Afrofuturism and Gender Consciousness in *Black Panther (2018)*

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Abstract. In the African diaspora context, Black people have never been set free from the dark history of slavery, apartheid, othering, and marginalization. The aspiration and longing for freedom, triumph, bright future or the so-called Afrofuturism conception are finally manifested in pop culture, such as in *Black Panther (2018)*, one of the black superhero movies. Afrofuturism emerges as a way to envision a bright future despite perennial racial discrimination against Black people. Not exclusively limited to men-empowerment, this movie puts women in the spotlight and therefore also touches on the matter of gender consciousness. For those reasons, this qualitative research aims to discuss how the *Black Panther* movie reflects Afrofuturism and gender consciousness and how those two are interrelated. Using Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics theory as a basis for movie interpreting, the analysis of the research relies on the writer's interpretation. The analysis results show that all of *Black Panther*'s prominent casts exhibit Afrocentric values by being empowered and proud of their naturally typical hair, their country with unbelievably wealth and superior technology, and who they truly are as Africans. The Afrofuturism value in *Black Panther* encourages black generations to go far beyond the limitations of the white imagination. Furthermore, this movie does not romanticize the idea of Black male supremacy. Black women here can be professional figures in various matters, such as love life, family, work professionalism, and service to the nation to uphold what is right for themselves, their children, nation, and communities.

Keywords: Afrofuturism; *Black Panther* movie; black people; gender consciousness

Abstrak. *Dalam konteks diaspora Afrika, orang kulit hitam tidak pernah terlepas dari sejarah kelam perbudakan, pemisahan ras, pembedaan, dan marginalisasi. Aspirasi dan kerinduan akan kebebasan, kejayaan, masa depan cerah atau yang sering disebut Afrofuturisme akhirnya terwujud melalui budaya pop, seperti Black Panther (2018), salah satu film superhero kulit hitam. Afrofuturisme muncul sebagai cara untuk membayangkan masa depan yang cerah meskipun diskriminasi rasial terhadap orang kulit hitam terus terjadi. Tak terbatas pada dominasi laki-laki, film ini banyak menyorot peran perempuan yang akhirnya menyentuh isu kesadaran gender. Oleh karena itu, penelitian kualitatif ini bertujuan untuk membahas bagaimana film Black Panther mencerminkan Afrofuturisme dan kesadaran gender serta bagaimana Afrofuturisme dan kesadaran gender saling terkait. Menggunakan teori hermeneutika dari Paul Ricouer sebagai dasar interpretasi film, analisis penelitian bergantung pada interpretasi penulis. Hasil analisis penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pemeran sentral Black Panther bersifat sangat afrosentris, misalnya, mereka bangga menunjukkan gaya rambut aslinya, negaranya dengan kekayaan luar biasa dan teknologi unggul, dan merasa berdaya dengan jati dirinya sebagai orang Afrika. Nilai Afrofuturisme dalam Black Panther mendorong generasi kulit hitam untuk melangkah jauh melampaui batasan imajinasi kulit putih. Selain itu, film ini tidak meromantisasi gagasan supremasi pria kulit hitam. Perempuan kulit hitam di film ini mampu menjadi sosok profesional dalam berbagai hal, seperti percintaan, keluarga, perkerjaan, dan pengabdian kepada bangsa untuk kemerdekaan diri sendiri, anak-anak, bangsa, dan komunitasnya.*

Kata kunci: *Afrofuturism; film Black Panther; orang kulit hitam; kesadaran gender*

INTRODUCTION

Within the realm of racial justice, Afrofuturism is not a new term but not yet an outdated topic to spark discussion. This term emerges as the antithesis of racial injustice phenomena, especially among black people, that remains a big issue in the US. This is reflected in a survey result showing Black, as well as Asian Americans, say it has become more common for them to receive racist views and slurs since the pandemic began (Ruiz et al., 2020). With that, the *#BlackLivesMatter* social movement that occurred in 2020 amid the Covid-19 pandemic may be the largest protest against racism (Widianingtyas & Munjid, 2021) as the backlash against police brutality killing a black man, George Floyd, and a series of other similar cases. Afrofuturism, therefore, comes in order "to tackle the increasingly complicated frameworks of racial discrimination" (Taylor-Stone, 2014).

