

SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL IDENTITY AND COLONIAL RESISTANCE IN THE FILM “BLACK PANTHER: WAKANDA FOREVER”

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ABSTRACT

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Film is one of the mass communication media, producing and displaying a message or ideology. This study aims to analyze the representation of culture and resistance to colonialism in the film Black Panther: Wakanda Forever using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach in a Qualitative method. Data were obtained from selected scenes that display visual symbols such as hand gesture symbols, spiritual interactions with ancestors, conversations between characters, costume that shows culture, and women's leadership and traditional-modern technology. The results of this study are 1) women's emancipation through female figures who lead and are strong to break the stigma of weak women and challenging subordinative stereotypes 2) culture as an element and foundation for forming identity reflected in language, costume, architecture, and spiritual traditions 3) the film builds a counter-narrative to the colonial view by repositioning Africa and Mesoamerica as advanced, sovereign, and spiritually valuable regions. This representation shows that cultural identity and communal solidarity are the main forces in facing neocolonial domination. These findings contribute to media and cultural studies by highlighting how popular films can be a medium for the articulation of postcolonial ideology and symbolic resistance through visual narratives.

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1. Introduction

Film is entity that plays the model role in the society; people copy the behavior of the film stars in their daily lives and develop as culture. As film is the audio-visual media that is so easy to capture in the mind of people, people get mediatized soon with the audio-visual effect of film (Dhungana, 2024). The United States Hollywood film industry has dominated the global film market for over a century, making American films the primary consumer in many parts of the world and influencing popular culture widely, especially in carrying cultural identity and colonialism. Development has not only often forgotten indigenous peoples, but has also often had negative impacts on their rights and lives (Asia Justice and Rights, 2022). African and Mesoamerican have experienced a long colonial story such as land grabbing and exploitation of natural resources so that overall, colonialism in Africa and Mesoamerica has left a deep

mark, shaping the history and culture of both regions. In the context of History and culture in films sometimes do not stand alone where they reflect the ideology or myth formed by the construction of narratives and characters by film creators, this issue is described by the creator, presenting a narrative about African and Mesoamerican as indigenous peoples who fight colonialism.

Black Panther: Wakanda Forever (2022), directed by Ryan Coogler's, offers counter-narrative. The film presents two imagined civilization, Wakanda and Talokan that are technologically advanced yet rooted in ancestral traditions. Wakanda subverts the stereotype of African inferiority by concealing its power behind a façade of poverty, while Talokan, inspired by precolonial Mesoamerica, embodies aquatic sovereignty and postcolonial resilience. Both societies resist Western exploitation, particularly over vibranium, a fictional resource symbolic of cultural and political autonomy. The film's setting provides a candid example of how paradoxical ideation governs *Black Panther*—the story as well as the franchise (Griffin & Rossing, 2020).

Superhero films remain one of the most popular genres among Gen Z audiences in Indonesia, with over 70% expressing interest in action genres (SMRC, 2022). Globally, Marvel films like *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* has achieved massive commercial success, grossing over \$837 million worldwide. From Barthes' perspective, such popularity reflects how superhero narratives function as contemporary myths embedding dominant ideologies in accessible form. However, any decline in interest may signal a growing critical awareness of these constructed myths.

