

PROTESTING AGAINST MALE DOMINATED WORLD OF CHESS IN SCOTT FRANK'S *THE QUEEN'S GAMBIT* (2020)

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Abstrak

Memprotes Terhadap Dunia Catur yang Didominasi Pria Dalam *The Queen's Gambit* (2020) karya Scott Frank. Studi ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana wanita menolak dominasi pria dalam catur dengan melihat perkembangan karakter Beth Harmon sebagai sosok netral gender dalam *The Queen's Gambit* karya Scott Frank (2020). Penelitian mengidentifikasi penanda protes ini melalui kecerdasan Beth, menunjukkan bagaimana ceritanya berfokus pada keterampilan teknis daripada hambatan sosial, dan menjelaskan bagaimana pemikiran strategis bertindak sebagai ruang netral untuk persaingan. Menggunakan kerangka studi sastra kualitatif dan analisis konten, studi ini meneliti dialog dan adegan melalui teori feminis. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa protes Beth bekerja dalam tiga cara. Pertama, dia memecah androsentrisme dengan membuktikan keahliannya di papan tulis alih-alih berdebat. Kedua, dia menentang polarisasi gender dengan menyeimbangkan dorongan kuatnya untuk menang dengan mode dan empati. Ketiga, dia menghancurkan esensialisme biologis dengan menuntut untuk bermain di bagian "Terbuka" dan menolak peran domestik tradisional. Dengan mengalahkan pemain pria top dan membeli rumahnya sendiri, Beth berubah dari orang luar gender menjadi saingan yang setara. Pada akhirnya, penelitian ini membuktikan bahwa pemberdayaan wanita sejati berasal dari kemampuan pribadi yang tak terbantahkan dan pikiran yang tajam, menunjukkan bahwa kompetensi lebih penting daripada seks biologis. Untuk program bahasa Inggris, film ini bekerja dengan baik untuk mengajarkan siswa bagaimana karakter menggunakan bahasa dalam masyarakat, sambil membuktikan bahwa cerita dapat menginspirasi perubahan sosial dengan menunjukkan bahwa prestasi melebihi jenis kelamin.

Kata Kunci: catur, dominasi laki laki, protes.

Abstract

Protesting Against Male Dominated World Of Chess In Scott Frank's The Queen's Gambit (2020) This study explores how women resist male dominance in chess by looking at Beth Harmon's character development as a gender-neutral figure in Scott Frank's *The Queen's Gambit* (2020). The research identifies the markers of this protest through Beth's intelligence, shows how the story focuses on technical skills rather than social barriers, and explains how strategic thinking acts as a neutral space for competition. Using a qualitative literary study framework and content analysis, the study examines dialogues and scenes through feminist theory. The findings show that Beth's protest works in three ways. First, she breaks down androcentrism by proving her skills on the board instead of arguing. Second, she defies gender polarization by balancing her strong drive to win with fashion and empathy. Third, she shatters biological essentialism by demanding to play in the "Open" section and rejecting traditional domestic roles. By beating top male players and buying her own house, Beth changes from a gendered outsider into an equal rival.

Ultimately, this research proves that real female empowerment comes from undeniable personal ability and a sharp mind, showing that competence matters more than biological sex. For English programs, this film works well to teach students how characters use language in society, while proving that stories can inspire social change by showing that merit outweighs gender.

Keywords: chess, male dominated, protest.

1. INTRODUCTION

In daily life, unwritten rules regarding the roles of men and women remain a persistent issue that deeply restricts society. This problem is clearly visible in how we judge human emotions and divide household responsibilities from an early age. Society often assumes that men who cry or show sadness are weak, whereas it is seen as completely normal for women to express their emotions. This unfair judgment puts heavy psychological pressure on men, who are constantly forced to look strong under any circumstance. Inside the home, the division of labor is equally unbalanced. Fathers are strictly expected to earn money outside, while mothers are frequently confined to cooking and cleaning the house. In reality, managing a household should be a shared responsibility done together through fair cooperation. Unfortunately, this unfair practice is passed down to the next generation. Young girls are often burdened with chores to help their mothers at home, while young boys are given the freedom to play outside and naturally develop their personal skills. These social restrictions on behavior and emotional expression prevent many individuals from reaching their true potential. Consequently, this dynamic allows men to continuously dominate important positions in public sectors, while women are pushed aside and viewed as incapable of competing in fields that require strategic thinking and intense competition. This real-world imbalance serves as the foundation for exploring how gender expectations limit human growth.

