

Female Empowerment and Leadership in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*: A Content Analysis of Female Characters

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the representation of female empowerment and leadership in Black Panther: Wakanda Forever (2022) through a qualitative content analysis framed by postcolonial feminist theory. The film marks a transformative moment in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) by centering women as political, intellectual, and emotional leaders within an Afrocentric context. Focusing on four main female characters—Queen Ramonda, Princess Shuri, General Okoye, and Nakia—the analysis examines verbal, visual, and narrative elements to uncover how the film constructs multidimensional models of womanhood and power. Findings reveal that Wakanda Forever challenges patriarchal and Western-centric portrayals of leadership by depicting empowerment as collective, relational, and rooted in moral integrity and cultural identity. Each character represents a distinct form of leadership—wisdom, innovation, discipline, and compassion—that together articulate an inclusive feminist vision. Through symbolic cinematography and dialogue, the film reframes heroism as healing and collaboration rather than domination. Ultimately, Wakanda Forever serves as both a cinematic and ideological statement that redefines gender representation, promoting intersectionality, empathy, and transformative leadership in contemporary popular culture.

Keywords: female empowerment, postcolonial feminism, leadership, gender representation, film studies

1. INTRODUCTION

The portrayal of women in media, especially in film, has changed a lot in the last few decades. Women have gone from being seen as passive characters or sidekicks in stories with male heroes to being powerful agents of change, leadership, and empowerment (Thames Copeland, 2024). The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is one of the most important movie franchises in the world. It has been criticized for its male-centered stories and lack of women in leadership roles. But Black

Panther: *Wakanda Forever* 2022 was a big change in this way. It told a story that was very much about women's power, strength, and emotional depth (Reyvonputra et al., 2023).

After the death of Chadwick Boseman, who played the title character T'Challa, *Wakanda Forever* had to deal with the unprecedented challenge of keeping the Black Panther legacy alive without its main male character. Ryan Coogler, the director of the movie, changed the story to make Queen Ramonda, Princess Shuri, General Okoye, and

Nakia, a new character, the main characters in both the political and emotional continuity of the Wakandan nation. This creative choice changed the way men and women interact in the MCU and also showed how strong, smart, and capable women are of leading in times of loss and crisis. *Wakanda Forever* goes beyond being just a superhero movie; it becomes a cultural text that shows how people are still talking about gender equality and empowerment in today's world (Broda & Allen, 2023).

In media and cultural studies, female empowerment means showing women as active, independent, and capable people who question traditional gender roles and assert their power in social, political, and personal settings (Manzar, 2024; Robinson et al., 2021). Leadership, on the other hand, is the ability to get people to work together toward a common goal by influencing, guiding, and inspiring them (Thakur et al., 2019). In *Wakanda Forever*, these two ideas come together to make a complicated picture of womanhood that has many layers, including emotional depth, moral conviction, and strategic intelligence. Queen Ramonda stands for wisdom and maternal authority; Shuri stands for innovation and the intellectual redefinition of power; Okoye stands for discipline, loyalty, and strength; and Nakia stands for compassion, diplomacy, and emotional resilience. Together, they create a new model of female leadership that is based on their own cultures and is useful all over the world.

From a feminist theoretical standpoint, *Wakanda Forever* corresponds with the postcolonial

feminist framework, which analyzes the intersection of gender with race, culture, and identity in narratives generated within and outside of Western hegemony (Guthrie, 2019; Thames Copeland, 2024). Wakanda, as an Afrocentric utopia, creates a space where Black women are not pushed to the side but are instead respected and have power. This narrative structure goes against both patriarchal and colonial ideas that have historically shown African women as less important or oppressed. *Wakanda Forever*, on the other hand, shows African women as protectors and heirs of cultural heritage, scientific progress, and moral integrity. Their leadership is based on working together, caring for each other, and being part of a community (Daniëls et al., 2019). This is a different way of thinking about power than the individualistic ideas that are common in the West.

Wakanda Forever's portrayal of female empowerment also reflects larger social and cultural movements that support gender equality and representation in the entertainment industry (Albarrán-Torres & Burke, 2025). The #MeToo movement and worldwide campaigns for diversity and inclusion have made the film industry think about how women, especially women of color, are shown on screen. In this light, *Wakanda Forever* is a big deal for both the MCU and Hollywood as a whole. It shows how mainstream movies can be a way to rethink gender roles and tell stories that empower people. The film's box office success and positive reviews show that people are becoming more open to stories that feature strong female leads and deal with issues of

empowerment, identity, and resistance.