According to Roland Barthes (1972) myth is a communication system that function as a message, myth or ideology works through forms that look like something natural even though it is a social and cultural construction. In cinema, myths are inscribed visually and textually, informing audiences' conception of identity, power, and resistance. From a semiotic perspective articulated by Barthes, the systematic approach considered denotation referred to as literal meaning, connotation as cultural associations and myth as ideological message-offers a guide for decoding the structure and legitimation of meaning in cinematic texts. In *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, for example, the denotative elements are regional languages, traditional African apparel, ancestral rituals, and the discord over vibranium. At the connotative level, denotative elements represent resistance to neocolonialism, pride in local heritage, and cross-cultural solidarity, especially between Wakanda and Talokan as representations of Africa and Mesoamerica, respectively. These connotations are articulated in a mythic storytelling that reclaims sovereignty and depicts postcolonial strength through ancestral and spiritual identity. Such ideological construction is also enhanced by gendered constructions of representation. Feminist film criticism, especially Mulvey's notion of the male gaze (1975), asserts that traditional cinema invariably tends to reduce women into passive, visual objects. However, *Wakanda Forever* subverts this tendency, positioning female characters-like Shuri, Queen Ramonda, and Namora as principal makers of leadership, scientific innovation, and military strategy. Semiotics is concerned with how meaning is formed and reality is represented or constructed through signs, sign, system, and sign processes (Chandler, 2022). As Pasya and Rahayu (2024) note in their semiotic analysis of Nolan's posters, "Through analyzing these signs, we can gain insight into the films' narratives, plot, and the art direction of the movie poster semiotic analysis gives a valuable approach to understanding the deeper meanings of visual media". This highlights the efficacy of Barthes' triadic model in decoding not only static promotional materials but also complex cinematic

narratives such as those in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* where visual signs, colors, and composition work ideologically to convey cultural identity, resistance, and mythic sovereignty.

This study seeks to present a fresh approach to semiotic theory and feminist film criticism using Barthes' perspectives by critically analyzing *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* as a cinematic site of ideological representations. Unlike previous studies that focus only on narrative and character tropes, this study discusses visual signs and cultural myths prevalent among people and gendered portrayals that capture meaning constructs of cultural identities and meanings that connote anti-colonial resistance. The research will make significant contributions to the broader scholarly debates in postcolonial media studies and feminist film criticism, particularly in demonstrating how mainstream superhero cinema can challenge dominant Western ideologies symbolically and visually. The study intends to analyze the manifestation of cultural identity and a resistance to colonialism in the narrative, signs, and character portrayals in the film through Barthes' semiotic framework. The formulation of the problem that will be discussed by the researcher is; How does the film *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* represent cultural identity and resistance to colonialism through visual signs, narrative structures, and character portrayals using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework?

2. Method

This study uses a semiotic approach by Roland Barthes to analyze the representation of cultural identity and resistance to colonialism in the film *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*. The researcher uses Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis to explore the visuals, narratives, and signs in the film. In his analysis, Roland Barthes has two processes of signification, namely denotative meaning or visual meaning, narrative and signs and connotative meaning, which are the results of the discovery of the myth or ideology contained.

This research uses a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is research that aims to understand the phenomena experienced by research subjects, such as behavior, perception, motivation, and actions, holistically and by means of description in the form of words and language, in a specific natural context and by utilizing various natural methods (Moleong, 2019). The object of this study is the scenes in the film *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* produced by Marvel Studios which was released in Indonesia on November 12, 2022. This film was chosen because it clearly shows aspects of African and Mesoamerican culture as local communities, and tells a story of resistance against colonialism, which makes it important in the study of semiotics and the representation of ideas. The data collection technique is carried out by non-participant researcher observation. In this study, the researcher purposively selected seven main scenes to be analyzed. The selection of scenes was based on the following three criteria:

- Narrative significance: the scene has an important role in conveying the main ideological message in the film.
- Thematic relevance: the scene contains visual and verbal elements related to issues of cultural identity, colonialism, and gender representation.
- Symbolic density: the scene presents visual symbols such as costumes, gestures, rituals, and spatial arrangements in the film

In this research, there are three significant stages:

a) The denotation stage

Involves recognizing the direct meaning of symbols that appear in the film, such as costumes, colors, and scenes directly.

b) The connotation stage

Involves understanding the social and cultural meaning of these symbols, which are related to historical context, cultural norms, and shared experiences.

c) The myth stage

A way of conveying the ideology implicitly built through the symbol, namely the way the representation in the film creates the impression that a value or view is "natural" and undeniable. Myth is a form (Roland Barthes, 1972, p. 109). What myth does is to make ideology seem like a natural reality, so that it is accepted without question (Roland Barthes, 1972, p. 129).

