

The Woman King: Rewriting the past for money and status

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The Woman King is directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood from a screenplay by Dana Stevens and Prince-Bythewood, based on a story by Maria Bello. The film tallied \$19 million at the domestic box office during its opening weekend, and by September 25 had brought in \$36.3 million.

Set in 1823, *The Woman King* purports to tell the story of the Agojie, a female warrior unit in the West African kingdom of Dahomey (today's Republic of Benin). There is very little of the real history here and a great deal of self-aggrandizement and identity politics. The results are deplorable, both artistically and socially.

The film features Viola Davis as Nanisca, defender of the Dahomey Kingdom led by fair-minded King Ghezo (John Boyega). General Nanisca leads the Agojie, a ferocious all-female fighting force trained for deadly warfare. They are the liberators of Dahomey women captured by the slavers from the bloodthirsty and cruel Oyo Empire.

In Spartan fashion, Nanisca prepares her troops for battle, relying in particular on the courageous Izogie (Lashana Lynch), her loyal lieutenant Amenza (Sheila Atim) and the young, ambitious newcomer Nawi (Thuso Mbedu). It later comes to light that Nawi is Nanisca's daughter, the product of rape by the savage Oyo leader Oba Ade (Jimmy Odukoya). Mother and daughter were separated when Nawi was born, and the revelation of their relationship provides the film with much of its largely unconvincing, poorly developed drama.

Another portion of the latter occurs in the scenes involving the unlikely romantic interludes between Nawi and Malik (Jordan Bolger), the half-Dahomean who accompanies Portuguese slavers led by Santo Ferreira (Hero Fiennes Tiffin). Nanica uses her influence with King Ghezo to plead for an end to slavery: "Let us not be an empire that sells our people. Let us be an empire that loves its people." As good as her word, a gory conflagration ensues—slaves are freed, including the abducted Nawi, and the slave ships with the humiliated Europeans sail away without a lucrative cargo.

The Woman King is a bad movie, with a cartoonish narrative and cartoonish characters. In fact, comparisons have been made to the racist, degrading Marvel film *Black Panther*, which takes place in the phantasmic African nation of Wakanda and includes a "fictionally reimagined" version of the Agojie, the

Dora Milaje ("adored ones").

In the new movie, the "historically reimagined" Agojie are not just combative. As inhabitants of the idyllic Dahomean kingdom, they sing, dance and exchange cliched aphorisms, such as "To be a warrior, you must kill your tears," "Here, I will be the hunter not the prey" and "Love makes you weak." Theirs is a juvenile, predictable domain of pat formulas. They are invincible in the filmmakers' make-believe universe of Amazonian women of color as the ultimate conquerors.

But the actual, complex history gives the lie to a racist interpretation. According to *Amazons of Black Sparta: The Women Warriors of Dahomey* (2011) by Stanley B. Alpern, Dahomey, perhaps more than any other African state, "was dedicated to warfare and slave-raiding. It may also have been the most totalitarian, with the king controlling and regimenting practically every aspect of social life ... But this did not prevent it from having to pay tribute to a neighboring realm, Oyo, for three-quarters of a century."

Alpern goes on to assert that 1865 "saw the extinction of Dahomey's Atlantic slave trade. The death-blows were dealt by the British Navy, which intensified its antislavery patrol of the Slave Coast, and by the Spanish government, which closed Cuban ports to slavers."

However, the slave raids continued: "There were still markets to be served in Muslim regions to the north, and as late as May 1892 Dahomey was said to be supplying virtual slaves (camouflaged as voluntary contract labor) to Portuguese São Tomé, German Cameroon or Belgian King Leopold II's 'Congo Free State.' But the drop in demand must have led to a downsizing of the Dahomean army."

Portraying the Agojie, through Nanisca's actions, as enemies of the slave trade makes for a "nice story," says architectural historian Lynne Ellsworth Larsen in an interview. "These women are symbols of strength and of power. But ... they're [also] complicit in a problematic system. They are still under the patriarchy of the king, and they are still players in the slave trade."

The September 2022 *Smithsonian Magazine* ("The Real Warriors Behind 'The Woman King'") cites an article by historian Robin Law who notes that the Dahomey "emerged as a key player in the trafficking of West Africans between the

1680s and early 1700s, selling its captives to European traders whose presence and demand fueled the industry—and, in turn, the monumental scale of Dahomey’s warfare...

