“Let me know when we’re done dick measuring”

An analysis of the entanglement of gender, race, and class in the representation of power in *Lioness*

Student Name: Alice Raffegeau
Student Number: 688711

Supervisor: Linda Kopitz

Master Media Studies – Media & Creative Industries
Erasmus School of History, Communication and Culture
Erasmus University

Master’s Thesis *June* 2025
Word count: 17 135

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the entanglement of gender, race, and class in the representation of power in Lioness, a contemporary military fiction television series centred on three female protagonists. Unlike shows set in the military fiction genre, Lioness foregrounds women in leading operational and decision-making roles, offering a compelling case for analysing intersectional power dynamics in media. Despite its apparent progressive premise, the series often reinforces traditional hierarchies and stereotypes. Through a qualitative thematic content analysis of all episodes from both seasons, this study examines how power is depicted and negotiated by four central female characters: Joe, Kaitlyn, Cruz, and Aaliyah. Each is situated differently across axes of gender, race, and class. The findings identify three overarching themes: gendered power, strategic whiteness, and social hierarchy. While the show offers portrayals of physically capable, professionally competent, and politically and economically influential women, their power is frequently undermined by male-dominated institutional structures, cultural expectations, and narrative mechanisms requiring them to justify their authority through personal sacrifice or trauma. Race is largely rendered invisible or stereotyped, despite the presence of three women of colour in lead roles. Meanwhile, class dynamics reinforce elitist ideals, with affluence portrayed as a prerequisite for influence, and working-class characters positioned within narratives of suffering or victimhood. By applying an intersectional lens to the analysis, this research reveals how Lioness both challenges and perpetuates dominant power structures in subtle but significant ways. The series illustrates the limitations of representational progress when systemic hierarchies remain unexamined. This study contributes to broader discussions in media and gender studies by demonstrating how intersectional power dynamics are encoded in contemporary television, shaping both narrative meaning and audience perception.

KEYWORDS: *Power, gender, race, class, intersectionality*

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

In 1997, *G.I. Jane* (Scott, 1997) shook the cinema world by portraying a woman in the U.S. Army Special Forces, a role that challenged traditional gender norms in military fiction. Nearly three decades later, powerful female representation in military fiction remains uncommon, particularly in both film and television. This is especially surprising given the recent surge in successful shows within the military and espionage thriller genres, such as *Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan* (Bay et al., 2018-2023), *The Recruit* (Bartis et al., 2022-2025), and *The Night Agent* (Beaubaire et al., 2023-present). Regardless of their popularity, these series rarely center on female protagonists. When women do appear, they are often portrayed as unstable individuals (Tasker, 2011, p.11) or are frequently framed as victims, reinforcing restrictive gender tropes (Moshe & Simeunović Bajić, 2022, p.28). The character of Carrie Mathison in *Homeland* (Bromell et al., 2011-2020) exemplifies this, as she is both unstable in her handling of her mental illness and portrayed as a victim on multiple occasions. Given that women constitute a significant portion of the military workforce, comprising 17.3% of active-duty personnel in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Defense, 2025), with women of colour making up 45.52% of this demographic, their representation in military fiction is both relevant and influential on public perception. Overall, women remain underrepresented or confined to limiting stereotypes in film and television (Gallagher, 2013, p.23).

Created by Taylor Sheridan, *Lioness* (Glasser et al., 2023-present) stands out as an exception in the military fiction genre, as it revolves around three female leads occupying both operational and decision-making roles. Critically acclaimed by the public, the show encountered a large success at its release, becoming Paramount+'s most-watched global series premiere in its first 24 hours (Campione, 2023). As of May 2025, the show maintains an overall Rotten Tomatoes rating of 73% (Rotten Tomatoes, 2025). Described as a "Mission Impossible, but with girls" (Mangan, 2023), *Lioness* is praised for its "unapologetic and uncompromising" leading female characters (Mangan, 2023). Set in the present, the show follows a covert CIA program that deploys female operatives, known as "assets", to infiltrate terrorist networks with the ultimate goal of dismantling them. This plot fictionalises a real CIA program which used female soldiers to distribute and gather information during operations in Afghanistan and Iraq (Mangan, 2023). The primary narrative focuses on Cruz (Laysla De Oliveira), an exceptionally talented but troubled Marine recruited to become a new "Lioness", tasked with befriending Aaliyah (Stephanie Nur), the daughter of a high-value terrorist target, in order to neutralise him. However, her unexpected romantic

entanglement with the target's daughter complicates the mission significantly. The *Lioness* program is run on the ground by Joe (Zoe Saldaña), a seasoned and highly competent field agent who firmly believes in the necessity of her work, despite the strain it places on her personal life. Meanwhile, Kaitlyn (Nicole Kidman), a high-ranking CIA officer overseeing the program from Washington, navigates political pressures and institutional constraints, balancing White House directives with the realities of field operations. Notably, among the three main female characters, Kaitlyn is the only white woman, emphasising racial dynamics within power structures.