To maintain the validity and credibility of the data, the researcher conducted repeated in-depth analysis of the scenes in the film so that the meaning that emerged truly represented the structure of meaning according to Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. The researcher also read and referred to various relevant academic literature related to semiotics, colonialism, cultural identity, and feminist film criticism as part of the literature triangulation strategy. In this process, the resulting semiotic interpretations were compared and re-evaluated with previous theories and research so that the results obtained had a strong theoretical basis. Supported by previous research and in current academic discourse in visual culture studies. This study only uses the film *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* as a public object of study and does not involve human participants. Researchers still uphold the principles of academic ethics and respect copyright and cultural representation studied in the film.

3. Results and Discussion

To support the identification of research problems, seven selected scenes from the film *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* were analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. These scenes were chosen because they contain signs, narratives, characters, and visual elements that represent cultural identity and resistance to colonialism through the myths and ideologies that are built.

Advanced African Civilization: Wakanda as Counter-narrative



Figure 1 : shows the Wakandan landscape reflecting technological advancement.

Wakanda's skyline as a symbol of progress, modernity, and cultural sovereignty. This scene is further analyzed in Table 1 to reveal ideological meanings.

Table 1.
Denotative, Connotative, and Myth in the Landscape Scene of Wakanda Nation.

DENOTATION	CONNOTATION	MYTH
The country of Wakanda with tall buildings and modern planes.	African culture Wakanda as a developed country with futuristic buildings and state equipment.	A counter-myth to the representation of Africa as a backward region; a symbol of epistemic resistance to colonial narratives in earlier western films.

Source: (Authored by the writer, 2025)

Representation of Women as Leaders in diplomacy and Protection



Figure 2 : shows Queen Ramonda addresses The United Nations, Defending Wakanda Sovereignty.



Figure 3 : shows Shuri wearing the Black Panther costume.



Figure 4 : shows Okoye fighting in Wakandan battle armor, against an intruder.

Figures 2 to 4 illustrate scenes that emphasize Women leadership diplomatic and military in Wakanda. These scenes are further analyzed in Table 2 to unpack its ideological significance.

Table 2.
Denotative, Connotative, and Myth in the Representation of Women Leadership and Resistance in Wakanda.

DENOTATION	CONNOTATION	MYTH
Queen Ramonda gives a speech in front of the UN General Assembly; Shuri wears a Black Panther costume; and Okoye fights against an intruder.	Black women like Queen Ramonda, Shuri, and Okoye are presented as political, scientific, and military leaders who challenge the traditional passive role of women in film.	The representation of Black women as leading actors challenges patriarchal structures in cinema, by presenting a postcolonial narrative that positions women as guardians of heritage and sovereignty, going beyond the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) and the white savior narrative in western cinema.

Source: (Authored by the writer, 2025)

Women in Science: Shuri as Tech Leader



Figure 5 : shows Princess Shuri doing technological activities.

Shuri collaborates with Griot, symbolizing scientific leadership and innovation. This scene is further analyzed in Table 3 to unpack its ideological significance.

Table 3.
Denotative, connotative, and myth in technological leadership carried out by Shuri.

DENOTATION	CONNOTATION	MYTH
Princess Shuri is doing technological activities with her AI assistant named Griot.	Princess Shuri is depicted as a young woman who leads with science. African women here are the subject of technology, not just objects.	The visual theme of this scenario undermines gender and racial stereotypes used in current technology, portraying African women as subjects of knowledge and masters of technology; it thus resonates with the discourse of technofeminism and deconstruction of epistemic colonialism.

Source: (Authored by the writer, 2025)

Cultural Gesture as Identity and Power



Figure 6 : shows Wakandans crossing their arms with the Wakanda symbol.



Figure 7 : shows the symbol of Talokan Identity namely Shark's Jaw.