These real-world social issues are directly challenged by director Scott Frank in the television series *The Queen's Gambit* (2020). The director utilizes the male-dominated world of chess as a direct reflection of these strict gender rules found in everyday life. To examine how this narrative protest is delivered, this study applies three analytical viewpoints from Sandra Bem's gender theory: androcentrism, gender polarization, and biological essentialism. First, through the lens of androcentrism, the series protests the idea that male experiences serve as the universal standard for humanity. When the female protagonist, Beth Harmon, enters the chess community, she is immediately treated as an outsider who does not belong. Second, through gender polarization, the show criticizes how society divides traits by assigning logic solely to men and emotion to women. The director reverses this expectation by portraying Beth as a highly logical thinker, while the male chess players around her freely openly weep or express deep sorrow upon losing. Third, through biological essentialism, the series fights against the false excuse that physical differences naturally limit a woman's capability. By showing Beth Harmon succeeding in chess without being trapped by domestic expectations, the director proves that women's limitations are not biological facts, but rather artificial barriers built by an unfair society. Analysing this cinematic protest helps us understand how media can deconstruct long-standing social biases.

Within the academic discourse surrounding gender representation in media, several recent studies have extensively analysed the television series *The Queen's Gambit* (2020) from various critical perspectives. A large portion of prior literature relies on feminist and cultural frameworks to understand

the protagonist, Beth Harmon. For instance, Muhammad (2022) utilizes a sociological approach alongside traditional sexism theories to examine the structural oppression faced by the main character, while Dewi and Pratama (2023) apply linguistic analysis through Sara Mills' discourse framework to investigate sexist dialogue within the narrative. From a cinematic standpoint, Menéndez-Menéndez and Fernández-Morales (2023) offer a feminist film critique arguing that the portrayal of female genius in the series often remains trapped within a male-centric gaze. Beyond core feminism, other scholars have explored alternative dimensions of the show. Rucka (2021) examines the visual aesthetics and cultural codes that illustrate the contrast between femininity and the hyper-masculine chess community. From a structuralist viewpoint, Chrisfenianti (2023) tracks Beth's internal and external character growth arcs through narrative conflict. Furthermore, Li and Hou (2023) adopt a Marxist Feminist perspective to provide a systemic critique of the professional barriers women face under patriarchal hegemony. Looking at audience impact, Shahid and Zehra (2024) evaluate how the show altered the recreational lifestyles and behavioral patterns of its viewers. Finally, Putri, Suryadi, Widyatwati, and Rinjani (2025) use psychological critique based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs to map individual self-actualization. Together, these existing studies provide a rich foundation regarding how the series interacts with gender, character development, and cultural reception.

Despite the valuable insights offered by these prior evaluations, current studies present significant gaps that leave the existing analysis incomplete. The primary drawback of previous feminist and sociological analyses, such as those conducted by Muhammad (2022) and Li and Hou (2023), is their tendency to focus almost entirely on societal barriers, thereby framing the female protagonist primarily as a helpless observer of gender inequality or discrimination. Similarly, the psychological and linguistic explorations by Wahyudin (2025) and Dewi and Pratama (2023) remain isolated within internal thoughts and wording choices, rather than addressing actual social rebellion. These approaches fail to capture the active agency and clever resistance displayed by the protagonist. Furthermore, media-centric studies like Rucka (2021) and audience analyses like Shahid and Zehra (2024) prioritize aesthetic reception over the social message of the show. Most importantly, none of the current research utilizes Sandra Bem's comprehensive "Three Lenses of Gender" framework androcentrism, gender polarization, and biological essentialism to analyze the narrative. By failing to apply this specific tool, previous studies overlook how the series intentionally dismantles deep-seated societal assumptions, such as the restriction of male emotional expression, the unequal division of domestic labor, and the social confinement of young girls. Previous scholars merely identify the presence of patriarchy within the chess world rather than breaking down the active methods used to challenge it. This lack of focus on real, planned protest against masculine supremacy represents the core limitation of modern literature on the series.