The dominance of male protagonists in military fiction persists, even though women have participated in military conflicts for centuries, including the American Civil War and World War II (Blanton & Wike, 2002, as cited in Moshe & Simeunović Bajić, 2022, p.28). While some female-led narratives exist, they remain the exception rather than the rule (Muñoz González, 2018, p.120). Shows such as *Homeland* (Bromell et al., 2011-2020) or *The Americans* (Falvey et al., 2013-2018) feature powerful women, yet *Lioness* distinguishes itself by structuring its narrative around a trio of women in different but interconnected positions of power. Examining *Lioness* contributes to ongoing discussions on gendered media representation (Sink & Mastro, 2017; Wood, 1994) while offering a fresh perspective on the intersections of power, gender, class, and race. Notably, the portrayal of female power in the military fiction genre remains relatively underexplored. A focused analysis of *Lioness* can provide new insights into the ways meanings are both reflected and constructed in such television series. Encompassing military, political, economic, and manipulative power, *Lioness* represents various power dynamics. These dynamics manifest in interactions between characters and institutions and are deeply intertwined with gender, race, and class. As Moshe and Simeunović Bajić point out, popular television continues to "cultivate masculine military culture and the male soldier prototype, whether in combat or at home" (2022, p.29). By centring on three women in positions of power, *Lioness* challenges dominant narratives within military fiction, providing an alternative depiction of female agency in a field traditionally portrayed as male-dominated. Analysing *Lioness* through the lens of power and intersectionality allows this study to seek a nuanced understanding of how television fiction can either reinforce or challenge prevailing societal norms. More precisely, this paper demonstrates how *Lioness* simultaneously disrupts and reinforces dominant media representations by positioning female characters in roles of power, while continually constraining and limiting their agency.

This thesis contributes to and expands existing academic research on intersectionality, a framework introduced by Crenshaw (1989) that examines how overlapping social identities, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and class, create compounded experiences of oppression and privilege. According to intersectional theories, social, political, and personal experiences are rarely influenced by a single factor. Rather, these experiences are shaped by multiple intertwined forces which interact and influence one another (Stasiulis, 1999, p.345). Viewing media through the lens of intersectionality can enhance the understanding of how power is produced by the portrayal of stereotypes and the simplification of diverse social identities (Fiig, 2010, p.43). The presence of three women of colour in leading roles within *Lioness* offers a rare example of intersectional representation in military fiction, warranting further exploration of how their identities shape their interactions within institutional and operational power structures. Given the significance of media representations in shaping cultural perceptions, investigating how *Lioness* portrays female agency within complex institutional structures offers valuable contributions to media and gender studies.

Moreover, representation on screen carries significant social implications. Despite increasing awareness, gender stereotypes continue to persist in film and television. Within the military fiction genre, *The Americans* and *Homeland* feature competent female protagonists who are as skilled as their male counterparts. However, these characters often struggle to assert power in their professional and personal lives. For instance, in *Homeland*, Carrie Mathison grapples with systemic challenges that undermine her authority (Bevan, 2015, p.146). Bandura's social cognitive theory (2020) suggests that media representations influence societal attitudes and behaviours, meaning that persistent stereotypes can reinforce real-world gender biases.

Overall, the show's portrayal of power dynamics across military, political, and institutional contexts creates an opportunity to analyse the intersections of gender, race, and class. *Lioness* integrates these elements with a focus on women's leadership in both tactical operations and high-stakes decision-making, making it a particularly relevant case study in contemporary media research. Additionally, given that war and terrorism remain critical global concerns, *Lioness* provides timely commentary on these issues through a gendered and intersectional lens. This study aims to investigate the concept of power intertwined with the core themes of gender, race, and class in *Lioness*. To address these questions, this paper will first establish a theoretical framework by reviewing existing literature on the representation of power and gender, race, and class on screen. The methodology section will then outline the choice of thematic analysis as the primary research method. Finally, the results and

discussion sections will present findings on the portrayal of power in *Lioness*, offering insights into how the show contributes to broader conversations on gender, intersectionality, and media representation. The findings will be constructed around the following themes: the entanglement of power and gender; the entanglement of power and race; and finally, the entanglement of power and class.

2. Methodology

Since this research seeks to examine the entanglement of power with gender, class, and race in *Lioness*, a qualitative approach is best suited to provide an in-depth analysis of these complex concepts. *Lioness* presents a particularly productive case study, as it centres almost exclusively on women occupying positions of power, while male characters remain largely peripheral. Furthermore, the diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds of these women offer a rich array of elements for critical analysis. Unlike quantitative methods, which focus on establishing causal relationships through numerical data, qualitative research emphasises interpretation and meaning-making within social and cultural contexts. Brennen (2017) describes qualitative research as "interdisciplinary, interpretive, political, and theoretical in nature" (p.4). This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of representation in television fiction, facilitating a more profound understanding of the ways in which power is portrayed and negotiated. Qualitative methods offer greater flexibility than quantitative approaches, enabling researchers to explore their subject matter from multiple perspectives and adapt their analytical framework as new insights emerge (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Given that this study seeks to analyse power dynamics in *Lioness* and compare the findings with established theories, a qualitative approach is particularly well-suited to achieving these objectives.