In the Hollywood film industry before the realization of Afrofuturism, Black Americans were primarily narrated as slaves as in *12 Years a Slave*, victims of the civil war as in *Detroit*, or symbols of comfort as in *The Help* which entails that the black experience can only be rendered under the white supremacy (Johnson, 2018). As Afro-Americans are falsely labeled as negative and insignificant compared to White people, Afrofuturism as a conception opposes the predicted dark future of Black people. It is also used to seek equal rights and utopia in the present moment and to envision the bright future of the underrepresented race (Yongo, 2014). As for now, the aspiration for Afrofuturism is largely manifested in pop culture, such as movies, by depicting the superior characters of Afro-Americans.

Unlike previous heroic movies, *Black Panther (2018)* which employs Afrofuturism has confoundingly stolen the world's attention due to its ground-breaking value on the powerful depiction of black people through the presence of African heroic figures and optimistic cultural reforms. This is a story of the black King T'Challa known as the Black Panther, a warrior who suddenly bestows with super-human powers as he ingests a heart-shaped herb affected by the vibranium that makes him the first Black Panther. Using his superpower, he unites all his tribes and builds Wakanda, a technologically-advanced kingdom or the African nation they call home. They, however, isolate themselves and hide from the rest of the world by pretending to be a third-world nation.

The *Black Panther (2018)* is one of the most successful commercial movies by the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). It is the first African superhero film that has been categorized by many polls as the best heroic film of all time, surpassing *The Iron Man*, *Spider-Man, Captain America*, and even the iconic box office successes, for instance, *Titanic* (Greenspan, 2019). The audience admires it because it serves a completely different 'menu' to consume with pleasure not only because of its racial consciousness but also gender consciousness. This movie represents Afrofuturism in which black themes such as slavery, apartheid, othering, marginalization in the context of the African diaspora, history, colonization, post-colonization, and decolonization are viewed, reconceptualized, and rearticulated through the perspectives of science fiction and technoculture (Dery, 1994). These themes also endorse African womanism in many parts. African womanism, in this movie, uncovers the same black themes in the African diaspora context but with black females at the center of intelligence, technology advancement, power, and bravery.

In this case, gender consciousness relates to equality between all genders, specifically men and women, in which both genders perform equal power. The gender consciousness and feminism terms are often discussed together, but they are not the same. Based on Hogeland (1994), gender consciousness is a vital precondition for feminists who challenge and seek women's rights in

contemporary society or the so-called feminist consciousness to somewhat be able to arrive at another higher level than the other gender. The difference, therefore, is about the relation between politics and gender. Feminism often politicizes gender consciousness and incorporates it into a systematic discourse on histories and structures of male privilege and domination. Women, organizations, and educators can benefit from reflecting on gendered power relations, creating safe spaces for connected learning, and committing to making changes that support women's advancement. As a consequence, failure on any of these levels could result in the replication and reproduction of patriarchal systems. While feminism focuses more on how women should have the same right as men, gender consciousness is essentially about the awareness of the equality of both genders. Endorsing gender consciousness offers promise for women to abate challenges to oppressive patriarchal systems. Like other forms of group consciousness, the gender consciousness conception "entails identification with others like oneself, a positive affect toward them, and a sense of connectedness with the group and its well-being" (Rinehart, 2013).

Seeing those two major conceptions, this paper aims to discuss how the *Black Panther* movie reflects Afrofuturism and gender consciousness and how Afrofuturism and gender consciousness are interrelated. The researcher brings up two different social phenomena all at once to fill out a research gap. With that, this paper also employs an effect impact approach since the writer intends to see how the *Black Panther* movie as a popular culture product and the audience influence one another. In other words, this paper discusses how the consumption of popular culture gives an impact on society and vice versa. This approach is closely related to the social impact approach (Jackson & Latane, 1981). This has been proven to be increasingly important in the aspects of interpersonal influence and people's behavior. Based on Jackson and Latane (1981), social impact is defined as:

> "any of the great variety of changes in physiological states and subjective feelings, motives and emotions, cognitions and beliefs, values and behavior, that occur in an individual, human, or animal, as a result of the real, implied or imagined presence or actions of other individuals" (p. 343).

