

Empowering Through Emotion: The Voice of Dissent against Gender Biasness as Delineated in the Film Adaptation of *The Queen of Katwe*

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ABSTRACT

Without literature, it is impractical to imagine the genesis of cinema. Cinema is considered a subset of literature and has long been one of the most fascinating academic subjects with a profound impact on human psychology. Film adaptations can take several forms, ranging from precise replicas of the original source to innovative story telling. Biographies have had a major influence on movies in recent years. These book-to-film adaptations share the real-life accounts of strong women who demanded positive change as well as the stories of trailblazing women who influenced history. This research paper unveils the brilliance of a modern masterpiece, *The Queen of Katwe*, a book that has gardened widespread acclaim and seamlessly transformed into the cinematic gem. The film uses a moving narrative to spread the message about gender equality, women's empowerment, and girls' education throughout the world. This study explores the film's narrative strategies, portrayal of major themes, and how well it works as an agent of social change.

Keywords: *Cinema, Literature, Adaptation, Women's Empowerment, Gender Equality, Girl's Education.*

Introduction

Art, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is any “creative activity resulting in the production of paintings, drawings, or sculpture” and includes in its folds “the various branches of creative activity, such as painting, music, literature, and dance.” This makes both literature and cinema two vibrant mediums for portraying artistic creativity. Cinema and literature are

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two distinct but equally extraordinary works of art that are bound together by an inherent connection that stretches back through time. Cinema is sometimes called the seventh art. After the turn of the 20th century, cinema surpassed literature as the most popular vehicle of expression during the 18 and 19th centuries. The Italian writer Canudo regarded films as “a fusion of three arts of time- music, theatre and literature.” (Phelps 89) The transmission of novel to film is regarded as a type of derivative or imitative work in modern culture.

In its most basic form, a film adaptation is the transfer of a work or story—in whole or in part—to a feature film. Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Adaptation* defines adaptation as “an extended, deliberate, announced revisitation of a particular work of art”. She further states that an adaptation “is framed in a context, a time and a place, a society and a culture” and is what drives “adapters to deal with the reality of reception by updating the time of the story in an attempt to find contemporary resonance for their audience” (142). For her, many filmmakers “take into account cultural changes that may have occurred over time” and each adaptation “always happen in a particular time and space in a society” (144). All the productions have been influenced by their historical background and are perceived differently by each distinct audience. We can assume that each adaptation is a reflection of life. Thus, their context influences all the films in one way or another.

Film adaptations of novels are not uncommon. The main goal of this undertaking is to make popular novels into films that will appeal to audiences. Numerous novels have been adapted for the big screen, and the degree of audience participation in these productions says a lot about the quality of the original material and the films that adapt it. Literature and films have been closely related ever since the beginning of cinema. Dudley Andrew opines that “the making of film out of an earlier text is virtually as old as the machinery of cinema itself” (29). The sophistication and refinement of design and content further developed as the crucial role of movement in cinema was understood. Geoffrey Wagner in his book *The Novel and the Cinema* (1975) “divides film adaptation into three modes: the transposition, in which the novel is reproduced on the screen with a minimum of interference; the commentary, where an original story is taken, altered in some respect; the analogy, which is a considerable departure for the sake of making another work of art.” (Phelps 89)

Literature provided early filmmakers with ready-made material that piqued the interest of viewers eager to witness a text translated into live action. Through the adaptation of classics,

film attracted an elite audience and established itself as a legitimate art form. Films, which allowed the characters to deliver dialogues and express themselves, amused the viewers. A wide range of literary genres have been adapted for the film in recent times including feminist novels, suspense novels, spy thrillers, horror fiction, and romantic novels.