To conduct this research, qualitative content analysis was employed. This method is particularly effective for studying media texts such as television shows due to its adaptability and iterative nature (Boeije, 2010). Content analysis enables researchers to systematically analyse textual, visual, and narrative elements, making it especially useful for investigating the social construction of meaning in media. By focusing on power as a social construct, this study explored how *Lioness* represents power dynamics embedded in the intersectional elements of gender, race, and class. More precisely, thematic content analysis was employed to identify and interpret patterns within the data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method that enables researchers to systematically detect recurring themes, concepts, and relationships within a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Since this research is concerned with how *Lioness* represents power, particularly in relation to women's leadership and the intersections of race, gender, and class, a pattern-based method like thematic analysis is highly relevant. By analysing the portrayal of power in *Lioness*, this study aims to uncover dominant themes and their implications for broader media representation. An inductive approach was taken,

allowing themes to emerge organically from the data rather than being predetermined by existing literature.

2.1. Sample

The data for this research consisted of all episodes of *Lioness*, which span two seasons of eight episodes each, totalling approximately 10.7 hours of content (IMDb, n.d.). The decision to analyse all episodes ensures a comprehensive examination of the show's narrative and character development, enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings. The data was accessed via Amazon Prime, and relevant quotes and observations (see Appendix 7.2) were used to facilitate the analysis and ensure accuracy. The study focused on four central female characters who occupy different positions of power and represent distinct intersections of gender, race, and class: Joe, Kaitlyn, Cruz, and Aaliyah.

Joe, played by Zoe Saldaña, is a Black and Latina woman leading the *Lioness* program on the ground. She holds significant responsibility but must navigate orders from higher-ranking officials who are not directly engaged in field operations. Additionally, she balances a demanding career with her role as a wife and mother to two daughters. Cruz, played by Laysla De Oliveira, is a Latina Marine who starts as a victim of abuse but transforms into a highly skilled operative. Her power is derived from her physical and mental resilience, yet she occupies the lowest rank within the *Lioness* hierarchy. Despite her lower status, the success of the mission depends on her ability to infiltrate enemy networks. Aaliyah, played by Stephanie Nur, is the daughter of a high-value Arab terrorist target. Unlike the other three women, she is not part of the Lioness team; instead, she is part of the 'objective' of the mission. While she benefits from immense wealth and privilege, she also experiences familial and cultural constraints. Her character embodies a complex intersection of power and oppression, and she is also one of the show's few queer characters. Kaitlyn, played by Nicole Kidman, is a high-ranking CIA official who oversees the *Lioness* program from Washington. As the only white woman among the main female leads, she wields institutional power and navigates political landscapes within the intelligence community. She is married to a finance magnate, which further amplifies her influence. While Joe and Kaitlyn remain present throughout both seasons, Cruz is absent during half of the second season, and Aaliyah only appears in the first season. These varying levels of presence provide insight into how power dynamics shift across the series. The data collection included every episode of both seasons (see Appendix 7.1) and focused on scenes where at least one of the four women appears. The

study employed purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique that involves deliberately selecting data based on specific criteria relevant to the research question (Babbie, 2020). Scenes that explicitly depict power struggles, hierarchical conflicts, or institutional authority have been prioritised, ensuring a focused analysis of power representation.