From an analytical perspective, this study utilizes content analysis to investigate the verbal and visual depictions of female empowerment and leadership in the film. Content analysis, a qualitative research methodology, facilitates a systematic investigation of symbolic meanings, recurring themes, and interaction patterns among characters. This study seeks to elucidate the construction, communication, and perception of empowerment and leadership through the analysis of dialogue, character development, costume design, and cinematography (Fazeli et al., 2023; Hamid & Razak, 2025). The approach facilitates a detailed examination of how narrative components and cinematic techniques shape the ideological construction of gender roles (Zheltukhina et al., 2023). The study is important for film and literary studies because it adds to the growing body of work on how feminism is shown in popular culture. Previous studies on the MCU, including analyses of *Captain Marvel* 2019 and *Black Widow* 2021, have examined the progression of female heroes, frequently within Western-centric frameworks. *Wakanda Forever*, on the other hand, takes an Afrocentric and intersectional approach to empowering women. It combines cultural identity, grief, and political responsibility. This intersectionality is key to understanding the film's broader message about female leadership, which shows that empowerment is not only personal but also communal, based on heritage and community support (Barthold et al., 2022).

The film's portrayal of women also reflects the challenges encountered by female leaders worldwide (Wang, 2024). Perseverance, moral integrity, and empathy are all important values for leaders (Lumpkin, 2023). These are all ideas that are still being talked about in feminist leadership theory, which values collaboration over hierarchy and inclusion over dominance. *Wakanda Forever* uses its characters to show these ideas on screen, showing that real leadership isn't just about having power; it's also about being able to heal, inspire, and support communities. In short, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* is a great movie to look at how women are empowered and lead in modern films. It changes the superhero genre by making women not just side characters, but also the main characters who are strong and keep things going. The movie goes against traditional gender roles by showing women as innovators, warriors, and leaders. It also shows a progressive vision of empowerment that goes beyond race and culture.

This research aims to elucidate how the film presents new perspectives on women's roles in leadership, identity formation, and social transformation through a content analysis of the female characters. This study emphasizes the significance of representation in influencing cultural perceptions of gender and power. Marvel has added to a bigger conversation about what it means to lead, mourn, and rebuild in a world that is always changing and losing people with *Wakanda Forever*. This shows that female empowerment, in all its forms, is still an important part of both stories and society.

2. METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach to examine the representations of female empowerment and leadership in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*. Qualitative content analysis enables a systematic yet interpretive examination of symbolic meanings, narrative structures, and visual-verbal representations within media texts (Fazeli et al., 2023). This method is appropriate for the present study because it allows the researcher to explore how cinematic discourse constructs gender, power, and identity through both narrative and aesthetic dimensions (Page et al., 2022). The analysis treats the film as a cultural artifact that reflects, challenges, and reconstructs ideological conceptions of womanhood within a postcolonial and feminist context.

The primary data source of this research is the 2022 film *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, directed by Ryan Coogler and produced by Marvel Studios. The film, with a runtime of 161 minutes, serves as the central text for analysis due to its rich and complex portrayals of women in leadership and empowerment roles. Four main female characters: Queen Ramonda, Princess Shuri, General Okoye, and Nakia, constitute the primary focus of this study. Each represents distinct aspects of female strength, wisdom, and resilience within the socio-political framework of Wakanda. Secondary data are drawn from scholarly journals, film reviews, and critical essays discussing gender representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). These supplementary materials serve to contextualize the interpretations and

substantiate the analytical framework employed in this study.

The analysis is grounded in a postcolonial feminist theoretical framework, which examines how gender, race, and culture intersect in cinematic representation (Ponzanesi, 2018). This perspective provides the lens through which the film's portrayal of African women is interpreted not as peripheral figures, but as autonomous agents of power, knowledge, and cultural continuity. Postcolonial feminism emphasizes the significance of cultural specificity and challenges Western-centered narratives of empowerment, aligning well with *Wakanda Forever's* Afrocentric depiction of leadership and collective resilience.

