

The Dilemma and Game after Awakening—A Feminist Analysis of “The Queen's Gambit”

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Abstract: "The Queen's Gambit," a thought-provoking drama series directed by A. Scott Frank, explores women's empowerment through the lens of the protagonist Beth Harmon's personal journey and her struggle to make a mark in the male-dominated world of chess. Employing textual analysis and considering the broader context of social history and the evolution of feminism during the time period, this paper delves into the inherent contradictions and conflicts arising from patriarchal structures depicted in the series and the challenges faced by women in their pursuit of self-actualization. The study emphasizes the obstacles encountered by women striving to succeed in traditionally male-dominated professions within the confines of a patriarchal society.

1. Introduction

"The Queen's Gambit," a captivating drama series, is adapted from the novel penned by Walter S. Tevis. Set against the backdrop of the 1950s U.S.-Soviet Cold War, the narrative follows the protagonist, Beth Harmon, as she navigates her journey to becoming a professional chess player. Throughout her arduous career, she overcomes societal prejudices and triumphs against male chess professionals, ultimately securing the title of World Champion in the Soviet Union. Beth's journey is fraught with dramatic twists and illuminating revelations.

In light of these aspects, this study aims to examine the process and elements of women's empowerment within a patriarchal context by analyzing the protagonist's experiences. Furthermore, it seeks to explore the dilemmas and choices that women confront after their awakening to self-realization.

2. The Construction of Patriarchal Ideology on the Dilemma of Women's Social Participation

2.1 The Contradiction between Marginalizing Women and Centralizing Women

While the contradiction between marginalizing and centralizing women is not the primary focus of "The Queen's Gambit," the series is set in the 1860s United States, where the social and cultural milieu of the time is consistently reflected throughout the narrative. The plot contrasts stereotypical images of constrained female characters with those who embody genuine independence, ultimately highlighting the dichotomy between marginalized women as structured by society and the

empowered women conveyed by the series' values and narrative.

During the high school years of the protagonist, Beth Harmon, the episode delves into the depiction of a group of adolescent girls, led by Margaret, who are influenced by popular culture. They are captivated by trendy music and dance, frequent lavish department stores, and dress in a sophisticated manner, all while achieving less than impressive academic results. Under the sway of pop culture and patriarchal values, these mainstream high school girls form a close-knit circle. The trajectory of their lives, led by Margaret, stands in stark contrast to Beth's later experiences. In the series' sixth episode, the adult Beth and Margaret reunite in a department store. Margaret has become a housewife, pushing a stroller and carrying a wine-filled handbag for her husband, while Beth continues to pursue her career, appearing independent and elegant. The irony lies in the fact that the once marginalized become central, while the previously central figures become marginalized.

Liberal feminism posits that for women to achieve emancipation, they must first secure employment to alleviate economic dependence. Subsequently, they should attain mental and spiritual awakening, eventually fostering societal change by promoting gender equality. A crucial aspect of this process is the mental emancipation of women: they should not only strive for personal development, but also resist the covert infiltration and assault of male-centric discourse throughout society and history. Consequently, women can avoid the perilous situation of self-objectification and unwittingly becoming accomplices to the patriarchy. In high school, Margaret invites Beth to a party at her home. The conversations among the young girls at the event are rife with consumerism and hedonism, revealing how industrialized products within a capitalist framework gradually erode individuals' capacity for critical thinking—especially for women in vulnerable positions. The tragedy of Margaret's fate is foreshadowed in this episode, as an invisible yet potent ideology hijacks her consciousness and behavior, turning her into a symbol of male authority within her own worldview. This is, without a doubt, a tragedy of the era.