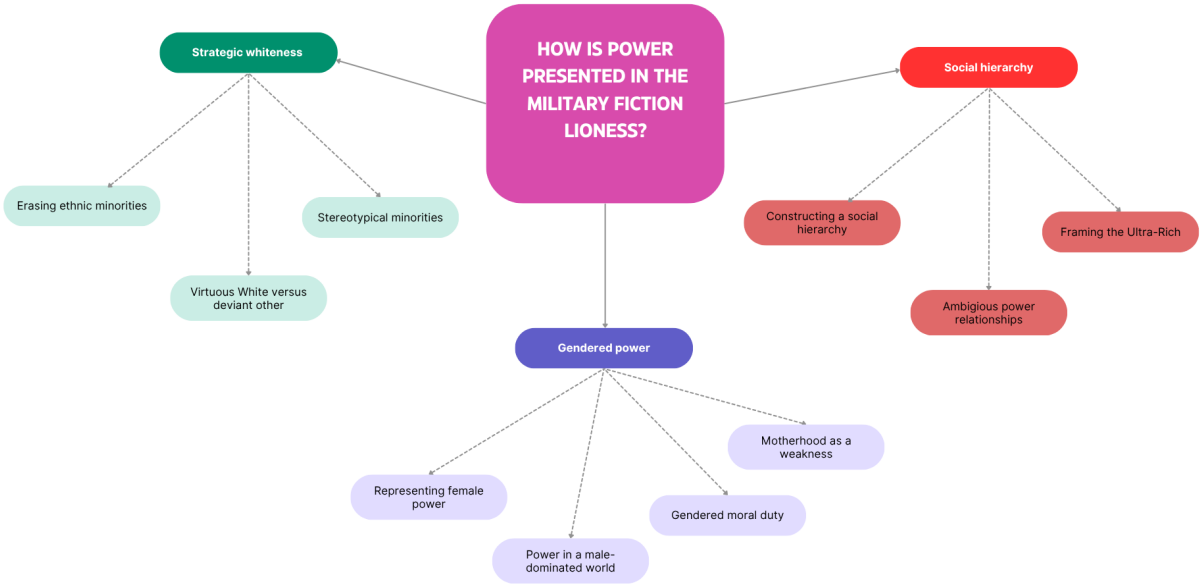
2.2. Data Analysis

Data collection focused on the narrative, with a specific attention on interactions between the characters. Such a process involved viewing all episodes and analysing relevant quotes from dialogues. The research focused on verbal exchanges that revealed power negotiations, non-verbal cues such as body language, facial expressions, physical looks, spatial positioning, institutional and social contexts that shaped character interactions, and recurring motifs and visual symbolism related to power.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, pp. 86-93) six-phase framework for thematic analysis. The first phase involves familiarisation with the data through repeated viewing of episodes, reading transcripts, and taking initial notes. The second phase consists of generating initial codes by identifying recurring words, phrases, and actions relevant to power dynamics. The third phase focuses on searching for themes by grouping codes into broader thematic categories. The fourth phase involves reviewing themes to ensure coherence and relevance. The fifth phase defines and names themes, creating clear labels and descriptions for each category. The final phase entails producing a report that presents findings with illustrative examples from the series. The data analysis led to three broad themes, combining ten categories: *gendered power*, *strategic whiteness*, and *social hierarchy.* The first theme, *gendered power*, includes four categories: the apparent image of powerful women, the negotiation of power in a male-dominated world, moral duty as a gendered burden, and the depiction of motherhood as a weakness. The second theme, *strategic whiteness*, draws on the following categories: the invisibilisation of ethnic minorities, the framing of whiteness as a virtue, and the use of stereotypes in the representation of ethnic minorities. Finally, the last theme, *social hierarchy*, encompasses three categories: the construction of a social hierarchy, ambiguous power relationships, and the negative framing of the ultra-rich.

This structured approach ensured rigour and allowed findings to emerge from the data rather than being imposed through a pre-existing theoretical lens. The research remained adaptable, adjusting to new insights as analysis progressed.

Figure 1: Simplified coding tree



2.3. Ethical Considerations

As this study involves textual and audiovisual analysis rather than human participants, ethical concerns primarily relate to accurate representation and responsible interpretation of data. Citations were properly attributed to maintain academic integrity, and care was taken to avoid imposing biased interpretations. Additionally, potential limitations such as subjectivity in qualitative analysis were acknowledged, and triangulation with existing literature helped ensure reliability.

3. Theoretical framework

Weber defined power as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests" (Weber, 1978, as cited in Warren, 1992, p.19). This means that power occurs when one's will is likely to prevail and happen even though there is resistance or opposition against it. As these power relations lead to dominance and inequalities, it is important to dive into what characterises them. The representation of power in *Lioness* is intrinsically linked to the notion of intersectionality. The term, first highlighted by Crenshaw in 1989, reflects "a transdisciplinary theory aimed at apprehending the complexity of social identities and inequalities through an integrated approach" (Bilge, 2010, p. 58). More precisely, intersectionality "refutes the compartmentalisation and hierarchization of the great axes of social differentiation through categories of gender/sex, class, race, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation" by postulating their "interplay in the production and reproduction of social inequalities" (Bilge, 2010, p. 58). When *Lioness* portrays women of various races, ages, sexualities, and socio-economic classes, the show engages with intersectionality not just in character design but in the very dynamics of power, inclusion, and exclusion that unfold throughout the narrative. Therefore, it is necessary to draw a map of the existing theory on power related to gender, class, and race in media representations. Gendered representations are still dominating the television landscape, and even though there has been an evolution, women tend to be represented in less powerful positions than men. But gender is often intertwined with race and social class. The way the media portrays ethnic minorities and different socioeconomic levels also enables various enactments of power. These three elements will be discussed in the three sections that follow in this theoretical framework.