Having regard to popular culture, this approach elaborates on social impacts and social values that affect the audience as well as the larger society. In general, it is used to help one think or act in a certain way as implicitly or explicitly narrated in the popular culture product, in this case, a movie. This also can be applied to see how a movie is produced due to the strong influence of society or concerning phenomena. According to Jackson (1987), the impact approach also predicts that "the effect of any one variable is greater if the value of the other variables is large". He explains if a target person is being induced to donate a certain amount of money to a charity by strangers (low-strength sources), a large number of strangers will work out more than a small number of strangers to collect a bigger donation.

To make the analysis more comprehensible, the writer also uses the postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory is a historical concept primarily concerned with the European colonialism ruled around the world from the 18th to the 20th century which accounts for the political, aesthetic, economic, historical, and social impacts of colonialism. Elam (2019), however, mentioned it is impossible to envisage "European philosophy," "European literature," or "European history" as existing in the absence of Europe's colonial encounters and oppression around the world. He also suggested that colonized worlds are commonly being forgotten amid global modernity, such as Africa. The theory emerges from and is deeply rooted in anticolonial thought from Africa in the early 20th century. The representation of postcolonial theory, in which western values eventually become the most suitable representation (Tallapessy, Wahyuningsih, Anjasari, 2020), is easily reflected through various media.

A movie as one of the popular culture products not only attempts to amuse the audience but also unravels particular ideologies.

METHOD

This is qualitative research in which the data source was the *Black Panther (2018)* movie. As a matter of analysis, the Afrofuturism, gender-consciousness, and social impact approaches as elaborated in the introduction part were used in this study. The analysis results of this qualitative study heavily rely on the writer's interpretation. According to Hamidi (2011), interpretation is an attempt to unravel hidden meanings on different levels that are contained in literary work. In addition, the study is subsumed under the hermeneutics method of interpretation, in which Ricoeur (1981) refers to multiple interpretations of language texts or contexts as it is improbable to have objectivity and standardization when interpreting them. Hermeneutics, according to Forster (2007), plays a role in several study areas whose subject matter inquires characteristically interpretative approaches because the disciplinary subject matter concerns the meaning of human intentions, beliefs, and actions, or human experiences as it is under the big umbrella of the arts and literature. Essentially, disciplines that rely on hermeneutics are, but not limited to, theology, especially in the human sciences, social sciences, and humanities. This study is subsumed under the field of social science.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Reimagining Afrofuturism in *Black Panther (2018)* towards Black Community

According to Brooks (2015), Afrofuturism is the combination of science fiction and fantasy used to envision how the future of Black people will look like and to reconstruct their future far beyond what they experienced in the past, particularly "as slavery forced Africans to confront an alien world surrounded by colonial technologies". Afrofuturism emerges as a result of cruel white imagination from which the African diaspora has to reimagine their future. Afrofuturism, rhetorically, intends to transform and metamorphose the trauma of the dark history of the African-American diaspora (Brooks, 2015). The perennial culture of white supremacy and cruelty in real life ironically plays a significant role in the emergence of Afrofuturism and the imagination of more powerful futures for the Black people. Benjamin (1994) took an example of how The Middle Passage as a science fiction horror where Africans were moved from western Africa, the home planet of the black people, and where technologies of transportation and bondage were previously unseen and instead used to dislocate, abduct a large number of people to a new world. In that world, the Black people reflect the values of Afrofuturism from time to time by innovating, adapting, capitulating, succumbing, and rebuilding their former lives and traditions (Benjamin, 1994). Similarly, the *Black Panther* comic and movie reflect an Afrofuturist imagination of African futures through the presence of its Black superhero T'Challa or Black Panther and the ultramodern and secret nation of Wakanda.

People perceive the issue of colonization from the setting of the place of the movie, Wakanda, which is a representation of the African land. Wakanda, however, is a country with unbelievable affluence and superior technology that is purposively hidden from the rest of the common world; therefore, it has never been colonized, in marked contrast to the colonialization of Africa by mainly 7 European powers. *Black Panther* propounds Wakanda's triumph as a nation because it has never been colonized by any country, particularly Western countries, which contradicts real history. The characters in the movie also frequently exhibit Wakandans with high self-esteem living in the most advanced nation.