The female characters, exemplified by Margaret in the series, failed to resist the encroachment of hedonism and consumerism driven by capital. Consequently, they became stagnant during a crucial stage in life when they had the opportunity for intellectual awakening. In the long run, this damage is immense, and the exploitation of patriarchy, combined with the structural oppression of capitalism, cannot be rectified within Margaret's realm of discourse. It is precisely because Beth possesses the power of knowledge that she is able to make choices and observations on this issue. This is also one of the reasons why women, represented by her, can be included in the central discussion category.

2.2 The Contradiction between Consuming Women and Refusing to be Attached

The objectification of women has long been driven by two forces: the patriarchal gaze and self-objectification. In the drama series, Beth Harmon becomes the Kentucky State Chess Champion while still in high school, and her name begins appearing in chess magazines. After Beth wins the Cincinnati tournament, a magazine approaches Mrs. Emma about conducting an interview with Beth. Beth takes the opportunity seriously, hoping to articulate her understanding of chess. However, she is disappointed when the reporter, after asking a few questions about chess, shifts the focus of the interview to her gender and appearance, as if the attention she receives is based on her femininity and looks rather than her chess skills and talent. This is a clear example of the societal objectification of women in the narrative.

The prevalence of female objectification stems from the external perception of women as objects. This capital-driven objectification of women by society at large is exemplified by the magazine's exploitation of Beth's female identity for promotional and marketing purposes, which contradicts

the publication's focus on chess but caters to the expectations of its readership. Beth's achievements are overshadowed by a male chess player's inadvertent error in the professional realm. As a result of her gender, all of Beth's accomplishments are deliberately disregarded.

The propensity for women's objectification also arises from their self-objectification. As people express outrage over the past "denaturalization" and moral alienation of female bodies while celebrating the liberation of modern female bodies, history subtly glides toward another paradox. Once again, the "body" we acclaim departs from "naturalness," and alienation deepens further, ultimately driving female objectification to its zenith - the consumption of one's own body.^[1] The journalist interviewing Beth is a woman who also occupies a disadvantaged position in terms of gender, but instead of offering support to Beth, she succumbs to societal prejudices and covertly oppresses her. This trend of female self-objectification is even more destructive than exploitation from societal structures, signifying that male dominance has permeated the unconscious realm of social norms. Consequently, several women have become unwitting accomplices of patriarchy, while Beth represents those who refuse to conform to norms shaped by male authority.

Beth is able to achieve financial independence not only through the prize money from chess tournaments but also because the seeds of spiritual independence have taken root within her. In her interactions with male opponents, Beth maintains an autonomous and, at times, aggressive stance, effectively nullifying any unnecessary turbulence arising from gender disparities. However, in reality, it is perplexing to see people continue to perpetuate this myth: the persistent divide between academic research and radicalism.^[2]

2.3 The Contradiction between Binding Family and Unbinding

For women, the harm caused by familial constraints extends beyond material limitations and into the realm of emotional distress. In the context of the drama, Beth becomes an orphan due to a car accident, losing her biological mother and becoming estranged from her biological father who forms a new family. Consequently, Beth is both fortuitously and regrettably granted the opportunity to reevaluate patriarchy upon her adoption. This scrutiny persists from the departure of her adoptive father, Whitley, to the death of her adoptive mother, Emma. Nonetheless, Beth remains unable to escape the confines of a patriarchal household, and Whitley's defiance nearly inflicts a fatal blow upon her. The treachery of her family precipitates her rapid decline. Evidently, although her original family ceases to exist, Beth's adoptive father continues to impose patriarchal control over her. He leverages his authority to exploit both Beth's material and emotional well-being, maintaining an inescapable bond.