The units of analysis in this study include both verbal and non-verbal components. Verbal expressions such as dialogues, speeches, and conversations are analyzed to identify how empowerment and leadership are linguistically constructed. Non-verbal cues including body language, gaze, and gestures are examined to reveal implicit meanings related to authority and solidarity. Furthermore, cinematic elements such as costume design, camera movement, lighting, and soundtrack are considered integral to understanding how the film visually encodes gendered power. Character development and narrative progression are also evaluated to trace transformations in leadership, moral agency, and emotional strength throughout the film.

Data collection involved repeated and close viewing of the film to achieve deep familiarity with its content. Key scenes and dialogues

involving the four principal female characters were transcribed verbatim. Subsequently, the researcher selected scenes most relevant to the study's focus those that explicitly or symbolically depict moments of decision-making, emotional endurance, or political negotiation. A thematic coding system was then developed to categorize instances of empowerment, leadership, and collective identity.

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the analysis, triangulation was employed by integrating verbal, visual, and textual data. Peer debriefing and theoretical validation were also conducted through engagement with scholarly literature and feminist media theory. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process to recognize the

researcher's subjective role in meaning construction and interpretation. Finally, the study adhered to ethical research practices. Since the research analyzed publicly available media content and did not involve human participants, no formal ethical approval was required. Nevertheless, academic integrity was strictly observed by accurately citing all sources, avoiding cultural misrepresentation, and maintaining respect toward the film's cultural and creative context.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Thematic Representation of Female Empowerment and Leadership in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*

Theme	Character(s)	Key Scenes / Expressions	Indicators of Empowerment & Leadership	Theoretical Interpretation
Wisdom and Maternal Authority	Queen Ramonda	United Nations speech; confrontation with Okoye	Moral leadership, emotional composure, assertive diplomacy	Reflects postcolonial maternal leadership grounded in cultural preservation and moral guidance (Ponzanesi, 2018)
Intellectual Innovation and Adaptive Leadership	Princess Shuri	Laboratory invention scenes; final ritual	Scientific intelligence, resilience in grief, transformative leadership	Symbolizes epistemic empowerment and redefinition of authority beyond traditional patriarchy (Guthrie, 2019)

Discipline and Ethical Strength	General Okoye	Defense of Wakanda; exile and reinstatement scenes	Honor, duty, and moral integrity under pressure	Embodies collective leadership and loyalty rooted in feminist ethics of responsibility (Thames Copeland, 2024)
Compassion and Diplomatic Agency	Nakia	Rescue mission in Haiti; reconciliation scenes	Empathy, cross-cultural negotiation, community healing	Represents intersectional leadership valuing care and inclusivity (Manzar, 2024)

Wisdom and Maternal Authority: Queen Ramonda

Queen Ramonda epitomizes wisdom, moral strength, and maternal authority. Her leadership is deeply rooted in cultural and ethical consciousness rather than coercive power. In the United Nations scene, Ramonda defends Wakanda's sovereignty with dignity and assertiveness, proclaiming, *"The world took my husband and my son, but they will not take our vibranium."* This dialogue conveys both resilience and moral superiority, emphasizing the protection of cultural heritage.

From a postcolonial feminist perspective, Ramonda's authority challenges the Western patriarchal model of leadership by merging maternal care with political firmness. Her character illustrates what Ponzanesi (2018) identifies as "maternal resistance," a leadership style that sustains moral and communal integrity amid global pressures. Thus, Ramonda's

representation reframes African motherhood as a political force that unites wisdom with justice.

Intellectual Innovation and Adaptive Leadership: Princess Shuri

Shuri's character arc encapsulates the transition from scientific detachment to emotional maturity and spiritual awakening. Her identity as a technological genius represents the film's redefinition of intellectual empowerment through Afrocentric futurism. Shuri's laboratory scenes where she designs new suits and weapons illustrate the power of knowledge as a form of resistance and survival.

Her eventual acceptance of the Black Panther mantle signifies a shift from intellectual rationality to holistic leadership that integrates science, emotion, and tradition. As Guthrie (2019) observes, postcolonial feminism acknowledges that empowerment is not only about

agency but also about negotiating grief, identity, and historical trauma. Shuri embodies this transformation as she redefines heroism not through conquest, but through renewal and reconciliation. Her leadership exemplifies adaptive resilience a crucial trait of women navigating modern political and emotional crises.