Linda Serger mentions in her book *The Art of Adaptation: Turning Fact and Fiction into Film*

Novels, unlike films or plays, communicate all their information through words. The words express much more than story and events, images and character – they express ideas. Occasionally, one sees a novel that is purely a story – usually a short novel that’s not mainly known for its literary merits. However, all of the great novels and most of the good ones are not just telling a story but are pursuing an idea. They are about something significant, and this theme is just as important as the storyline, if not more so. The best films also have strong themes, but in films, the theme serves the story. It’s there to reinforce and dimensionalize the story, not to replace it. In a novel, the story often serves the theme. (14)

An adaptation is the process of recreating and presenting an existing work in a way which draws a new meaning. “Adaptation is, however, frequently a specific process involving the transition from one genre to another: novel into film; drama into musical; the dramatization of prose narrative and prose fiction; or the inverse process of making drama into prose narrative” (Sanders 19) In best adaptations, directors try to highlight the best aspects of the texts and raise new questions that give a reader or a viewer a fresh point of view on the book. The director expands the possibilities for the text by using the movie as an interpretive tool.

The world of contemporary cinema has seen a shift in media narratives in recent years due to the influence of feminism. E. Ann Kaplan in her book *Feminism & Film* writes:

“Film study is enhanced by feminist perspectives stance vis-à-vis women: it implies a concern with gender difference in general, but taking up the prospective of women specifically. Film is an important object for feminist practice, since creating art or entertainment with feminist perspectives may help to change entrenched male stances towards women that can be found in commercial or avant-garde entertainment and art. In so doing, feminist film study may change cultural attitudes towards women, and may deepen our understanding of meanings women have traditionally born in patriarchal cultures.” (17)

A notable way in which feminism has impacted contemporary film is through its emphasis on the value of authentic and diverse representation. Female characters who are clichéd and one-dimensional are no longer acceptable to women. They want representation that accurately captures the richness and variety of experiences faced by actual women. In addition to serving as role models for young girls and women, biographical films highlight the lives and accomplishments of remarkable women who have made a difference in a variety of disciplines. Preconceptions about women and their skills can be contested by these films. They encourage viewers to view women differently by showcasing them in leadership roles, influential roles, and challenging social norms. They provide a clearer comprehension of the difficulties women encountered and the historical accomplishments they made. These films have the power to stir up powerful feelings in viewers by chronicling the lives of actual women. They can arouse sentiments of gratitude, compassion, and optimism.

According to hooks, “. . . Cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people . . . I began to realize that my students learned more about race, sex, and class from movies than from all of the theoretical literature”. (3) *The Queen of Katwe* is a moving movie that touches people all over the world. Shattuck heralded *The Queen of Katwe* as a film of female empowerment. (9) It tells the story of Phiona Mutesi, a little girl from Katwe, Uganda’s slums who overcomes all difficulties to become a chess champion. Based on a true story, directed by Mira Nair, the movie inspires viewers to pursue their aspirations despite all obstacles with tenacity and grit. Adapted from an ESPN news story, *The Queen of Katwe* (2016) is set in the Kampala city slum of Katwe in Uganda. Filled with compassion and hope, the film depicts the extraordinary challenges faced by a 10-year-old Phiona over a four-year period as she strives to become an unlikely chess champion.

It may be argued that the phrase “empowerment” is a broad idea, thus in order to comprehend the process of empowerment in both the novel and the film, it is important to follow Phiona Mutesi’s character’s development in the novel. As it is offered in the Cambridge Dictionary, empowerment is defined as “the process of gaining freedom and power to do what you want or to control what happens to you”. Nonetheless, when it comes to female empowerment, it could be described as “the process of raising women’s access to certain opportunities that enable them fully to accomplish their faculties”. As a result of her gender or social status, Phiona had to reassert herself in society, which came with a number of difficulties.