Figures 6 and 7 depict iconic hand gestures from the Wakandan and Talokan civilizations. These gestures serve as cultural markers and affirm collective identity. These scenes are further analyzed in Table 4 to reveal their ideological meanings.

Table 4.
Denotative, connotative, and myth in the function of the gestures performed by the Wakandans and Namor.

DENOTATION	CONNOTATION	MYTH
The crossed arms symbol performed by Queen Ramonda, Shuri, and Wakandans in a moment of honor; Namor's hand gesture forming a shark's jaw.	Gestures can be seen as a marker of a collective identity, the authority of culture, and a spiritual heritage that rejects the homogenization of global identity.	This representation constructs a myth of symbolic resistance to colonial hegemony; gestures become visual forms of cultural resistance and the claiming of a space of meaning beyond the dominant symbols of the West.

Source: (Authored by the writer, 2025)

Costuming, Ritual, and Dances as Symbolizing Heritage



Figure 8 : shows traditional garments and ritual dances in Wakanda ceremonies highlight African traditions.

The symbolic meaning of traditional garments and ritual dances are further analyzed in Table 5.

Table 5.
Denotative, connotative, and myth in Costuming, Ritual, and Dances that highlight African Culture.

DENOTATION	CONNOTATION	MYTH
Costumes, visuals, and dances depict Wakanda as an African culture. Ethnic motifs and typical African colors along with dances are displayed here.	Ceremonial visuals evoke pride in ancestral heritage and affirm cultural continuity. Rituals become a visual language of cultural unity and strength.	Myth of African spiritual sovereignty: tradition as resistance to colonial erasure and as a means of reclaiming cultural dignity and identity.

Erlania Hafitri et.al (Semiotic Analysis of Cultural Identity and Colonial Resistance in “Black Panther: Wakanda Forever”)

Source: (Authored by the writer, 2025)

Resistance to Global Dependency

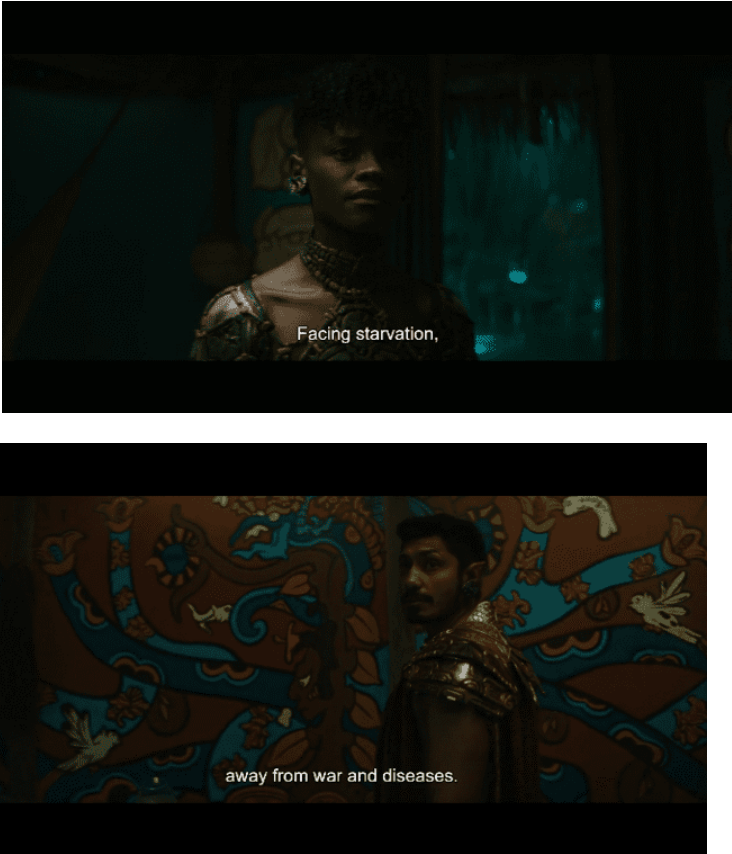


Figure 9 : shows the narrative of Namor's conversation with Shuri where Namor states that Wakanda and Talokan are able to withstand famine and avoid disease.

