

## **The Woman King Is Bad News** **Hollywood's immature feminist Afrocentricity** **By Armond White**

Ever since [Black Panther](#) and [The Lion King](#), Hollywood has used Afrocentricity to take advantage of black moviegoers and their self-congratulatory, "anti-racist" allies.

Now, *The Woman King* is the latest example.

Set in 1823 in the former African kingdom of Dahomey (the present site of Benin), *The Woman King* features the Agojie, the nation's female warriors, and its fierce commander, Nanisca (Viola Davis). This small army of bodacious Serena Williams types who slaughter men and defy social codes is enough to generate \$18 million at the weekend box office, but even that minor sum is discouraging because *The Woman King* itself is bad news.

Historical fraudulence is a problem, but the reasons behind it are what cause alarm. Director Gina Prince-Bythewood and screenwriters Dana Stevens and Maria Bello gainsay Dahomey's role in the slave trade, trivializing the complications of that original sin. Instead, they offer another Millennial gender-flip, conceived to further sexual confusion via racial frustration and feminist anger.

This approach cannot be taken seriously because, like *Black Panther* and *The Lion King*, *The Woman King* is juvenile. The film's comic-book premise treats black audiences like children. That adolescent kick over hair-pulling catfights is extended into an almost laughable, pseudo-political history lesson pitting women against men. Consider it deriving from Black Lives Matter's attack on the black family, honoring butch women as standard-bearers in the battle against toxic, ineffectual masculinity.

Only teenagers should fall for this nonsense. Prince-Bythewood's usual boast about telling marginal black stories (*Love and Basketball*, *Beyond the Lights*, *The Secret Life of Bees*) is motivated by the notion that she is correcting Hollywood's neglect. Thus, she gives us Dahomey as Wakanda, a made-up history for uninformed viewers who feel so "unseen" that they can be robbed and conned again.

What benefit comes from proffering the delusions of the film's two big battle scenes? The Agojie fight the slave-trading Oyo and then against European slavers, and the women emasculate and devastate the men. Bad feminism is compounded by the offense of trafficking in slavery simply as an excuse for action-movie violence.

Narrowly defining womanhood as consisting of masculine traits, *The Woman King* actually contradicts the virtues of diaspora-based Afrocentricity. The film uses period history to parallel contemporary resentments. (There's even an effeminate court sage dressed in lavender.) Nanisca asserts the valor of being "feared, paid for your work" and having "your opinions heard." Commanding her troops with "we fight or we die," she sounds like Hillary Clinton, drunk on that purse-hidden hot sauce.

Maybe Prince-Bythewood has tapped into something that the two lousy [Wonder Woman](#) movies missed, but whatever it is, it isn't excitement. Her battle scenes (supposedly based on Mel Gibson's *Braveheart*) are haphazard, with poor continuity. These black Amazon battles, featuring sharp, bloody, clawlike fingernails -- sorority-house celebratory rituals with banshee ululations -- are mere novelties.

Anger is Viola Davis's specialty, but it isn't enough to justify this distortion of black African heritage and grievance from way back. Nanisca's leadership focus on physical strength, force, and power -- not love or knowledge -- is just truculent. Figuring out its tradition source is as frustrating as trying to place Nanisca's odd patois. She represents a naïve Hollywood-Marxist-

materialist view of third world rebellion, the history that Frantz Fanon, John Henrik Clarke, and Ivan Van Sertima made credible. Davis reduces it to sporting a stylish upswept Afro; she struts the way Cardi B twerks — superficial feminine postures. Nanisca's stoicism ("You are powerful, love makes you weak") betrays the camaraderie and spirituality that should be at the heart of Afrocentricity.

Claiming that "the white man has brought evil here" makes black tribal enslavement and warfare sound Edenic. Has Prince-Bythewood never heard "King and Chief must have had a big beef / Because of that / Now I grit my teeth," that ingenious précis of the African slave trade in Public Enemy's "Can't Truss It"?

Falling way short of the magnificent "Can't Truss It," *The Woman King* cannot be trusted. Nanisca's backstory is a pitiful steal of Sethe's painful matriarch memory in *Beloved*. Her protégé Nawi (Thuso Mbedu) goes through an endurance test that Eddie Murphy and Craig Brewer had affectionately satirized in *Coming 2 America*. The emphasis on feminine audacity is a trashy version of Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen*, and dismissing Yoruba and Christian religious conflict is inexcusably trite after Haile Gerima's *Sankofa*. The only male character of note is the Dahoman King Ghezo, who reinstated the slave trade before being deposed (a role reduced here to John Boyega's performing with the same misdirection as in his portrayal of *Star Wars*' Finn).

In 2016, Tammy Bruce observed, "Feminism is having a nervous breakdown." Because of the oxymoronic *The Woman King*, the same can be said about Hollywood's Afrocentric feminism.

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