3.1. Power and gender

Female characters on television have evolved, stepping away from the traditional gendered roles represented until recently (Oppenheimer et al., 2003, p.162). In the late 70s, men largely outnumbered women on primetime television (Gerbner & Signorielli, 1979, p.7). If gendered representations in media have evolved, it has not evolved as fast as society has. Collins highlighted in 2011 the remains of a discrepancy between men's and women's representation on primetime television, although women "have progressed to nearly representative rates of participation in the working world" (pp. 291-292). This suggests that while societal roles have diversified, media narratives have not kept pace in reflecting these

shifts. Indeed, women are still portrayed in media through "symbolic annihilation" (Tuchman, 1978, as cited in Gallagher, 2013, p.23), meaning that they are either underrepresented or represented through a specific discriminatory lens (Gallagher, 2013, p.23). Sink & Mastro (2017) came to the same conclusion and insisted on the consequences of such underrepresentation of women on screen: it teaches audiences "which groups warrant respect and status", (p. 16) leading to the normalisation of such differentiation between the two groups. These patterns are especially influential in shaping young viewers' perceptions of gender roles and hierarchies. It connects with Bandura's social cognitive theory (2002), according to which audiences learn behaviours through media representations, including fictional television work, for example. In short, this underrepresentation of women in media is not without consequences on society.

Moreover, the way they are portrayed also "may be much more important than whether they are portrayed" (Collins, 2011, p. 293), and "simply increasing the prevalence of women among characters in media might exacerbate any problematic effects of media use" (Collins, 2011, p. 294). Even when it comes to representing women's empowerment, it is done through a "neutered version" (Gallagher, 2013, p.27) that promotes an individualistic, neoliberal economic model rather than the representation of gender equality. Brandt (2019) has even talked about "enlightened sexism" (p.112) on television, which is the idea that women are now portrayed fairly and equally in comparison to their male counterparts, and therefore, it is acceptable to bring back sexist representations. These gendered portrayals raise questions of power: how women are represented also dictates what power they have, or more precisely, what power they are given, and how they exercise their power. Do they have powerful responsibilities at work, at home, and do they embody physical strength or mental strength? If the quality of representation matters as much as the quantity, it is interesting to note that stereotypes are associated with gender in media, both for men and women.

Women are frequently sexualised in the media, and in many cases, even "hypersexualised" (Collins, 2011, pp. 293-294; Sink & Mastro, 2017, p. 16). In video games, for instance, female characters are often depicted wearing "sexually revealing clothing" (Downs & Smith, 2010, p. 727), a representation that reduces them to objects of visual pleasure rather than portraying them as fully developed characters. A prime example of this stereotype is Lara Croft, who is highly sexualised and positioned as an object of desire (Kennedy, 2002, p. 1). However, Lara Croft also exemplifies physical strength and competence, embodying significant power (Jansz & Martis, 2007, p. 147). Since her emergence in video games, female characters have increasingly been defined by their

"bimodal appeal" (Kennedy, 2002, p. 1), attracting both male and female audiences. This so-called "Lara phenomenon" (Jansz & Martis, 2007, p. 147) refers to the introduction of a "strong, and competent female character in a dominant position" (p. 147) within the gaming landscape, initiated by the Lara Croft character. Moreover, over the past two decades, women have increasingly been portrayed as action heroes in mainstream media, with notable examples including *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins, 2017), *Lucifer* (Bruckheuner et al., 2016-2018), *The Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012), and *Charlie's Angels* (McG, 2000). These powerful female protagonists have become "an accepted and integral part of the TV landscape" (Sweet, 2022, p. 217), marking a significant shift in gender representation and narrative agency. Nevertheless, female characters, particularly in superhero cinema, often remain "present yet oddly peripheral" (Tasker, 2022, p. 277) in comparison to their male counterparts. This marginalisation occurs despite the fact that they are "physically capable and significant in narrative terms" (Tasker, 2022, p. 277), suggesting a persistent imbalance in the distribution and recognition of power on screen. Overall, there has been a noticeable increase in the representation of powerful female characters on television, moving beyond traditional archetypes such as the damsel in distress or the helpless victim (Kondrat, p. 188; Jansz & Martis, 2007, p. 147). Nevertheless, this shift is marked by an ambivalent coexistence of both objectification and empowerment.

Beyond sexualisation, other stereotypes continue to constrain female power in media portrayals: age, social roles, the depiction of motherhood, and the idea of a reluctant heroine (Collins, 2011, pp. 293–294; Sink & Mastro, 2017, p. 16). Indeed, women are frequently shown as housewives, caregivers, or in romantic roles, and are generally portrayed as significantly younger than their male counterparts (Collins, 2011, p. 295; Sink & Mastro, 2017, p. 18). These representations not only limit the depth and complexity of female characters but also reinforce broader structural gender inequalities. As explained through the framework of hegemonic masculinity, "stereotypical and exaggerated gender roles in the media exist to perpetuate the control and authority of men over women in many realms of society" (Connell, 1987, as cited in Sink & Mastro, 2017, p. 16). Concerning motherhood, Sweet (2022, p. 219) notes that "motherhood is depicted as being extremely problematic for heroic mothers", reflecting a perceived incompatibility between heroic identity and maternal responsibilities. Female action heroes who are also mothers are often characterised as "reluctant heroines" (Lotz, 2006, p. 81), taking up the heroic mantle primarily to protect their children (Sweet, 2022, pp. 232-234). However, this maternal motivation often results in narrative consequences, as these characters are frequently "deprived of both the work and the

pleasure of raising their children, with whom they are only reunited as adults" (Sweet, 2022, p. 234). Thus, while motherhood can be a source of power, it simultaneously operates as a narrative limitation, creating a paradox where female agency is both enabled and restricted by maternal identity. Age also plays a significant role in limiting the representation of female power. Older women in action-drama series are frequently portrayed in negative terms, depicted as "evil", "transgressive", or "literally demonised" (Sweet, 2022, p. 236). These depictions marginalise older women and reinforce ageist constraints on female authority and influence within the genre.

