic narrative cues that vividly paint pictures and illustratively tell of what was in vogue and in practice in the African societies of the 1820s where and when the film is set.

**On Dramatic Twist:** Prince-Bythewood (2022, 02:14:49) introduces element of dramatic twist in her film - *The Woman King* (2022). The element of dramatic twist is introduced using Nawi (Thuso Mbedu), Nanisca (Viola Davis), and Malik Diallo (Jordan Bolger). There is a twist in the narrative when Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) and Nanisca (Viola Davis) came to know that they share a daughter-mother biological relationship without their knowledge. This is even more confounding and complicated considering the minor confrontations that both usually have especially when Nawi (Thuso Mbedu), in most circumstances, seems to be falling out of line in her military training. The twist also extends to Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) getting to know that she had been a product of rape through the sexual molestation, assault, and humiliation meted on her mother, while in the past, by a man who by every standard is the antagonist, villain, and arch enemy of her mother and kingdom – Oba Ade (John Odukoya). Fate is twisted as destiny brings Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) to Nanisca (Viola Davis) through uncontrollable circumstance.

On the part of Nanisca (Viola Davis), there is also a twist to see what she had considered her bitter past and secret being brought before her. This brings her to her emotional knees as she do everything she can to eliminate the father of her child while reconciling with her daughter.

Prince-Bythewood (2022, 02:14:49) also introduces another twist to the narrative as the viewers get to know that Malik Diallo's (Jordan Bolger) mother land is Dahomey. This makes him half Dahomey and half Portuguese in ancestral lineage. This twist is to the bewilderment of the characters in the film who become surprise when they are confronted with such revelation. These twists are presumably introduced by Prince-Bythewood (2022, 02:14:49) to further develop the plot and extend the narrative of the film.

**On Dramatic Conflict and Climax:** The dramatic conflict and climax in the film are established in the scenes where Oyo Empire, in accompaniment with the Mahi, raid the Dahomey kingdom and take some indigenes of Dahomey as captive for slave trade. The intervention of the 'Agojie' in setting the captives free and killing of the Mahi warriors infuriated Oba Ade (John Odukoya).

Also, the killing of the Oyo warriors who were to accompany the tributes of the king of Dahomey and the 40 young 'Agojie' warriors as demanded by Oba Ade (John Odukoya) heightened the conflict in the film. Taking the heads of Oyo warriors killed in anger of the outrageous demand of Oba Ade (John Odukoya) as accompanied by the 'Agojie' in a basket to Oba Ade (John Odukoya) at Ouidah against what he demanded, sets the tone for the series of wars and battles the Oyos and the Dahomeys have to fight in remaining relevant in slave business.

In one of their wars, specifically, the one that the Oyo Empire intended to lay siege on Dahomey, Nawi (Thuso Mbedu), Izogie (Lashana Lynch) and some other 'Agojie' warriors are captured and taken to the Port of Ouidah as slaves to be sold to the Europeans. Izogie (Lashana Lynch) is killed in her attempt to rescue Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) while escaping the Port of Ouidah. The capturing of the 'Agojie' warriors, especially, Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) unsettles Nanisca (Viola Davis) and she defied King Ghezo's (John Boyega) orders and launched out on a rescue mission

in accompaniment of other warriors. On arrival, a full scale war is started and Nanisca (Viola Davis) finally confronts her arch enemy - Oba Ade (John Odukoya) at the battle ground. It is through these heightened conflict and climax that the narrative of wars, battles, and struggles are resonated.

**On Denouement or Resolution of the Conflict:** The climax and the heightened conflict in the film are resolved when Nanisca (Viola Davis) finally killed Oba Ade (John Odukoya) in a duel. The slave camp is destroyed and some of the Europeans slave merchants killed. Some European slave merchants that manage to escape to the sea shores are drowned by the angry slaves. This symbolically suggests the end of slave trade.