In fact, Emma, the adoptive mother, epitomizes the image of a woman constrained by her family. As a full-time homemaker, she loses her financial resources when her husband, Whitley, abandons the family, rendering her financially dependent—a symbol of women's material subjugation under male hegemony. Following Whitley's departure, Emma succumbs to despair, relying on psychotropic drugs to cope and losing her emotional autonomy. The representation of wives may vary, but their enduring status as objects of male discourse and their vulnerability against a backdrop of male rationality remain constant.^[3]

Fortuitously, despite the societal constraints of her time, Emma possesses sufficient knowledge and wisdom to steadfastly support Beth amidst controversies and unwarranted scrutiny regarding her gender. She encourages Beth to become a professional chess player in a male-dominated field. Although deeply affected by male discourse, Emma serves as a source of inspiration for Beth to break free from familial shackles while simultaneously providing her with a sense of belonging. Emma's image contrasts with that of the female reporter who, also subject to social and historical constraints, consistently aids Beth's awakening. Emma promotes a sense of familial warmth rather

than bondage, while the female reporter unwittingly becomes an accomplice to patriarchal discourse, furthering her own self-objectification.

Indeed, financial independence is a crucial factor in liberating oneself from familial ties. Dependency on others for financial support may lead one down a path similar to Emma's, where the pursuit of reliance results in a loss of agency. When Whitley demands an exorbitant price for the house, Beth's financial autonomy and economic freedom enable her to retain control over her own decisions. Simultaneously, she rejects further disruption of the family by patriarchy, effectively lifting the material constraints imposed by her family.

3. The Awakening of Female Consciousness and the Elimination of Occupational Gender Bias

3.1 Removing Monopoly - Female Role Participation in Male Careers

In the 1960s United States, the role of the housewife was widely accepted as a primary occupation for women. This was due to the fact that equal pay for equal work had not yet been established, and a single income during that era was often sufficient to support a family. As a result, many women opted to leave their jobs and dedicate themselves to their families. Feminist scholars argue that the disadvantaged position of women in the labor market is a consequence of patriarchy, which enforces the social division of labor between genders. This patriarchal system assigns household chores and childcare as women's responsibilities while designating the role of financial provider to men.

This patriarchal mindset and structure compel women to seek career positions that can accommodate their familial obligations, whereas men, for economic reasons, are driven to pursue high-income professions. ^[4]For instance, the male-dominated world of professional chess, as portrayed in "The Queen's Gambit," exemplifies how people's perceptions of certain occupations are unconsciously gender-biased. The implicit assumption is that women should not pursue such professions, or that they should instead focus solely on their families and raising children, leaving mentally demanding work to their male counterparts.

The success of Beth Harmon's character largely stems from her ability to defy the societal constraints placed upon women during that time, crafting a contemporary feminist myth through the transcendent medium of television. This myth dismantles the gender segregation within the realm of professional chess, integrating women into the narrative of the profession, rather than merely utilizing a female symbol as the protagonist. The biases and social pressures that Beth encounters from her male counterparts throughout her career serve as a microcosm of the challenges faced by women of that era, and even today, as they enter the workforce. The stark contradictions of the time and the sensitive nature of career choices allow the narrative, even if not explicitly emphasized, to inadvertently convey relevant ideologies through the language of film and television.

As underscored by Marxist feminism, gender theories should serve as a focal point for shifting the discussion of women's oppression from private ownership and economic foundations to the patriarchal system. ^[5] The prerequisite for equal pay for equal work is that women have the opportunity to participate in various occupations. However, when occupational monopolies persist even after accounting for certain objective physiological factors, gender segregation within the capitalist social structure will continue to exist. As a result, women will be consistently exploited and oppressed, making it difficult to achieve the economic foundation of equal pay for equal work, as emphasized by socialist feminism, in the absence of gender representation in some professions.

3.2 Removing Labels - Dissolving Stereotypes and Professional Sexism

Various stereotypes of female leads contribute to occupational gender discrimination. Beth Harmon, a remarkable and beautiful female figure, achieves an extraordinary career through her intellect and prowess. As a reporter inquires during an interview, the attention of society often shifts

from a woman's career trajectory to her appearance, promoting the belief that a woman's appearance aids career development is determined by men. This commodification of women is pervasive in society, as the general public tends to construct this stereotype of professional women.