This movie is the icon of black liberation since Afrofuturism refers to a change of culture of underdeveloped Africans to the technologically and scientifically advanced Africans shaping their future through their optimistic imagination.

Figure 1 Afrofuturism in Wakanda, the Black people's technologically advanced world
https://www.quora.com/How-can-Wakanda-from-the-MCU-have-technology-that-rivals-the-rest-of-the-world

Excerpt 1:

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"I can't be happy here knowing that there are people out there who have nothing."
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The line above is uttered by Nakia, one of the supporting characters in the movie who shows compassion for any people, including other black and non-black people, whose lives are suffering outside Wakanda (32:28). Through the line, she acknowledges how rich her tribe is, compared to the other tribes from other sides of the world and that they should keep sharing and supplying technological aid to countries in need. It is such a contradiction with the fact that the whole of Africa had been colonized. It also satirizes the postcolonial vindication that "the actions of the West which ultimately caused the lack of development in colonized regions such as Africa" (Said, 1978). Back in 2017, this is a big thing that the black community in America has been waiting for. The internet was riding a big wave of exuberance as Twitter reported that "*Black Panther*" was one of the most-tweeted movies of 2017, though it was released one year after.

However, it is not just Wakanda's skyline that has created huge impacts; the film drew on a team of designers and stylists to showcase a very typically beautiful yet underrated black aesthetic. Moreover, the movie's characters exhibit a total Afrocentric manner in which they are proud to show their natural and unique hairstyle and texture, in which the former first lady of the US, Michele Obama, and her daughters who are also Afro-Americans no longer represent the same value; they virtually appear in public with straightened hair which is different from their natural hair. The movie is an instance when Black people feel nonchalant and confident about who they truly are. The movie tries to help communicate that Black people preserve their dignity and power. Further, *Black Panther*'s costuming was an opportunity to infuse the meaning and pride of black culture into the movie. Yu (2018) states that "the gorgeous and dignified costumes of each character also seem to invoke a place and people that had never been colonized, yet the breakthrough was based on a real traumatized past". It is also supported by Johnson (2018) that black people are looking for social validation and are hungry for

the opportunity to celebrate everything that they do not have in a hand at the moment, from Afrofuturism to the natural hair movement, which is often ridiculed on the daily basis among white supremacists.

Figure 2 The representation of *Black Panther*'s casts wearing their hair in a natural style.
https://www.blackpanthercostu.me/nakia/

The film also exhibits black political thought and action through the representation of an ideological debate and conflict between T'Challa (the movie star) and Killmonger (the supervillain) on the state of the people. Though both of them aim for the good, they are working on different solutions. In this case, Killmonger flies into a rage to see the unjust world that Wakanda has ignored. In addition to Afrofuturism, *Black Panther* gives African Americans chances to reimagine and reexamine their existence within the society, both literally and figuratively. Wakanda has emerged as an inspiration for what people might think impossible to be true by illustrating what true liberation would look like on screen. However, the power of that fantasy collides head-on with the grim realities of Killmonger who grew up in Oakland, California, which is far away and different from the utopian vision. The complexity of significantly different black cultures shown in the *Black Panther* movie thus sparked dialogues and personal reflections about black identity in the United States of America and other countries via *#WhatBlackPantherMeansToMe* across social media helping build reflections on being true African-Americans to black moviegoers.

According to Wallace (2018) in a New York Times article, this movie works as a medium for multiple generations to store some of black Americans' most deeply held aspirations. From this, it is understood that the Black people are still experiencing racial issues in a promised land that their ancestors had sought to forcibly create and build. All generations, regardless of their skin colors, are supposed to have freedom, untroubled life, and racial justice which the world has not provided yet for Afro-Americans. The Afrofuturism value in *Black Panther* is a response to a racial injustice phenomenon and is meant to encourage black generations to transcend anything that has been a hindrance to black liberation and development. Furthermore, it is not only the idea of how black people will live in the future, will utilize technology and science, and will pursue breakthroughs in space. It is however the idea that they will have emerged victorious in the future. The movie also helps build an image to unite Black Americans as a whole in one home. Afrofuturism is an attempt to imagine what kind of living the Black community would build.