Discussion

This research paper examines the life of Phiona Mutesi, whose story is brought to life on cinema and immortalised in the novel *The Queen of Katwe*. It is a powerful story that goes beyond a straightforward biography. The movie adaptation transforms into a potent voice of protest against gender inequality by incorporating a theme of female education and women's emancipation throughout the entire narrative. The study delves into the true story of Phiona Mutesi, which was initially published as a book and later made into a movie by Mira Nair. This paper also examines at how the movie challenges social norms and gives viewers the tools to advocate for change through the use of moving storytelling. The captivating true story of Disney's *Queen of Katwe* tells the story of a young girl who lives in the slum of Katwe in Kampala and whose life drastically transforms when she discovers the game of chess. The film begins with the quote by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf stating, "The size of your dreams must always exceed your current capacity to achieve them." The story revolves around the idea of setting ambitious objectives and striving to attain them despite difficulties. The way in which *Queen of Katwe* examines the intersections of opportunity, class, and gender is among its most captivating features. In addition to demonstrating Phiona's inner strength, her story highlights the structural injustices that marginalised communities and girls encounter globally. The movie questions established ideas of success and emphasises how crucial resources and education are to achieving an individual's full potential.

The film presents gender bias not as an abstract idea but as a real challenge that Phiona faces along the way. At such a young age, Phiona, who ought to have been in school, is made to sell maize. Tim Crothers in his book *The Queen of Katwe* writes:

"To be African is to be an underdog in the world. To be Ugandan is to be an underdog in Africa. To be from Katwe is to be an underdog in Uganda. To be from Katwe is to be an underdog in Uganda. To be a girl is to be an underdog in Katwe" (227)

Girls are expected to live up to certain social standards. Society has created a norm that only revolves around nurturing, subordination, and passivity for women. There is great poverty, extreme violence, inadequate sanitation, little to no education, and criminality in Katwe. On the perilous streets, people look for food, and because they can't afford rent, they frequently find it difficult to settle down for an extended period of time. In this harsh atmosphere, where hopes and dreams frequently seem impossible, life is a daily struggle for existence. This was

how Phiona lived. In an interview to ABC News, Phiona tells that after her father died, Phiona and her family were homeless and living below the poverty line in Katwe. “It’s one of the poorest in Uganda. Katwe is where, like, human waste is dumped. So, the life is so hard there, like, getting water is difficult and getting food is difficult.” Phiona’s family also struggled financially, which led her to do household chores and earn money to support her family. In Uganda it is said:

“Giving birth to a daughter is like giving birth to sugar. Female children are viewed by many Ugandans as assets. Dowry. When it comes time for marriage, they are worth a negotiable number of cattle, which explains why many Ugandan men see women as property.” (Crothers 223)

The film shows that the domestic tasks were the girl’s responsibility. Phiona’s mother, Harriet exemplifies this by assigning the household and financial duties on her. She made the decision for her family to sell cooked corn when she witnessed a child doing so.

“Beginning when Phiona was five years old, Harriet sent her daughter out alone into the slum each day carrying a saucepan of maize on her head. Phiona carried 20 corncobs and each was to be sold for 100 shillings, a supply worth 2,000 shillings, but a five-year-old girl rarely returned with that. There were some moments when you would come across some street children and they would beat you up and steal your maize and then they go...at times they would even take the money you have so far earned and you go home with nothing...Before her first run of maize each day, Phiona was expected to do much of the housework. She was also required to fetch water.” (Crothers 72-73)

Chess, which was considered a male-dominated game, was something that was next to impossible for a girl in Katwe. Phiona was born in the world where her family that was struggling with extreme poverty and where the quest of necessities took precedence over hopes for better future. There is little room for hope and progress is more of an occasional sight in a place like Katwe where people are struggling with crime, poor sanitation, and restricted access to education. Her mother remarks, “Girls help their mothers. They cook, they clean and look after their younger siblings.” This reminds us of the societal expectations placed on girls, which limit their opportunities to pursue future endeavours. Thinking of playing a game like chess in such circumstances was an alien thing for Phiona. “Among the most popular sports in the world, chess infiltrated almost everywhere else on earth before it discovered in sub-Saharan Africa. It needed 1,500 years to find Uganda.” (Crothers 122)