Moreover, female agency is often mediated through the male gaze and narrative structures that demand justification for women's power and violence. Tasker (2022, p. 277) observes that female violence is frequently framed "through backstories that legitimate such unusual gender behaviour", implying that a woman's use of force must be rationalised in ways not required of male characters. This contrast is exemplified in the differing motivations of male and female superheroes: "Diana Prince's discovery of her powers is framed through a desire for peace, Batman develops himself and his strength within a search for technologized vengeance" (Tasker, 2022, p. 290). Diana's power is rooted in selflessness and care, again linking female strength to traditionally feminine values and limiting the scope of their autonomy. The male gaze further undermines the subversive potential of powerful female characters. As Kirby (2015, p. 468) argues, it "undermines the transgressive potential of characters such as Mrs. Smith and Lara Croft" by eroticising their strength, rendering their bodies visible primarily "for the consumption of male audiences". In this way, even empowered female figures are visually and narratively constrained by patriarchal viewing frameworks.

Finally, portrayals of powerful women often include implicit punishments for their success. Brandt (2019, p. 113) notes that strong female figures such as "female investigators" are rarely shown to maintain successful personal lives. These characters are frequently depicted as single, childless, or unable to manage their private and professional responsibilities, suggesting that female power is still portrayed as incompatible with holistic life fulfilment. In sum, while there has been an increase in the visibility of powerful women in action roles, this power remains heavily circumscribed. Whether through maternal sacrifice, ageist stereotyping, the male gaze, or narrative punishments, female agency is frequently portrayed as conditional, constrained, or in tension with societal expectations. The representation of power, therefore, remains deeply gendered, shaped by cultural norms that continue to limit women's autonomy and authority on screen. Overall, powerful women on

screen are still rare and often presented with negative consequences deriving from their powerful position.

3.2. Power and race

Gender is frequently shaped by its intersection with other social categories such as race and class, a dynamic that is clearly reflected in the characters portrayed in *Lioness*. In the context of media, and particularly Hollywood, race plays a significant role in shaping representations, both on-screen and behind the scenes (Erigha, 2015, p. 78). As with gender, meaningful analysis requires more than simply counting appearances; it must assess the quality and depth of portrayals**,** as representation directly influences public perceptions. Tukachinsky et al. (2017, pp. 32-33) emphasise this point, noting the connection between media representations and audience attitudes toward minorities. They argue that "any socially desirable effects of exposure to ethnic minority characters depend on the existence of favourable, quality representations of ethnic minorities" (Tukachinsky et al., 2017, p. 26). Stereotypical or tokenistic depictions may, therefore, reinforce existing power hierarchies rather than challenge them.

Much of the scholarship on ethnic minorities in media begins by documenting their underrepresentation relative to their white counterparts. This absence shapes cultural narratives about whose stories matter. On U.S. primetime television, Asian, Latino, and Native American characters remain significantly underrepresented (Erigha, 2015, p. 81; Tukachinsky et al., 2017, p. 25), with Latinos being especially marginalised despite their substantial demographic presence in the U.S. (Tukachinsky et al., 2017, p. 25). Genre conventions also play a key role in reinforcing these disparities. For instance, while Black characters appear frequently in sitcoms and crime dramas (Mastro, 2009, as cited in Tukachinsky et al., 2017, p. 540), they are notably absent from genres such as action and adventure (Eschholz, p. 315). Such compartmentalised visibility can create an illusion of diversity while confining minority identities to narrow roles, ultimately reinforcing stereotypical power structures. Even when characters of colour are included, whiteness often remains central. As McWan and Cramer (2022) explain, there is often a "centralisation of whiteness" (p. 313), whereby all other identities are defined, accepted, or rejected in relation to it.

Stereotypes frequently permeate these representations, shaping characters from the earliest stages of casting and scripting. Nancy Wang Yuen's (2004, pp. 254-255)

ethnographic research reveals how racial stereotypes are embedded in industry practices. Actors of colour are often channelled into roles based on reductive cultural assumptions. Asian and Asian American performers, for example, are repeatedly cast as mystical martial artists or other exaggerated figures, often required to adopt Chinese accents regardless of their actual heritage. This practice not only homogenises Asian identities but also positions them as foreign, further entrenching their outsider status. Similarly, Black actors are often limited to roles tied to urban crime or poverty, reflecting entrenched narratives of 'ghetto' life and criminality. These characters are frequently shaped by white writers and producers, which compounds the risk of inauthentic and stereotypical portrayals (Yuen, 2010, p. 241). Research by Tukachinsky et al. (2017) also finds that women of colour are especially vulnerable to stereotyping, being disproportionately portrayed as "hypersexual and less professional" (p. 32). Latino characters, regardless of gender, are often associated with criminality or violence (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Tukachinsky et al., 2017, p. 32). Representational patterns also vary by age: Black women are commonly shown in roles under the age of 30 (Eschholz et al., 2002, p. 315), reflecting a double standard that disproportionately affects both women and minorities, while white men are less constrained by such expectations (Eschholz et al., 2002, p. 323). These stereotypes not only misrepresent real lives but also reproduce power imbalances by maintaining white, dominant cultural narratives.