This scene highlights Namor’s statement about Talokan and Wakanda’s ability to survive without external dependence. The symbolic meaning of this dialogue is further explained in Table 6.

Table 6.
Denotative, connotative, and myth in Namor’s dialogue on survival and sovereignty beyond colonial system

DENOTATION	CONNOTATION	MYTH
Namor narrates that Wakanda and Talokan can Facing starvation and away from diseases.	Talokan and Wakanda are independent countries in managing natural resources and maintaining the peace of their people from the west. This statement also implies criticism of the global, especially western leaders who still allow disease,	As a strong and advanced nation, life without colonialism is an ideal life. Talokan and Wakanda are representations of nations that resisted colonial hierarchies of power and progress.

poverty, and hunger to run rampant.

Source: (Authored by the writer, 2025)

Talokan Women’s Leadership



Figure 10 : shows the costume worn by Namora, which is typical of Mesoamerica attribute.

Namora’s visuals with Talokan war attributes in figure 7 contains strong gender and cultural symbolism, as explained in table 7.

Table 7.
Denotative, connotative, and myth in Namora’s visualization as a Talokan leader which has its roots in Mesoamerican culture.

DENOTATION	CONNOTATION	MYTH
Namora wears a head ornament with feathers, gold jewelry, and traditional costume from the Mesoamerican culture.	Namora represents the identity of the strong Mayan ritual symbol form as a Mesoamerican Woman. Although she comes from an ancient civilization, she is not marginalized, but rather vocal, intelligent, and strong.	Through the character of Namora, the film reconstructs the representation of women in superhero cinema from merely male companions to heroes who lead and protect their people. This in line with feminist criticism and also challenges the dominance of western representation that tend to see women of color as exotic or subordinate.

Source: (Authored by the writer, 2025)

Mass media is a driving force and with the invention of digital media, it has become more impactful and powerful. There was a radical change in culture after mass media and

technological developments in communication modes. The media has constituted and promoted culture (Rafique, Khan, & Bilal, 2022). According to Barthes (1972), myths function to maintain ideology and shape perceptions of reality. Therefore, in this film study, Barthes' semiotics is very useful for knowing how the film converts certain values through symbols, narratives, visual representation and characters. In the context of Black Panther: Wakanda Forever, the representation of cultural identity can be analyzed through visual symbols such as costumes, language, rituals, and architecture that reflect African and Mesoamerican culture. An important factor in a connotation is the signifier that is in the first order (Barthes, 1957). Both imaginary photos are related to the form, appearance of the photo or in its signifier, explaining that at least in the photo it gives an idea that what is explained by the meaning of the connotation is how to photograph it (Barthes, 1957).

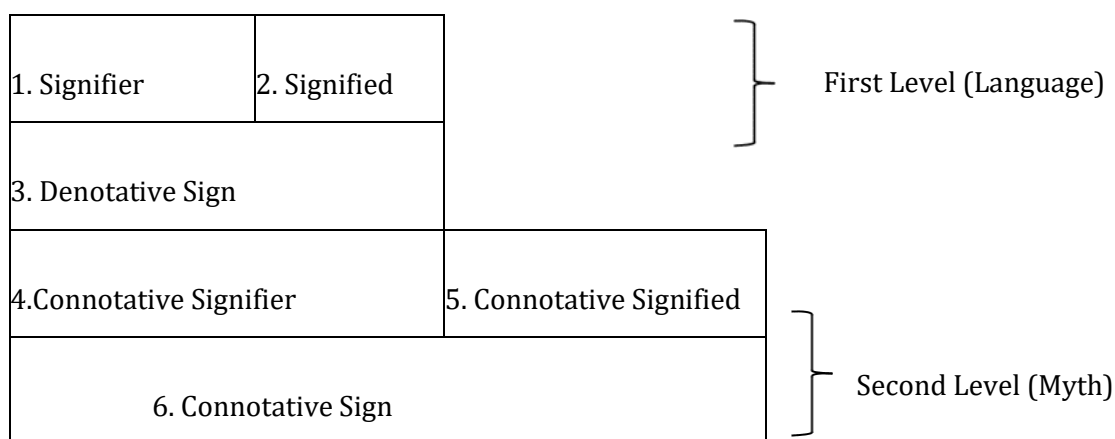


Figure 11. Roland Barthes' Map of Signs
(Source: Alex Sobur, 2006)