The mismatch between prior academic literature and the actual issues found in society creates a significant analytical gap that requires a clear theoretical explanation. Although existing literature on *The Queen's Gambit* has extensively explored feminist topics, these studies predominantly position Beth Harmon as a helpless outsider or victim trapped within patriarchal structures. Previous research has largely been confined to identifying forms of discrimination and the negative psychological impacts on the protagonist, often resulting in a narrative of passivity where she simply accepts her situation. However, this narrow focus fails to reflect the current problems embedded in everyday life, where society still forces men to hide their sadness, confines mothers to domestic cooking, and limits the freedom of young girls. Existing approaches in cultural studies, structuralism, and psychoanalysis have focused on character development or audience reception, completely failing to address the character's

active agency against these real-world stereotypes. This study directly addresses this significant research gap by incorporating Sandra Bem's "Three Lenses of Gender" androcentrism, gender polarization, and biological essentialism to offer a deeper socio-political critique. The novelty lies in shifting the focus from Beth as a helpless observer to an active subject with genuine strength to fight back. This research moves beyond merely cataloging discrimination; it deconstructs how Beth consciously employs strategies of real protest and intellectual supremacy as tools to dismantle masculine dominance in the chess world. This theoretical shift is vital as it reclaims the narrative from one of simple female survival to one of actual challenge and transformation. By bridging the series' internal rebellion with the everyday gender struggles faced by modern families, this analysis explains how visual media serves as a deliberate tool to challenge rigid cultural boundaries.

Based on the limitations identified in prior literature, this study formulates three primary research questions to guide the investigation: what are the indicators of protest against the male-dominated chess world in *The Queen's Gambit*, how is this protest reflected within the narrative, and why is this resistance addressed in the series? In alignment with these questions, the research objectives seek to identify Beth Harmon's intellectual supremacy as the primary marker of resistance, describe how the director utilizes her technical competence to overturn masculine dominance, and uncover why strategic intelligence serves as a neutral battlefield where all individuals stand as equals. The core novelty of this research lies in shifting the academic focus from viewing Beth as a helpless observer to recognizing her as an active subject with genuine strength to fight back. This study moves beyond merely cataloging discrimination; it deconstructs how Beth consciously employs strategies of real protest and intellect as tools to dismantle masculine supremacy. This shift is vital as it reclaims the story from one of simple female survival to one of actual challenge and transformation. Beyond its theoretical novelty, the significance of this research offers practical benefits for academic and social fields. The findings demonstrate that this film is highly suitable as a learning tool for university students in English Education or English Literature programs, particularly within subjects like Critical Reading, Sociolinguistics, or Introduction to Literature. Furthermore, this study implies that cinematic storytelling acts as a bridge to inspire real social change by teaching the public that merit and brainpower are far more important than gender. Ultimately, the series provides a valuable lesson that the most effective way to challenge rigid social expectations and earn respect is by proving one's value through actual expertise, dedication, and extraordinary results.

2. METHOD

This study employs a documentation method through textual observation of the Netflix limited series, *The Queen's Gambit*, which serves as the primary data source. Data collection involves a comprehensive and intensive viewing of all episodes, followed by the systematic recording of relevant analytical units, including dialogue excerpts, narrative arcs, character actions, and key visual elements that align with the research objectives.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1. Protesting androcentrism

The findings in this chapter first focus on androcentrism, presenting the major results regarding the action of protest against the male-dominated chess world based on the first lens of Sandra Bem's theory.