The killing of Oba Ade (John Odukoya) also symbolised the end of the Oyo Empire. As the 'Agojie' returned back to their kingdom and Nanisca (Viola Davis) handed the sword of Oba Ade (John Odukoya) to King Ghezo (John Boyega), the king's narrative, within the time-codes of [1:59:50 – 2:00:14] confirms the end of the Oyo Empire as follow:

**King Ghezo:** People of Dahomey!  
We have ended the reign of the Oyo Empire.  
Look on the faces of the warriors,  
Many never thought it possible,  
But we believed...  
(Prince-Bythewood, 2022, 1:59:50 – 2:00:14)

This narrative means independence and supremacy of the Dahomey kingdom. To crown it all, Nanisca (Viola Davis) is elevated to the highest and most coveted title of the 'Opojito' which means 'woman king'.

**Narrative Discourse Three:** What are the metaphorical and literary themes that help to enhance the film narrative?

Prince-Bythewood's (2022, 02:14:49) film, *The Woman King*, is replete with series of metaphorical and literary themes that help to advance the film's narrative at the physical and meta-physical levels of understanding. These themes help in the film narrative by enabling the development of the film plot and in the establishment or identification of lead characters. It is through their embellishments that the protagonist and the antagonist are entangled in a pool of conflict, twist, and denouement inherent in the film. While some of these themes enhance the stylistics of the film by buttressing the temporal or spatial setting explored, others gave clues to how the director chose to present a narrative that is befitting of a film genre. While some of these themes are manifest (literary) and could be perceived easily, others are latent (metaphoric) and would need a deep introspection for meaning to be deconstructed. The metaphorical and literary themes that dominate the film narrative are as follows:

**Metaphorical Themes:** Some of the deep-layered central ideas resonating in the film are:

1. **Feminism:** The film's narrative is principally anchored and structured on feminist ideals, philosophies, creed, struggles, and sentiments. The 'Agojie' comprising women-only warriors which are depicted in the film as being more ruthless, fearless, brave, and tougher than their male counterparts is a subtle portrayal that female gender is no way inferior to the opposite sex.

The film, depicting women as ferocious warriors who are not relegated to the background in the socio-political affairs besetting their immediate environment, is a direct narrative of feminists struggle, revolts, revolution, and uprising against male chauvinism, paternalism, and patriarchalism within the African cultural setting. The film subliminally supports the narrative of women's inclusion and equal representation in all endeavours and

spheres of life just like their male counterparts and should not be sidelined on the basis of being considered as weaker vessels.

Nanisca (Viola Davis) portrays the embodiment of an ideal feminist by standing up to her male antagonist and oppressor (Oba Ade – Jimmy Odukoya) whom had exploited her sexually. She is also portrayed as a feminist who have a mind of her own and was not ready to obey or succumb to men's pressure even to the point of defying King Ghezo's (John Boyega) order.

This character trait is what she ingrained in her lieutenants and recruits and would forbid that they should cry or succumb to pressure. In the film, the narrative expressed is women's world against that of the men as women are framed to call the shot or decide the course of their destinies. The case of Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) who resists the humiliation of a rich old suitor by retaliating when the former slaps her is a confirmation of bra-burning feministic narrative. Izogie (Lashana Lynch) disclosure of her similar situation to Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) suggest that both detest submission to and humiliation from men and reinforces the narrative of feminism.

The idea of being an 'Agojie' is a call to freedom from men subjugation, children upbringing, submission to husband, being wild, 'drinking whiskey', and total independence of womanhood from the grip and control of men. Rather than submit to and be humiliated by men, the young women recruited to join the 'Agojie' prefer to die at battle grounds. This informs why majority of recruits that joins this elitist women-only warriors are often those that their families gave up on due to excessive stubbornness, recalcitrance, and outright refusal to subserviently bend like an typical or traditional 'African woman'.

The narrative of feminism seems to be intentionally portrayed in the film given the lineup of key production elements: the director (Gina Prince-Bythewood), screen writer (Dana Stevens), story (Maria Bello & Dana Stevens), cinematographer (Polly Morgan), producers (Cathy Schulman, Viola Davis, & Maria Bello), and the editor (Terilyn Shropshire) all being women. It therefore suggest that the film had a feminist agenda and conspiracies which it sets out to narrates.