In "The Queen's Gambit," such discussions arise before Beth attains significant accomplishments. This stems from both the overarching constraints of society and historical context, as well as the sexist chauvinism of male chess players who, after losing to Beth, feel their male dignity has been violated. It is only after Beth secures victories in the Kentucky State Championship and the Cincinnati Championship, based on her innate talent, that the conversation shifts from her being a woman to her being a skilled chess player. The ongoing negotiation between women's rights and men's rights is, in fact, a process of clashing and blending gender cultures. The awakening of feminist consciousness is not for women to acquire any privileges, but to establish relative equity between the sexes, allowing women to receive due respect in a male-dominated society and fostering a harmonious coexistence of "gender culture." [6]

Hence, to realize the gender equality values advocated by liberal feminism, we must effect endogenous changes in the perceptions held by those entrenched in patriarchal mindsets. Achieving success through merit, rather than relying on physical appearance, is paramount in garnering genuine respect in one's career, instead of merely banking on societal leniency. To eradicate bias in various professions, it is essential to dismantle consumerist labels, such as beauty, which cater to the male gaze, thereby broadening avenues for unbiased opportunities.

4. The Combined Force Prompting Female Self-Identity and External Value Identification

4.1 The Internal Force—Breaking the Shackles of Patriarchal Ideology

People have become accustomed to the objectification and symbolization of women in various visual images. As a result, mainstream films not only cater to the public but also continually reinforce the male gaze's disciplinary and desirous nature directed at women. The patriarchal ideology is solidified during the viewing process. [7] In the drama, Beth consistently struggles with drug and alcohol abuse. On the surface, she relies on sedatives to enhance her mental prowess, defeating formidable opponents through the use of medication, and depends on alcohol to combat her adoptive father's betrayal and the failure of competition, seeking emotional support. However, sedatives are not stimulants, and in reality, they are unlikely to improve an athlete's performance, potentially even causing adverse side effects. Emma, the adoptive mother, embodies a character constrained by patriarchal ideology. She attempts to alleviate her grief through alcohol and sedatives after Mr. Wheatley abandons his family. In the series, the green pills symbolize a placebo for women oppressed by patriarchal ideology, consuming drugs to mitigate their subjugation and exploitation. Consequently, the small glass bottle containing the green pills serves as a symbolic representation of patriarchal bondage that accompanies Beth for nearly half of her youth. Each time Beth takes the medication, she undergoes a submissive effect within the power discipline mechanism formed between herself and the subject, culminating in a transformation toward bodily obedience and receiving the patriarchal gaze. [8]

Consequently, after repeatedly defeating formidable opponents with the aid of medication, Beth's career trajectory became deeply entrenched within the male discourse. These observations emphasize the influence of the symbolic patriarchal discourse underlying the use of sedatives. The alarming aspect of this rule is that it not only manifests in family life but also directly impacts Beth's career, involving psychoanalysis and the unconscious. Gender discrimination discourse, as a concept and attitude deviating from objective facts, is an integral part of cultural ideology, closely linked to social culture, and reflects the unequal status between men and women. The oppression women face stems from a male-centered discourse.

The male-dominated group controls discourse and generates symbols, including those pertaining to women. [9] Upon taking the pill, Beth may have considered it merely as drug dependence;

however, she entirely overlooked the structure of male discourse behind it. Following Mr. Whitley's betrayal of Beth, the latent power of this male discourse exhibited its purportedly immense destructive force. Beth found herself in a seemingly hopeless addiction to drugs and alcohol, with the overwhelming dependence consuming her personality and spirit.