Discipline and Ethical Strength: General Okoye

General Okoye demonstrates an unwavering commitment to duty, loyalty, and honor. Her leadership style is characterized by discipline and ethical strength, aligning with feminist theories of integrity and accountability (Thames Copeland, 2024). Even after being stripped of her title, Okoye maintains a sense of moral obligation toward Wakanda. The scene of her emotional breakdown before Queen Ramonda underscores the tension between personal loyalty and institutional duty.

Visually, Okoye's representation marked by her spear, armor, and upright posture symbolizes warrior ethics intertwined with emotional vulnerability. This balance of strength and sensitivity reinforces feminist ideals of ethical leadership rooted in empathy rather than domination. Her reinstatement later in the narrative signifies the recognition of moral courage as a legitimate form of authority. Thus, Okoye redefines leadership as collective defense of justice rather than individual pursuit of power.

Compassion and Diplomatic Agency: Nakia

Nakia's leadership manifests through empathy, negotiation, and intercultural understanding. Her decision to live in Haiti and protect displaced Wakandans expands the notion of leadership beyond national borders, embodying what Manzar (2024) terms "transnational feminism." Her diplomatic intervention to rescue Shuri illustrates emotional intelligence and pragmatic problem-solving, traits often marginalized in patriarchal power structures.

Through costume and cinematography, Nakia's scenes are rendered in warm tones and natural lighting, reinforcing her role as a nurturer and peacebuilder. Her representation conveys the feminist principle that compassion and diplomacy are not signs of weakness but sources of transformative power. In this sense, Nakia embodies an inclusive form of leadership that prioritizes healing and community over hierarchy.

Theoretical Discussion

Across all four characters, *Wakanda Forever* constructs a multilayered narrative of empowerment that transcends Western individualism and champions collective resilience. The film illustrates what postcolonial feminism conceptualizes as intersectional leadership a synthesis of intellect,

emotion, and community that resists binary gender hierarchies (Guthrie, 2019; Barthold et al., 2022). The women of Wakanda represent distinct yet interconnected dimensions of power: Ramonda's moral wisdom, Shuri's innovation, Okoye's integrity, and Nakia's empathy. Collectively, they exemplify a new paradigm of female leadership grounded in cultural heritage, solidarity, and care ethics.

Cinematically, Coogler's direction employs symbolic contrasts—light and shadow, sound and silence, color and costume—to reinforce these thematic dimensions. For instance, the golden lighting in Ramonda's throne room signifies divine authority, while Shuri's laboratory scenes, dominated by cool blue hues, represent rational intelligence and futurism. These visual motifs, in conjunction with dialogue and character interaction, sustain the film's ideological project of decolonizing gender representation in mainstream media.

In alignment with feminist leadership theory, the women in *Wakanda Forever* embody relational power leadership that heals, collaborates, and inspires rather than dominates (Lumpkin, 2023). Their empowerment emerges not from individual heroism but from interconnectedness, empathy, and collective purpose. Hence, the film functions as both a cinematic and cultural statement: an Afrocentric reimagining of feminism where power is exercised through wisdom, compassion, and community restoration.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* serves as a landmark cinematic text in redefining the representation of female empowerment and leadership within a postcolonial and Afrocentric framework. Through its four principal female characters—Queen Ramonda, Princess Shuri, General Okoye, and Nakia—the film constructs a multidimensional model of womanhood that integrates moral authority, intellectual innovation, ethical discipline, and compassionate diplomacy. Each character embodies a distinct facet of feminist leadership that collectively subverts patriarchal and Western-centric ideals of power. Rather than presenting leadership as domination or control, the film articulates a relational and communal form of empowerment rooted in cultural identity, emotional intelligence, and collective resilience.

From a theoretical standpoint, the film aligns with postcolonial feminist discourse by challenging traditional hierarchies of gender and race while situating Black women at the center of political, scientific, and moral agency. The intersection of gender, culture, and identity in *Wakanda Forever* offers a counter-narrative to the historical marginalization of African women in global cinema. The film thus becomes a medium of ideological resistance, portraying women as cultural custodians and transformative leaders who embody both strength and empathy.

Moreover, the film's visual and narrative strategies—ranging from cinematographic symbolism to

dialogue construction—reinforce its feminist message by presenting empowerment not as an individual struggle but as a collective movement toward healing and justice. This reconfiguration of power dynamics invites a re-evaluation of leadership values in both cinematic and sociocultural contexts, suggesting that effective leadership requires not only authority and intellect but also compassion, collaboration, and moral integrity.

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