After all, *Black Panther*'s imagination fuels the Afrofuturistic vision of the young generations. It is like Sankofa, a term from the Akan people of Ghana, that means, "to go back and get it" (Alkalimat, 2021). In other words, it is a spirit for Black people to look back to learn from the past and avoid things that should not have happened to create a better future for the people. This movie encourages

its billions of audience to embrace the idea that what happened in the past may be the best teacher to live in the present and change the future. This movie also invites people who watch it to acknowledge and remember Africa as the root of Americans' current civilization and understand social forces, like colonization, that have limited racial justice. All in all, *Black Panther* "never lets the viewer forget that if we can dream and imagine it, we can realize it and make a change for the better" (Strong & Chaplin, 2019).

2. Showing How Society Should Trust Black Women (Gender Consciousness)

The narrative of the *Black Panther* has undoubtedly put Black men and masculinity at the center through the appearance of King T'Challa and other male prominent characters. *Black Panther*, however, if we look deeper, tries to deliver a clear message that Black women also play significant roles in the advancement of the extremely modern world of Wakanda. The movie points out the role of leading female multidimensional characters who are all Black to carry the film. The predominantly black casts are not displayed in one continuum; instead, they speak to pluralistic sets of women's experiences in real life in most parts of the film. They represent women of color, particularly Black, who are both young and old, stern and witty, career-focused, and family-oriented.

A character named Shuri, T'Challa's younger sister, is a Wakanda's major engineer who spends most of her life developing technological innovations to keep her country thriving and her brother alive during fights. Despite the insignificant assistance of any big and muscular men, T'Challa and the rest of the central figures in the movie are protected by a queen guard and female troops who glow with their heads shaved bald. Simply put, neither *Black Panther* himself nor Wakanda would exist in their current glory without the presence of Black women. This movie attempt to neglect the patriarchal ideology and plaguing issues that Black women are only identical to household activities and workplace inequality and break the alignment of patriarchal family values, as well as a call for Black women to position themselves as equal to Black men, especially in the leadership aspect. It is therefore a kind of reflection of what happened in America that Black women's business ownership grew 605% over the last 20 years between 1997 and 2017 (Women's Business Center, 2017) despite all other gender and racial inequalities that remain to occur. Other women of color including Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (493%), and Latina (491%) have also turned to entrepreneurship at an extraordinary rate based on the survey.
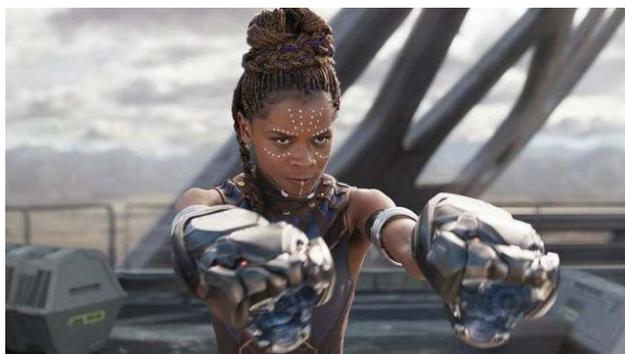

Figure 3 Shuri, a prominent Black technology genius in *Black Panther*
https://www.liputan6.com/showbiz/read/3543954/shuri-black-panther-resmi-jadi-putri-disney

Although *Black Panther* starring the late Chadwick Bosman is under the spotlight throughout the movie, the storyline implicitly makes us realize that maximizing the capabilities and freedom of

women must also be a concern in a movie, which then may spark a massive impact on many people's lives. This movie does not attempt to romanticize the idea of Black male supremacy. Many scenes throughout the movie show Black women are equal to Black men and should be treated fairly. For example, when the tension over what is right for Wakanda has escalated into all civil war, Okoye (Danai Gurira), the leader of the queen guards, faces off with her lover W'Kabi (Daniel Kaluuya) in a battle. W'kabi challenges Okoye's rectitude and loyalty to Wakanda who uses her superpowered spear to kill him by playing her feelings and asking:

Figure 4 Okoye, the head of Wakandan armed forces and intel

https://twitter.com/wakandawelcomes/status/1045884339182080000

Excerpt 2:

"Would you kill me, my love?"