“In truth, [King] Ghezo only agreed to end Dahomey’s participation in the slave trade in 1852, after years of pressure by the British government, which had abolished slavery (for not wholly altruistic reasons) in its own colonies in 1833. Though Ghezo did at one point explore palm oil production as an alternative source of revenue, it proved far less lucrative, and the king soon resumed Dahomey’s participation in the slave trade.” In *The Woman King*, the production of palm oil successfully replaces the slave trade.

The fact that the film is a historical falsification has been widely publicized. Even certain black nationalist proponents have denounced the film. Journalist Antonio Moore and others have attempted to organize a boycott of *The Woman King*. Moore writes that this “may be the most offensive film to Black Americans in 40–50 years.” Another critic denounces a film that glorifies “the African slave-trading tribe that’s responsible for selling close to 20 percent of all Africans to the new world.”

The level of misrepresentation, however, does not trouble the critics, either in thrall to racial politics or intimidated by its promoters. The nauseating media praise for *Black Panther* has been echoed in this case. For the most part, the so-called critics merely act as cheerleaders: “*The Woman King* is indelible and truly inspiring—Black women only—no white saviors need apply,” writes Peter Travers at ABC News. A *Variety* headline touts “Viola Davis leading an Army of African Warriors in Compelling Display of Black Power.”

The *New York Times* goes farther. Manohla Dargis writes that the “ascendancy of women filmmakers over the past decade is one of the great chapters in movie history, and as women have fought their way back into the field, they have also taken up space—on screens and in minds—long denied them. Their canvases are again as expansive as their desires...”

“The women are their own greatest weapons, and among everything else it addresses, *The Woman King* is about strong, dynamic Black women, their souls, minds and bodies.” Prince-Bythewood, Dargis asserts, “frames these warriors, with their gradations of skin tones, lovingly and attentively.” The *Times* reviewer goes on to claim that Prince-Bythewood’s attentiveness to dark skin, by “foregrounding women like Davis, Sheila Atim and Lashana Lynch,” is “galvanizing.” What revolting drivel this is. Frankly, Dargis, in her obsession with skin color, uses the terms and language long associated with the extreme right.

The “critics” are generally on board with the filmmakers having invented an anti-historical narrative that flatters an affluent petty bourgeois layer in Hollywood and beyond and confirms their delusions about society and about themselves.

The Woman King is the latest in a series of films and television series in which the creators solve difficult or troubling historical problems by simply making things up. This

is in part the product of postmodern irrationalism and subjectivism, which rejects the possibility of objective historical truth in favor of personal “narrative.” The list of the most egregious offenders includes Sophia Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette* (2006), Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), Yorgos Lanthimos’ *The Favourite* (2018), Madeleine Olnek’s *Wild Nights with Emily* (2018) and television series such as *The Great* (about Catherine the Great, 2020), Ryan Murphy’s *Hollywood* (about Hollywood in the 1930s and 40s, 2020) and *Bridgerton* (2020).

Instead of changing the social and political conditions, these self-obsessed social strata simply change the historical facts to suit themselves. This is not artistic license.

Hollywood has a renowned, discreditable record of playing fast and loose with the historical record. Films such as *They Died with Their Boots On* (about the life of Gen. George A. Custer, 1941), *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937) and many others largely discarded the facts. Nonetheless, there was often an attempt to either grasp the overall content of the historical situation or at least advance a humane theme.

In the case of *The Woman King*, we have anti-history mobilized in the selfish interests of an upper-middle class milieu, rewriting the past for money and status.

The history of Dahomey and the slave trade as a whole is a painful, bloody one. It would certainly be very important to shed real light on this brutal period. However, the events have to be treated honestly and objectively. This means providing a broad, comprehensive picture, not a set of comic book characters and situations. The WSWS, in its critique of the *New York Times*’ 1619 Project, explained that in “relation to the New World, the phenomenon of slavery in modern history cannot be understood apart from its role in the economic development of capitalism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”

Karl Marx famously and brilliantly characterized the epoch in question in *Capital*, pointing out that the “discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.” Marx went on: “These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation.”

The Woman King is not a genuine artistic effort, but part of an ad campaign on behalf of affluent, grasping social layers.



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