- 2. Gender equality:** Deeply embedded and intertwined in the plot of the film is the narrative of gender equality. This theme is heavily underscored by the title of the film 'The Woman King'. Adjective like 'queen' would have been more suiting since reference is made to a woman that is exalted or promoted to royalty. But no! The justification for the title is to give an impression of a female equivalent or version of a 'king'. Such description like 'The Woman King' makes more sense when reference is to be made to a woman who wields equal power and influence like her male counterpart.

Though the description is feminist in all intents and purposes, it perfectly dislodges the disparities that come with how women's identities and roles are defined, labelled, and described especially when taking up titles with similar responsibilities to their male counterparts. By being elevated to the rank of the 'Opojito' (woman king), Nanisca (Viola Davis) has, through the declaration made by King Ghezo (John Boyega), been given equal right in ruling over Dahomey people the same way King Ghezo does irrespective of her gender.

The theme of gender equality is narrated as being deeply entrenched in the culture, tradition, mores, religion, and value system of the Dahomey people. This is inspired by their beliefs in the mythology and legend of Muwa (male) and Liza (female). The Dahomey legend has it that Muwa and Liza are twin gods that came together to create humanity and lived together in equality of power and influence thereafter. The twin gods are epitome of gender

equality. By depicting this ancient mythology, the narrative of gender equality is ingrained vividly in the film and buttresses the need for men to balance power with women.

Using the promotion of Nanisca (Viola Davis) by King Ghezo (John Boyega) to the position of 'woman king', the narrative of power balancing and gender equality are lucidly expressed. Hence, 'woman king' is equal to 'man king' irrespective of gender. Even in the royal palace, the narrative of equality is also expressed boldly as the women warriors have their separate court much the same way as their men counterparts do for sake of dignity, pride, and privacy. In such narrative, the female warriors are presented in manner not lesser in any degree to their male counterparts.

3. **Chastity, dedication, sacrifice, and patriotism:** Considering the commitment the 'Agojie' would have to make to protect their land against external aggression underlie their sacrifices of emotional and sexual detachment from men, that is, being chaste for the rest of their lives till death do their sisterhoods part at the battlefields. This shows that they have no life of their own but rather they live and die for their kingdom. This thematic narrative shows the 'Agojie's' highest regards for patriotism to their kingdom.
4. **Freedom and emancipation from internal and external forces:** As the 'Agojie' puts an end to the reign of the Oyo Empire and sack the European slave merchants from the Port of Ouidah, the narrative resonating in this idea is the expression of freedom and emancipation of the African continent from the internal and external forces that plundered and exploited her. This narrative is expressed using dialogues and actions of the characters in the film. King Ghezo's (John Boyega) address to his kingdom between the time-codes [2:00:21 - 2:01:06] when the 'Agojie' defeated the Oyo Empire push forward this narrative very forcefully thus:  
**King Ghezo:** ....The Europeans and the Americans have seen  
That if you want to hold a people in chains,  
One must first convinced them that they are meant to be bound.  
We joined them in becoming our own oppressors.  
But no more, no more.  
We are a warrior people  
And there is power in our mind, in our unity, and in our culture.  
If we understand that power, we will be limitless.  
My people, this is the vision I would lead...  
(Prince-Bythewood, 2022, 2:00:21 - 2:01:06)
5. **Fate, circumstance, and destiny in human affairs:** Throughout the film, Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) is presented as a child of circumstance. Fate made her the product of rape initiated by Young Oba Ade (Joel Mukadi) and was given out to an orphanage by her mother, Young Nanisca (Wanda Banda) with the assistance of Young Amenza (Lethabo) immediately after her birth. Circumstance arise in her adopted family and destiny orders her steps to her biological mother who, unknown to her, has been the brave and fearless Nanisca (Viola Davis): the general of the 'Agojie' she looks up to as a role model. Unknown to Nanisca (Viola Davis), if not for the revelation made by the birth mark she had inscribed on the arm of her child, Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) has been her daughter all this while and she did not know. Both the mother and the daughter are reconciled to each other on the altar of fate, circumstance, and destiny. Even Nanisca (Viola Davis) acknowledged it herself that she felt terrible, disgusted, and guilty for having given Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) to an orphanage and acknowledged the role of fate and destiny as re-uniting factors that brought them together.