Phiona experiences internalised gender bias herself. She is first hesitant to take up chess since she isn’t sure if a girl like her can succeed at it. After seeing the boys playing, she makes a

remark, “Is chess for girls?” She has never heard of or seen chess before. Her own language doesn’t even have a word for it. She says, “I didn’t know whether it was a game because I had never seen it.” (Crothers 81) Phiona encounters opposition from outside forces. Her family is doubtful of her decisions, and chess is seen by the general public as a pointless activity for young girls. Her brother and the rest of the community doubt her commitment to chess, which reflects the general belief in society that the game is a “boy’s game”. Phiona faces obstacles as a result of these outside forces.

The emotional core of the movie plays a crucial role in conveying its message against gender discrimination. The film elicits empathy from the viewer by presenting Phiona’s internal problems and her struggle against society standards. The audience is able to connect with Phiona’s life journey and wants her to succeed by dismantling all the societal obstacles she faces. In a situation where society and family were at odds, Robert Katende, Phiona’s mentor and coach, offers a whole different perspective on gender roles. Not only he challenged the traditional norms, but he also encouraged her. Katende says she was a natural talent. “She has a special — I call it — a gene.” Katende says, “When she came to visit me, I knew she had an enduring kind of spirit. I knew the girl had courage.” (Crothers 86) He challenges the pre-conceived notion that chess is a male-dominated sport. Robert taught Phiona more than just the rules of chess; he taught her the value of strategy and critical thinking, which started to change the way she saw the world.

The film is a potent reminder of the transformative power of hope and the universal human longing for self-actualization. Her victories on the chessboard become symbolic victories over gender bias. In an interview to Penn Moviegoer, Director Mira acknowledges: “That’s the story of everyday life....that captures the joy and the dignity of everyday people, ordinary people living extraordinarily difficult situations but triumphing over them to achieve what they really are there for and that is the story of Africa that we never see on our screens... And for me this was exactly what I wanted to make...” Phiona’s journey from the streets of Katwe to the international chess stage is proof of the human spirit’s tenacity and the limitless potential that each person possesses, no matter what their circumstances are. The film is a global story where everyone can identify with Phiona. Lupita Nyong’o, who played the role of Phiona Mutesi in the film told ABC News “It’s a global story. It’s everyone, I feel, can identify with Phiona. You know, wherever you are, you know, there’s people all over the world who are living in conditions in which they feel there is no way out. And something like chess can be introduced

to you and it can just spark a hope and an excitement and a confidence to change the circumstances within which you were born.” There are many people all around the world who are still living in such circumstances who feel that they will never be able to come out of their nutshell as there is no way out. This movie is an inspiration for all such people. When you are introduced to something like chess, it might instil confidence, excitement, and hope to transform the conditions of your birth. Viewers are motivated to face their own challenges head-on with bravery and tenacity as they consider Phiona’s narrative because they see that, with enough persistence and faith, even the most unlikely goals are achievable.

The film is a powerful tool for women empowerment. By exhibiting Phiona’s character, it demonstrates that girls can excel in any field, irrespective of societal expectations. Phiona is an inspiration for many other girls. Her achievements motivate other girls and make them learn that girls should pursue their dreams and challenge the limitations. The theme of the movie goes beyond personal growth. It may encourage viewers to speak up for the causes of gender bias and should become advocates for change. The movie challenges viewers to question gender norms in their own communities and support projects that support girls’ education and equal chances by bringing gender bias to light. The movie stands for a commitment to telling stories that are true. When speaking on the plot of *The Queen of Katwe* to Pen Moviegoer, Director Mira acknowledges: “That’s the story of everyday life....that captures the joy and the dignity of everyday people, ordinary people living extraordinarily difficult situations but triumphing over them to achieve what they really are there for and that is the story of Africa that we never see on our screens... And for me this was exactly what I wanted to make...”