From figure 11 of Roland Barthes' sign map, it shows that denotation consists of a signifier and a signified. However, at the same time, the denotative sign is also a connotative signifier. In other words, it is a material element. In Roland Barthes' concept, an additional sign, but contains both parts of the denotative sign that underlie its existence (Sobur, 2006:69). In Barthes' framework, connotation is identical to ideological operations, commonly called myths and functions to express and provide justification for dominant values that apply in a certain period (Budiman, 2001:28 in Sobur, 2006:71). Roland Barthes also created a systematic model of myth in analyzing signs directed at the idea of two-stage signification.

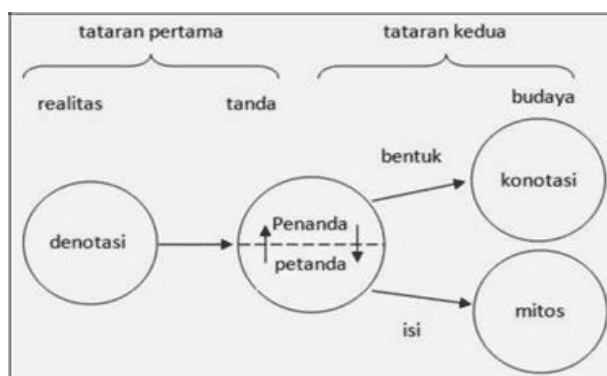


Figure 12. Two Orders of Signification from Roland Barthes
(Source: Fiske, In Alex Sobur, 2004:127)

Figure 12 explains that the first stage of significance is the relationship between the signifier and the signified in a sign there is an external reality. The signifier represents the element of form or content, while the signified represents the element of concept or meaning. The unity between the signifier and the signified is what is called a sign. In the second stage of significance related to the content, the sign works through content, and emotions have connotations to a particular ideology or myth. Basically one myth arises temporarily and sinks replaced by another myth. Myths become justification for some prevailing values.

At the denotative meaning level, which is the actual meaning written in the sentence in a straightforward and clearly visible meaning without having to find the real meaning again (Jakautama & Bustam, 2022), the film *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* displays cultural elements such as traditional costumes of African and Mesoamerican peoples, hand symbols such as the Wakanda cross and the Talokan shark jaw, as well as the customs of the people of the two regions.

At the connotative level, the meaning of connotation is the second order meaning that can be given to symbols with reference to cultural values that are therefore on the second level (Saifuddin, 2018), the depiction of Queen Ramonda and Shuri as the new Black Panther is not only a transformation but also connotes the power of women. In this film, women are no longer supporting characters, but dominate and become the center of Wakanda's power to the main driver. Traditional narratives of heroism, particularly in historical epics, have often glorified male figures, portraying them as saviors, conquerors, or protectors. Women, when included in such narratives, are frequently relegated to supporting roles, serving as motivators or symbols of vulnerability that justify the hero's actions (Hole, Jelača, Kaplan, & Petro, 2016). Wakanda still maintains spiritual values and customs as its identity even though Wakanda is a high-tech country. This is a symbol of a non-Western civilization that is not inferior, without sacrificing ancestral culture, Wakanda continues to advance against colonialism that wants to take natural resources. The connotation of Talokan depicts a hidden underwater civilization that is closed, sacred, and spiritual. Accessories, dances, and languages that are symbols of Maya show that pre-colonial civilization still lives with its own strength and is able to protect its people with cultural heritage from western exploitation. Western countries in this film appear as powers that want to steal and control Vibranium. The connotation of the repetition of modern colonialism, namely efforts to control resources through global diplomacy even though they are rooted in exploitation. Postcolonial theory comes from reflections on Western colonial history, focusing on the unequal distribution of power in colonial and colonized relations, as well as the resulting cultural conflicts and reshaping of identities (Wang, 2025).