This narrative is reinforced by Nanisca (Viola Davis) between the time-codes [2: 03: 30 - 2: 04: 39] for having to say thus to Nawi (Thuso Mbedu):

**Nanisca:** I am sorry  
I left you  
I was not brave enough  
But you survived because you are meant to be here...  
You are not the thing that hurt me  
You are Nawi  
You are my daughter  
(Prince-Bythewood, 2022, 2:03:30 - 2:04:39)

6. **Nostalgia and love for motherland:** In expressing this thematic narrative, Malik Diallo (Jordan Bolger), who is presented to the viewers as a Portuguese, made a shocking revelation that his mother is from Dahomey and that his father was Portuguese. He said that it was her mother's dying wish that he must visit Dahomey. He identified more on the side of Dahomey than on the Portuguese's or the Oyo's. His nostalgia and patriotism to Dahomey is the reason he divulges the Oyo's intended siege on Dahomey. Though the viewers are made to believe that it is because of his affection for Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) that makes him do the things he did. Such assertive narrative is quite true when Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) is considered to metaphorically and symbolically representing Dahomey in the film.

Hence, the love for his motherland is the reason why he metaphorically fight and resisted the Europeans when they supposedly put Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) and Izogie (Lashana Lynch), symbolically representing his mother land, up in a market place of slavery to be sold to the highest European bidder. Even when Izogie (Lashana Lynch) is killed, Malik Diallo (Jordan Bolger) literarily bought Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) which symbolises the future and hope of his motherland from slavers and grants her independence and as well offer to care for her and to shield her away from the fury of the slavers.

Love for motherland is deeply narrated as Malik Diallo (Jordan Bolger) has to betray his Portuguese origin symbolically represented by his friend (Santo Ferreira - Hero Fienne Tifflin) by releasing and setting free the slaves the latter forcefully carried on his boat to flee to Europe during the heat of the war between Dahomey and the Oyos at the Port of Ouidah. The slaves drown Santo Ferreira (Hero Fienne Tifflin) at the sea shore in the presence of Malik Diallo (Jordan Bolger) as he made no attempt to save him. This narrative reveals how resentful he must have been perceiving the enslavement, plundering, and exploitation of his motherland.

7. **The travails of Africa:** In capturing this thematic narrative, Nanisca (Viola Davis) is metaphorically represented as mother Africa who is in travail as a result of being plundered, exploited, raped, bruised, undermined, and humiliated by internal (Africans: native slave merchants) and external (Europeans) forces yet she still struggles and fights for emancipation of the continent symbolised by Dahomey. It is on the throes of her travails that she births a new hope (Nawi) for the future of the continent.

**Literary themes:** At the surface level of the film are the following thematic portrayals which aid to develop the film's narrative:

1. **Slavery and Slave trade:** The main plot and narrative of the film is anchored on the theme of slavery and slave trade. It is presented in the film as the most lucrative business venture that mutually-benefit the African kingdoms and the Europeans. There is a narrative of over-dependence on slave trade by the Europeans and the African slave merchants that when

Nanisca (Viola Davis) raised a motion in a council meeting that King Ghezo (John Boyega) should make effort to stop the selling of Africans as slaves while diversifying into other commercial commodities, other council members strongly objected her position. Santo Ferreira (Hero Fiennes Tiffin), a prolific Portuguese slave merchant is not at home with the intention of King Ghezo (John Boyega) to stop slave trade and later confronted the latter who made it plain to the former that Africans are not commodities of trade that should be sold to the highest European bidder.

The theme of slave trade is the film's key narrative anchor which greatly helps in the development of the plot as it is the critical narrative upon which other narratives are anchored. It is the bid to control the slave trade market which is exemplified and symbolised by the Port of Ouidah that set Oyo Empire, Dahomey, Mahi, and other slave business-oriented kingdoms against themselves. The need to control the slave market informs these kingdoms of the sinister idea to wage tribal war against one another in order to capture victims of war to feed the supply chain of the European's unending demand for slaves.