A particularly salient issue is the invisibility of Black women in media (Boylorn, 2008; Goepfert, 2018; Smith-Shomade, 2002). Behind the scenes, the lack of diversity is stark: only 6.9% of television series showrunners are non-white women, a number that is alarmingly low compared to their 42.2% share of the U.S. population (WGAW, 2023, pp. 3, 7). One notable exception is Shonda Rhimes, whose work has significantly reshaped the landscape of Black female representation. In their analysis of Rhimes' productions, Rocchi and Farinacci (2020) explore how characters like Olivia Pope (*Scandal*) are constructed as powerful figures. Pope's power is expressed through her romantic desirability; she is "romantically and sexually desired by powerful Caucasian males" (Rocchi & Farinacci, 2020, p. 33), as well as her career ambition. She is "ambitious, even ruthless in carrying out her job and trying to stay at the top of her game. She doesn't cook, she doesn't feel the urgency to settle down and have a family" (p. 33), thereby defying traditional expectations of femininity and motherhood. Her romantic and professional choices "challenge the stereotypes surrounding Black femininity and interracial romances" (p. 33), allowing her power to emerge through both narrative agency and identity disruption. Additionally, characters like

Annalise Keating in *How to Get Away with Murder* express power through symbolic acts. For example, when Keating removes her wig, the moment resonates as an act of vulnerability and strength, "attributable to the experience of Non-White women" (Rocchi & Farinacci, 2020, p. 37). Her elegance, class status, and control over her appearance become part of how her power is performed and perceived.

However, these portrayals often occur in fictional post-racial universes where race is backgrounded. R*occhi and Farinacci (2020) note that in How to Get Away with Murder (*Beers et al., 2014 – 2020), race is primarily mentioned in reference to past discrimination or the absence of solidarity among women (p. 35). Similarly, *Scandal* references race through characters linked to the civil rights movement (p. 36), but avoids exploring racial identity in the present. Such framing suggests a society "beyond the problems of racial inequality" (p. 36), potentially downplaying the ongoing realities of systemic racism. Despite the presence of powerful Black women, these depictions often remain exceptional and isolated, leaving structural racial inequalities unaddressed.

Moreover, Middle Eastern women are also subject to stereotyping in the Western media. As Abu-Lughod (2002) highlights in their work, "the traditional image of the Middle Eastern woman that has long dominated Western media is one of an oppressed and exoticized creature, controlled by men and religion" (p.765). Two main tropes are often used: the Middle Eastern woman is usually represented as constrained by the men surrounding her, and their culture is oversimplified. The use of symbols like the veil to represent the entirety of Muslim women's experiences leads to a reductive interpretation of veiling as the quintessential sign of women's unfreedom" (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 786). The other common stereotype is the need for a western 'savior' which reinforces "a sense of superiority by Westerners, a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged" (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 789).

In conclusion, while there are emerging portrayals of powerful women from ethnic minorities, these representations remain limited in scope and frequency. Intersectionality remains essential in assessing how power is granted, constrained, or obscured across axes of race, gender, and class.

3.3. Power and class

The representation of power in media is deeply entangled not only with gender and race but also with class. Dominant media narratives frequently "celebrate the rich and powerful while presenting negative representations of poor and working people" (Kellner & Share,

2019, p. 3). U.S. television overwhelmingly portrays the middle and upper classes, particularly among white populations (Bullock et al., 2001, p. 231; Kellner & Share, 2019, p. 3; McWan & Cramer, 2022, pp. 312-314). In contrast, the poor are either rendered invisible or depicted through reductive and stigmatising tropes, such as substance abuse, criminality, sexual promiscuity, or violence (Bullock et al., 2001, p. 231). When the working class does appear, it is more often represented through white male characters who are "unattractive, overweight, physically aggressive, sexually aggressive, and highly motivated" (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2018, p. 219), with women and minorities notably underrepresented. Sutherland and Feltey (2017), drawing on Allen (1998), explore power through a feminist lens and note that powerful women in media are predominantly white and middle class. Socioeconomic status and race are closely linked in media portrayals; for example, Black characters are commonly shown as either middle class, educated, employed, and stable, or as members of the underclass, unemployed or involved in criminal activity (Dates & Stroman, 2001; Jhally & Lewis, 1992). When they are not represented as middle or upper class, Black characters are more likely to be portrayed as "social undesirables" than as members of the working poor (Busselle & Crandall, 2002, p. 269). Interestingly, Black characters are seldom shown in upper-class roles. However, Entman and Rojecki (2000) found that in professional settings, white characters are often subordinated to Black counterparts, suggesting a superficial inversion of workplace hierarchies that does not reflect broader systemic inequalities.