Protest takes place at the orphanage, where Mr. Shaibel attempts to dismiss a woman's capability through the dialogue "Girls do not play chess," which is met with a direct proof of understanding the game rules through the following dialogue:

Mr Shaibel : Girls do not play chess.

Beth : That one moves up and down, or back and forth, all the way, if there's space to move in. But that one can only go up. That tall one can go any way it wants.

Mr Shaibel : And this one?

Beth : On the diagonals. One square diagonal, plus one square straight.

Mr Shaibel : Let's play a game.

Protest is a rejection of the chess tournament system that attempts to isolate female players into a separate group, delivered through a direct question that rejects that separation rule:

Beth : Why do they put the girls together?

Annette : They're not supposed to. But, if you win, they move you up.

A protest against androcentrism occurs in an elevator when Borgov's associates openly dismiss Beth in Russian, wrongly assuming she cannot understand them. They attempt to belittle her skill by labelling her emotions as a trait "typical of all women," using a biased trope to diminish her intellectual standing. However, Borgov directly shuts down this narrative by firmly stating, "She's like us," acknowledging that her will to win is identical to their own. This response serves as a powerful protest because it forces the male elite to stop viewing Beth as a gendered anomaly and start seeing her as a peer. Ultimately, through Borgov's words, the series demonstrates that Beth has successfully dismantled the androcentric standards that previously excluded women from the status of a true competitor.

Russian man : When she blunders, she gets angry, and can be dangerous. Like all women.

Borgov : She's like us. Losing is not an option for her. (in Russian)

3.2. Protesting Gender Polarization

Regarding the lens of gender polarization, Beth removes the barrier between beauty and intelligence. Although Cleo claims that Beth is "too smart" to be a model, Beth rejects this idea and continues to express her femininity. At Benny's house, she defeats three men simultaneously in chess while still desiring to dress elegantly. This highlights a protest against the social expectation that intelligent women must be dull or uninterested.

Beth : Modelling sounds pretty exciting to me. Plus, I imagine they give you a lot of free clothes.

Cleo : Ah, you like nice clothes, huh?

Beth : I do.

Cleo : You could never be a model. You are pretty enough, but you are much too smart. Models are empty creatures.

Regarding the lens of gender polarization, Beth removes the division of roles that views men as disciplined and women as emotional by showing strong mental discipline. She proves that she has

learned from her past mistakes by exercising restraint and staying focused. Although she admits her fear to Jolene, she chooses to face it in a tough chess competition rather than remaining safe at home, as shown in the following dialogue:

Beth : I'm supposed to go to Russia at the end of the year. I'm afraid.

Jolene : Then don't go.

Beth : I have to go. If I don't, there's nothing for me to do. I'll just drink.

Jolene : Well, looks like you do that anyway.

Beth : I need to quit the wine, and the pills, and... Clean this place up. That'd be a good place to start.

The director uses this encounter between Beth and her former classmate to protest gender polarization by contrasting two very different life paths for women. While her friend embodies the traditional role of a housewife and mother, Beth represents a life of independence and professional success in the public arena. This scene serves as a protest against the rigid social expectation that a woman's only path to happiness is through marriage and domestic life. By showing her friend's look of surprise and admiration, the series implies that Beth has successfully escaped the common social traps of her era. Ultimately, this moment proves that a woman can forge her own journey based on her own talents rather than following a script written by society.

Picture 1. Beth and her friend



3.3 Protesting Biological Essentialism

Regarding biological essentialism, Beth rejects the assumption that a woman naturally likes dolls or is inferior to a man. Her act of throwing away the doll gifted by Mr. Ganz serves as a protest against the idea that biology dictates a girl's interests. Instead of accepting traditional roles, Beth chooses to focus on chess.