2. **Love:** Although members of the 'Agojie' are not permitted to nurse emotional feelings for the opposite sex let alone having a romantic bond, love seems to break this long standing tradition and norm. Love seems to happen to Nawi (Thuso Mbedu), an 'Agojie' warrior and Malik Diallo (Jordan Bolger), a Portuguese. Their encounter with one another sets the pace for a secret love relationship. It is on the throes of this love relationship that the sub-plot of romance is narrated. It is also the love relationship that exist between the duo that gave Dahomey's joint military force an advanced intelligence of the military strategy of the Oyo Empire which the Dahomeys explored and exploited to their advantage.

Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) seems to be the centre point for the narrative of love. There is also traces of sisterly love hovering around her and Izogie (Lashana Lynch). Both loved themselves dearly like biological sisters. It is the strong sisterly love which exist between Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) and Izogie (Lashana Lynch) that indirectly led to the death of the latter. It is established in the film narrative that while both of them made attempts to escape, it is the love Izogie (Lashana Lynch) had for Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) that made her to run back to rescue Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) who was accosted by two Europeans. Izogie (Lashana Lynch) is shot in the process. She would not have died had she been selfish to escape alone.

3. **Sexual exploitation of women:** As Young Nanisca (Wanda Banda) is sexually-assaulted, exploited, raped, and forced out of innocence by Young Oba Ade (Joel Mukadi), the theme of sexual exploitation of the vulnerability of women is narrated. The result of the sexual exploitation hunting Nanisca (Viola Davis), reveals the trauma that victims of rape and other grievous sexual assaults are often subjected to. This thematic narrative is a clear symbolism of how women taken as captives for slave trade were often molested sexually by their captors or slave masters.
4. **Secrecy:** Not until Nanisca (Viola Davis) spotted the birth mark on the arm of Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) who disclosed to Nanisca (Viola Davis) that she was an adopted child of her foster parents when asked where she got the mark from, the whole idea of Nanisca (Viola Davis) being raped and eventually giving birth to a girl child was a top secret kept by Nanisca (Viola Davis) and Amenza (Sheila Atim). Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) disclosed to Nanisca (Viola Davis) that even her father had no clue what the mark signified and would always call it the devil's mark. The disclosure of age-long and forgotten secret, through the appearance of Nawi's (Thuso Mbedu) birth mark, kept Nanisca (Viola Davis) and Amenza (Sheila Atim) startled. Until disclosure, it was also unknown to Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) that his biological father was

Oba Ade (John Odukoya), her mother's arch and sworn enemy who happens to be the general of the Oyo warriors.

5. **Forceful and underage marriage:** As typical of Africans as at the time (1820s), teenage girls were forcefully sent to houses of men who were of commensurate age with their grandfathers as wives. This act was basically against their wishes and aspirations. The film, using Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) to narrate and confront this anomaly, is actually lending its voice in the campaign against forceful and underage marriage.
6. **Bravery and strength in womanhood:** The film, using the bravery of 'Agojie' as point of reference and strong symbolism, narratively depicts the idea that there is an untapped strength in womanhood. This idea is a total departure from the paternalistic narrative and perception of women as weaker vessels, objects of sexual gratifications, kitchen managers, vulnerable house wives, emotionally-imbalanced, and overtly dependent on men to take personal decisions. The film is of the narrative that African women are brave, strong, resilient, tough, target-driven, independent-minded, and result-oriented.
7. **Revenge:** Lurking within the heart of Nanisca (Viola Davis) and lack of circumspection of Oba Ade (John Odukoya) is the narrative of the tempest and beastly crave and overdosed appetite for revenge disclosed. She sought revenge for the sin committed against her body and the innocence that the Young Oba Ade (Joel Mukadi) forcefully took from her. She strived at every given chance to make Oba Ade (John Odukoya) be at even with the travails, grief, trauma, devastation, and catastrophe she went through during and after being sexual exploited and humiliated by the latter.
8. **Ethnic annihilation and battle for tribal supremacy:** This narrative was fueled by the need and greed to maintain slave trading business with the Europeans. To be on top of the slaves supply chain to Europe, there was need for kingdoms who wanted more power and territorial influence to control the slave market to their advantage. This means subduing and conquering other kingdoms through wars so as capture more slave captives from those kingdoms to expand the slave business. This prompted series of raiding and attempts by composite kingdoms with vested interest in slave trade to want to annihilate one another in order to stand out. This narrative is the justification for Oyo Empire's ceaseless tribal wars with the Dahomeys.
9. **Reference to African traditional religion:** In the film, deep narrative reference is given to the African traditional religion. It is heavily relied upon in all spheres and endeavours in the film. Amenza (Sheila Atim) is an embodiment of the African traditional religious practices as she is portrayed as the chief priestess who consults the gods at any slightest urge or circumstance. Shrine is presented as the abode of the native gods of Dahomey where sacrifices are offered, libation poured, and incantations made to invoke the protection, forgiveness, fortification, healing, and other esoteric powers of the gods.