The myth level uses symbols in accordance with the concept of myth in Barthes' view, where signs used in popular culture often carry greater ideological meaning (Amelisa, Duku, & Yahya, 2024). Ryan Coogler as the author creates a myth that a nation that was once colonized is able to rise with its own strength without any dependence on the global system. Wakanda and Talokan are a depiction of resistance carried out through the power of culture and solidarity. Shuri, Ramonda, and Namora are not only seen as women who symbolize affection but also morality towards preserving heritage and leading conflicts. Drawing from Mulvey's (1975) feminist film theory, their roles challenge the traditional male gaze by repositioning Black women as central agents of action and knowledge. Unlike the early MCU films such as *Iron Man* or *Captain America* that pit white male heroes as global saviors, *Wakanda Forever* recenters the narrative African and Indigenous characters who abolish whatever geopolitical agency there was assigned to them.

a. Women's Emancipation is highlighted.

The strength of a woman is explored and honed, so that the stigma about women as weak creatures is slowly broken as Princess Shuri takes over the Black Panther throne and leads

Wakanda as a strong nation. This film voices the figure of a woman who has a role, becoming a subject of technology, not an object. However, the role played by women in their participation in the field of development is an act in order to raise the dignity and quality of women themselves. The involvement of women is an absolute requirement in the effort to realize a just development (Issalillah, Khayru, & Wisnujati, 2022).

b. Cultural Identity Value

Culture is an important element in forming the identity of a society (Sarumaha et al., 2024). A film with modern results cannot be separated from the hands of the author, but modern does not mean having to abandon previous cultures and traditions. This film combines a concept that modern does not forget the traditions that have long been attached between Wakanda and Talokan.

c. Innovation and Dynamism

Wakanda is inspired by a true story about African history full of slavery, chaos, and violence. By packaging a film that reflects Afro-futurism, inviting the audience to enjoy deeply related to technology, architecture, geography and history that can be found in Africa.

d. Resistance to Colonialism

A positive depiction in the film *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* can help reduce systematic discrimination against Africans and Mesoamericans. The film articulates a symbolic resistance to ongoing colonial legacies embedded in modern geopolitics. Beyond protests, Native peoples also resist colonial ecological violence through numerous initiatives and activities, including efforts to maintain traditional practices (Bacon, 2019).

The findings of this study reinforce Barthes' (1972) notion of myth as a means of ideological communication wherein visual symbols are used to convey resistance to colonialism. This corroborates the findings of Pasya and Rahayu (2024), indicating that popular visual media symbolically wield power over the construction of cultural and political narratives.

4. Conclusion

This study emphasizes the importance of cultural representation and resistance to colonialism influence the identity that is constructed through popular films. *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* employs visual signifiers and narrative structures and develops its characters in such a way that these three help the film import postcolonial ideology by concentrating on women's liberation, cultural sovereignty, and resistance to Western hegemony. Roland Barthes scholarly comprehension of text in this movie shows how myths serve as ideological devices normalizing resistance and an identity pride in the global media landscape. The most essential contribution this study makes to the understanding of global superhero films is their symbolic rendering of marginalized identities. These films do not merely provide entertainment; rather, they serve as instruments in the construction of socio-political consciousness among audiences. The present study confines itself to one film and is based on textual analysis that is subjective in nature. For further research, it is recommended to conduct comparative studies with films with similar themes, audience reception analysis to understand the diversity of interpretations or intersectional approaches that combine postcolonial and feminist perspectives. Research on audience responses from postcolonial countries can also enrich the discourse on identity, media, and power.

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