Picture 1. Beth Discards the Doll in the Trash Can



The director uses this scene to protest biological essentialism by showing Beth's refusal to accept the beginners' section. When the committee assumes she belongs there, Beth firmly demands to compete in the Open category. This action proves that strategic capacity is a result of a trained mind and independent intelligence, rather than biological destiny. Ultimately, the series asserts that intellectual merit should be judged objectively, completely free from gender-based limitations.

Tournament Committee : We don't have a women's section. I'll put you in beginners.

Beth : I'm not a beginner. Is it against any rule for me to be in the Open? Tournament Committee : Not exactly.

Beth : Put me in the Open.

Beth's victory over Borgov serves as a definitive protest against the theory that men naturally possess superior logical and strategic minds. By defeating the world champion in his own country, she shatters the myth that women are biologically incapable of matching the mental endurance required for elite chess. The initial assumption that her opponents would secure an "easy win" because she is a woman is proven entirely wrong by her absolute achievement. This moment demonstrates that excellence in chess is a product of practice and intelligence rather than male hormones or biological destiny. Ultimately, the series uses this triumph to prove that the human mind can transcend any gender-based limitations imposed by society.

Picture 1. Beth and Borgov



3.4 Discussion

3.4.1 Deconstructing the Director's Protest through the Three Lenses of

Gender

This section explains the narrative and thematic analysis of *The Queen's Gambit* from Episode 1 to Episode 7. By applying Sandra Bem's "Three Lenses of Gender," this study shows the director's deliberate protest against the male-dominated chess world. Instead of depicting Beth Harmon as a passive victim, the director highlights her intellect as a primary tool against gender inequality. Through the lens of androcentrism, the chess world treats males as the default standard, rendering Beth an anomaly since Episode 1; however, the director protests this by showing Beth forcing the male players to acknowledge her genius, expanding upon Muhammad's (2022) focus on media limitations. Furthermore, the lens of gender polarization is challenged by presenting Beth as highly fashionable yet intellectually dominant, countering claims by Menéndez-Menéndez and Fernández-Morales (2023) that her genius remains male-centric. This visual comparison of elegance amidst male players operates as a social critique, deepening Rucka's (2021) cultural analysis. Finally, the biological essentialism lens is shattered by Episode 7, proving her supremacy stems from dedication and brainpower rather than gender. This moves past the passive barriers noted by Li Xiang and Hou Xueru (2023), and redefines the individual growth conflicts identified by Chrisfenianti (2023) into a sociopolitical fight against biological myths. Ultimately, this analysis integrates all episodes to prove the director uses active merit to remove masculine supremacy.

The primary limitation of this study is its exclusive focus on dialogue and text through Bem's three lenses, leaving onscreen imagery and other external factors unexamined. Future researchers and students are encouraged to explore alternative male-dominated settings, such as technology, science, or medicine, to demonstrate that female intellectual resistance is universal. Lastly, students are highly recommended to view media more critically; rather than focusing on romance or aesthetics, future research should investigate how female characters utilize their minds and skills to achieve formal social equality.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that there is a protest against the male-dominated chess world in *The Queen's Gambit*. This protest is seen through the doubt and rude comments from male players when Beth Harmon starts competing. Interestingly, Beth does not protest with words, but instead uses her extraordinary chess skills to fight back. By defeating her opponents on the chessboard, Beth's pure skill serves as a clear sign that she is successfully breaking the unfair system that underestimates women.

The director clearly portrays this protest against male dominance through specific scenes and dialogues in the series. Through the director's lens, the focus of the story shifts over time, where the early scenes showing social barriers and gender discrimination change into scenes that highlight Beth's technical chess skills. The important dialogues chosen by the director no longer talk about Beth's gender as something strange, but instead praise her smart strategies and pure intelligence in every match.

The reason why this protest is included in *The Queen's Gambit* is to show that intelligence is a neutral thing. The series wants to prove that the chessboard is a place where brain power is more important than language, culture, or gender. In the end, this story is made to break down social walls and prove to the audience that being smart and skilled has nothing to do with gender.

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