**Narrative Discourse Four:** How does the director's use of cinematography enhance the film narrative?

1. **Visual effects:** The film utilises high level creative visual effects to portray the narrative of war and battle in related scenes. Bullet wounds, machete cuts, rain falls, wind storms, night falls, spear-body penetrations, horse attacks, wounds sustains through thorns, etc. are

established through the utilisation of visual effects. The visual effects used help to create believability, aesthetics, emotional suspense, and attention to the film narrative.

2. **Stunts:** The narrative of film is supported with highly and professional stunts. From jumping down from a horse back, jumping into the river from a high level, acrobatics on battle grounds, etc., the director skillfully deploys stunts to establish thought-provoking actions to enhance the film narrative.
3. **Lighting and lighting effect:** The lighting techniques used in the film help in the development of the film narrative by enhancing the proper establishment of moods, tones, and scenery components of the film. It is through light, that night, dawn, and hazy scenes are established to further beautify the narrative by providing related ambiance.
4. **Editing:** The film uses a non-linear editing technique to enhance, adjust, and extend the narrative of the film.
5. **Sound and sound effect:** In advancing the film's narrative, the director utilises diegetic and non-diegetic sounds. The director heavily relied on appropriate soundtracks and sound effects to bring the scenes alive. The battle, war, fighting, shooting, horse prancing, and the war chant scenes evoke emotive appeals and help clarify and intensify viewing experience. Sound and sound effects are used to create suspense, evoke sense of premonition of doom or intending danger, introduce scenes and suggest actions. The film also relies on choreography and ambiance sound to pulsate the plot and narrative of the film.

The editor of the film (Terilyn Shropshire) has done a good job in sound adjustment and sweetening by creating synergy and complementarity between diegetic and non-diegetic sound sources throughout the scenes of the film. There has not been a scene with superimposition of one sound source over the other. The soundtracks composed and mastered by Terence Blanchard add beauty to the narrative of each scene.

6. **Languages of Dramatic Dialogue:** The major languages of dialogue deployed in the film narrative are English and the Portuguese. There is no way indigenous African languages of the Dahomey, Oyo Empire, and Mahi are deployed. While the use of English may be justified so that the viewers from diverse cultural and language backgrounds may understand, the use of the Portuguese is symbolic as it portrays the language of the European slave merchants, that is, the language that was often used in slave trade interaction.

Though the African language is not used in the film dialogue, there are some nuances and terms used which serve as reference to African languages. Nuanced words such as 'Agojie', 'opojito', 'Mawu and Liza', etc. are used to give African cultural reference to the film's spatial setting.

## CONCLUSION

This work was concerned with narratology in Prince-Bythewood's (2022, 02:14:49) film - The Woman King. It was specifically set to analyse the narrative structure inherent in the film. It uses qualitative content analytical method to dissect and x-ray the composite scenes in the film to establish how cinematographic elements in the film were deployed by the director to enhance the film narrative. It has established, through narratological exegesis, how Prince-Bythewood (2022, 02:14:49) weaved her narrative through the plot, themes, setting, and other cinematographic elements such as visual effects; stunts; lighting and lighting effect; non-linear editing; sound and sound effect; and languages of dramatic dialogue.

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