Throughout Beth's quest to liberate herself from the constraints of male dominance, the support from her friend Jolene, whom she met at the orphanage, and her custodian, Mr. Shaibel, proves to be invaluable. Jolene provides Beth with much-needed emotional support during her darkest moments, while Shaibel, maintaining a discreet watch over her even after her departure, preserves all articles concerning her accomplishments, thereby enabling Beth to discover the profound significance of chess. The transformation of the patriarchal system is not contingent upon a specific mode of discourse; rather, it necessitates the adoption of novel leadership approaches and cognitive paradigms. ^[10] On the eve of the climactic match against Borgov in the Soviet Union, it was these cherished memories that endowed Beth with the mental fortitude to surmount her inner strife, ultimately liberating her from the clutches of substance addiction. In the pivotal moment when she discarded the pills, symbolically casting off the fetters of patriarchy, Beth achieved the full realization of her independent persona. Her prodigious chess prowess no longer necessitated the covert validation of the patriarchal system, empowering her to rely solely on her own abilities as she ascended to the pinnacle of competitive chess.

4.2 The External Force -Active Competition for Discourse Power

Based on their gender identity and multiple social roles, women often experience a heightened sense of insecurity and vulnerability in their work and personal lives.^[11] However, during the Soviet competition, Beth defied this notion and garnered significant attention from the Soviet public. This was due in part to the immense popularity of chess in the Soviet Union, which was also a dominant global force in the sport. Furthermore, spectators were astonished by Beth's ability, as a female chess player, to compete and triumph against renowned chess masters from various countries at the highest level.

Each time Beth vanquished her opponents and exited the competition venue, she was met with enthusiastic applause from the crowd. Beth emerged as a heroic figure in the Soviet Union, with her admirers transcending the ideological divide between the United States and the Soviet Union at the time. She came to symbolize women's independence and success, embodying a form of discursive empowerment. Empowerment refers to the process of challenging and transforming unequal power dynamics to achieve greater equality for women.^[12] It is viewed as a pragmatic approach to fostering gender awareness and enhancing the societal status of women.

This text underscores the values championed by liberal feminism, emphasizing the immeasurable importance of seizing control over the ideological discourse, even when economic structures and patriarchal systems remain challenging to alter.

During an interview with a reporter, Beth expressed her gratitude to Mr. Shaibel in front of the audience. While the portrayal of women in commercial films has evolved considerably, it remains difficult for women, who have long been the subject of gaze and admiration, to fully break free from these stereotypes and labels for the time being.^[13] On this occasion, however, her voice was finally heard by the media, and people's attention shifted beyond her gender and appearance, genuinely listening to her perspectives.

We recognize that women are navigating and expanding their space amidst the intersections of sports and power, male chauvinism and feminism, insufficient empowerment, and the alienation of empowerment. At times, they are compelled to participate in sports, while at other times, they tenaciously challenge and break through taboos. Women's identity struggles and the lack of female discourse surface in the realm of sports, which often perpetuates masculinity.^[14] This demonstrates that only when oppressed women attain a voice through their own awakening can labels and biases be removed, allowing public resources to be no longer dominated by capital and ensuring that the

needs of vulnerable groups are genuinely and transparently addressed.

5. Conclusions

The triumph of one's physical nature cannot supersede the triumph of one's gender identity. As Beth Harmon ascended to the world number one rank as a female professional chess player by defeating Borgov, the dismantling of patriarchal dominance held far greater significance than the victory of physical nature. This achievement shattered two prevailing norms: the authority of older generations over younger ones within the system, and the dominance of men over women, which lies at the core of men's control of gender discourse. "The Queen's Gambit" thus constructs a transcendent paradigm that provides a framework for the development of female roles and the implementation of feminist principles. As society and history progress, an increasing variety of cultures will demand such narratives and characters. Contemporary feminist films should not only depict diverse female figures that embody female empowerment but also elucidate the principles guiding women's growth and perseverance within the "gaze" of others throughout the narrative process.^[15] The constraints imposed by patriarchy render the journey of women's social participation fraught with challenges, representing the primary dilemma faced by women following their awakening. Consequently, the multidimensional structure and balance of gender discourse is of paramount importance to feminism in shaping ideal gender relations^[16].

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