A major subject of *The Queen of Katwe* is the value of education, which is intertwined throughout Phiona’s chess journey story. In Uganda, Girls’ education is not considered a wise investment; some parents even deter from sending their daughters to school by the mere cost of a pen. Mutesi’s family could not afford for her to continue her education, therefore she left when she was approximately nine years old. The kids in Katende’s chess group were all struggling. In an interview with NPR, Robert Katende says, “Almost 97 percent of the children don’t go to school at all. When you’re in a survival situation, the parents or guardians have to choose whether to waste their money on education or to find a way to feed the family.” In order for Phiona to subsist before she learned to play chess, she had to assist her mother in selling corn. Education provides a way out of this vicious cycle and an opportunity at a better life. In the movie, education is portrayed as being more than just mastering chess moves. Phiona

attends school to acquire knowledge and skills that enable her to pursue chances outside of her current circumstances and help her make decisions. It demonstrates how education gives girls the knowledge, abilities, and self-assurance they need to face obstacles in life and make wise decisions about their futures. In addition to her chess prowess, Phiona demonstrates her growing capacity for self-expression, dream advocacy, and the ability to see beyond her current situation to a better future. She becomes empowered by education, challenging the limitations put upon her by her gender and socioeconomic status. The movie gently questions the idea that girls don't require as much schooling as boys do. When other girls witness Phiona excelling in chess while attending school, it dispels misconceptions about girls' capacity and encourages them to pursue education as well.

Chess became a metaphor for perseverance for Phiona; every move was a step towards a brighter future, and every game was played against the odds. As time goes on, Phiona keeps getting better. In 2009, she won the Uganda women's junior championship in Sudan, which she describes as a surreal event that she will never forget. "In the airplane I was smiling all the time because I could not believe that I was the one flying to another country," Phiona says,

"I felt like I was going to a new world... Her room at the hotel was no place she had ever seen in her life. She stared at the bed. She had never seen one like that. She could not believe she was the one who was going to sleep in that bed. She had never slept alone in a bed before...It was the first time she had seen air-conditioning. The first time she had ever seen flushing toilet. She flushed it over and over." "I could never have imagined this place I was visiting," Phiona says. "I felt like a queen." (Crothers 146)

Conclusion

Within Katwe, there was a consensus that big change was an impossible dream that only the wealthy could afford. But as Phiona became more and more involved in chess, the visions she had hardly dared to dream of started coming true. The more she succeeded at the game, the more her confidence and aspirations developed, gradually defying the restrictions imposed by her socio-economic surroundings. For Phiona, the game of chess had a transforming effect that also led to new ties in her family. Even though they were always fighting for their lives, Phiona's successes in chess gave them hope, which made them more optimistic than they had previously been. It was more than simply a game; it was a revolutionary force that progressively altered Phiona's course in life and affected everyone in her immediate vicinity. Her ability to purchase her mother a home was among the most significant benefits she received from playing chess. "When we got money in chess, we talked with my coach. We talked about it then and

the only best thing we can do is just to buy a house. We bought a piece of land. She was so excited during that time. So I think that's the best thing I like in chess and I've gained in chess right now," she told to ABC News. Mutesi claims that her goal is to win the game of chess and thereby improve her community's lot in life. When asked about her dreams, Phiona ponders the question for a long time and answers, "Okay, what I think is to study hard and perform well in chess in order to be able to get the money to lift up my family. That is where my dreams begin." (Crothers 227)

Mutesi's narrative must be brought to schools, communities, and other locations where young girls can read or watch it and be motivated to realize their ambitions remain worthy regardless of where they are from. The film *The Queen of Katwe* is widely regarded as a successful adaptation of the novel as it effectively constructs a captivating storyline centered on the life of protagonist, Phiona. The movie deserves an applause both for the story it communicates and the way it is communicated.

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