It is a question that raises turmoil whether Black women can be professional figures in various matters, such as love life, family, work professionalism, and service to the nation to uphold what is right for themselves, their children, and communities. Okoye's answer to W'Kabi (see Except 3) is the call to challenge the concept of male superiority, not just for Black women, but for all moviegoers. Aware of both her honorable allegiance to Wakanda and her ability to kill her lover for her country, W'Kabi kneels before her and drops his weapon. At that moment, he trusts her professionalism and leadership more than his own. Even while in love, Okoye remains assertive and capable of unconstrained thought. When she needs to choose between dreams or the love of a man, she quite simply chooses to pursue her dreams. This is something that has not appeared massively in other American superhero movies.

Excerpt 3:

"For Wakanda? No question!"

As mentioned previously, *Black Panther* has been empowering the female African-Americans' position, particularly by employing some Black women in powerful and pivotal roles throughout the movie. *Black Panther* delivers powerful lessons about gender roles based on how Wakandan women handle life and love and could balance many aspects of life as well as violating the common patriarchal culture within the black tradition. Shuri and Okoye, as explained above, are allowed to fully express themselves as women pursuing their passions and how their lives will unfold. Other than Shuri and Okoye, the movie also reflects gender consciousness through the presence of Nakia, a

rebellious spy who is often sent on missions around and outside Wakanda. The movie implicitly shows how she dedicates her life to protecting women held in captivity outside the borders of Wakanda. Her contributions to justice and humanitarianism empower other women in her community. The gender consciousness is also demonstrated through the appearance of Ramonda, the nation's former queen, and Dora Milaje, a special force unit consisting entirely of women that protects King T'Challa. With those roles, the movie tries to prove women can also do anything that men do, from leading political operations to taking care of and protecting members of the community.

Figure 5 Nakia, a member of Wakanda's spy group
https://www.pinterest.com/pin/786300416184408195/

Figure 6 The Dora Milaje, female personal bodyguards of the Black Panther

https://geekositymag.com/black-panther-disney-plus-spin-off-series-to-focus-on-the-all-female-dora-milaje/

The roles of women in the aforementioned positions have given a significant impact on the narrative and it all signifies gender equity and highlights how exceptional women can be. Race and gender consciousness have never been promoted in any other MCU and other Hollywood movie production companies' movies. With that spirit, *Black Panther* fills out the gap as well by paying tribute to female resistance to colonization, oppression, and injustice throughout the history of the African diaspora. All in all, *Black Panther* puts female empowerment on full display on the big screen which is also the one that the people pursue in Afrofuturism, and reminds us all that the future is female and the underrepresented race, in this case, African.

CONCLUSION

Black Panther represents two major values; black liberation or Afrofuturism and gender consciousness. This movie becomes the icon of black liberation since Afrofuturism touches on a cultural change of primitive Africans to the technologically and scientifically advanced African land to reconstruct their future through their imagination which is portrayed by a technologically-advanced kingdom or the African nation called Wakanda. It is a triumph because any country, particularly Western countries have never colonized Wakanda. The Afrofuturism value in *Black Panther*, a decidedly black creation, is meant to encourage black generations to break the limitations of the white imagination. Furthermore, *Black Panther* promotes gender consciousness and empowers the female African-Americans' position, particularly by employing some Black women in powerful and pivotal roles throughout the movie. *Black Panther* delivers powerful messages about gender consciousness based on how Wakandan women navigate life and love, which are shown in every task and role of the Black female characters. All these female characters are multidimensional and are strong, reliable, independent, and career-focused.

Black Panther (2018) the movie implicitly shows that pop culture may gain great admiration from the audience if it raises a large-scale social issue. In the case of *Black Panther*, the writer argues that it brings up specific a phenomenon experienced by the massive number of African-American communities residing in the U.S. and African-American diaspora in the entire world, which is racial inequalities. Simply put, a work must have attractiveness and the massive X factor to be successful. However, even though it is a black-related film, it does not mean that only Black people are interested in it. *Black Panther* won many people's hearts regardless of race and boundaries which proves that Black liberation and racial justice are the dreams of so many.

This research possesses some limitations and therefore is very likely to be developed in the future time by future researchers. Since the research did not focus on the utterance of each character in the movie, future researchers are expected to discuss and analyze the dialogues in the movie which are believed to contain gender-consciousness and Afrofuturism ideologies.

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