Overall, television grants "higher recognition to the narratives of people from the middle and ruling classes" (Jakobsson & Stiernstedt, 2018, p. 536). Upper-class characters tend to be depicted as "married/partnered, highly attractive, provocatively dressed, and under/average weight" (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2018, p. 219), reinforcing their desirability both socially and physically. Characters such as Olivia Pope in *Scandal* embody this archetype, signalling status and success through expensive clothing, polished appearance, and ambition. Visual cues alone often suffice to signal upper-class status to audiences. Representations of class vary across genres and contexts. Hunt (2004) identifies a notable contrast in the portrayal of working-class versus upper-class families. Poor or working-class families are often depicted as emotionally rich, cohesive, and supportive, whereas middle and upper-class families tend to be portrayed as less happy and more fragmented (Hunt, 2004, pp. 187-189). This suggests a narrative in which "money clearly does not buy happiness and that, in fact, relative poverty does" (Hunt, 2004, p. 186).

Kendall (2011, pp. 29-79) outlines six media "frames" used to portray the wealthy. The *consensus frame* minimises class differences by portraying the rich as fundamentally similar to everyone else, thereby obscuring structural inequality. The *admiration frame* presents the wealthy as generous philanthropists, encouraging aspirational emulation. The *emulation frame* promotes consumerism by suggesting that upward mobility is attainable through personal effort. The *price-tag frame* focuses on the cost of elite lifestyles, entertaining audiences while reinforcing materialist values. The *sour grapes frame* implies that wealth does not bring happiness, reassuring lower-income viewers. Lastly, the *bad apple frame* treats misconduct by wealthy individuals as isolated incidents, protecting systemic privilege from scrutiny.

Finally, it is worth noting that empowerment, an important dimension of power, is predominantly framed in individualistic terms within Hollywood (Sutherland & Feltey, 2017, p. 628). Power is often depicted as something attained and exercised on a personal level, reinforcing neoliberal ideals of self-sufficiency and meritocracy. In sum, media portrayals of power continue to reflect and reinforce existing social hierarchies, positioning whiteness, maleness, and middle-to-upper-class status as cultural defaults while marginalising those who do not conform to these norms.

3.4. Intersectionality

The representation of power in *Lioness* is intrinsically linked to the notion of intersectionality. While the notions of gender, race, and class are discussed separately in the literature review and in the results, they are, however, ultimately interlinked. The concept of intersectionality offers a crucial framework for analysing such layered identities and the power structures they navigate. As Crenshaw explains, intersectionality prevents the partial understanding of minority groups that results from focusing on "the most privileged group members" (1989, p. 140) within those communities, which in turn marginalises the "multiply-burdened" (1989, p. 140) individuals. Crenshaw's example of Black women, who face discrimination through both gender and race, illustrates how these intersecting identities create unique, compounded experiences of marginalisation. Similarly, the experience of a queer, disabled Black man differs profoundly from that of a queer, disabled white woman, highlighting how distinct configurations of social identity produce different forms of power imbalance and discrimination. Thus, intersectionality is essential in any analysis of representation and power in *Lioness* and broader media contexts, as it captures the

complexity of lived experience that cannot be reduced to a single axis of identity. Intersectional theories propose that social, political, and personal experiences are rarely shaped by a single dimension of identity. Instead, they are the result of overlapping and interacting forces that influence one another in complex ways (Stasiulis, 1999, p. 345).

Intersectionality also serves as a critique of dominant analytical frameworks, which often uphold structural biases. It "reflects an uncritical and disturbing acceptance of dominant ways of thinking about discrimination" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 150). An intersectional lens resists implicit assumptions, such as whiteness, heterosexuality, able-bodiedness, or middle-class status as the default social norms (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 151), and instead reveals the overlapping nature of systemic power relations. In short, intersectionality disrupts singular, dominant narratives and promotes a more inclusive analytical approach. As Hancock (2007, p. 248) argues, its core aim is "incorporating previously ignored and excluded populations into preexisting frameworks", thereby expanding our understanding of social inequality and power.

In examining the representation of power in media, intersectionality emerges as the essential framework linking gender, race, and class. Media portrayals do not simply reflect individual identities but rather the compounded and overlapping structures of privilege and marginalisation. While women may appear empowered, their agency is often limited by hypersexualisation, ageism, or maternal stereotypes. Similarly, characters of colour, particularly women, are constrained by racialised tropes that reinforce whiteness as normative. Class adds another axis of inequality, where power is visually and narratively reserved for affluent, often white characters, while working-class and poor individuals are marginalised or vilified. Intersectionality challenges these compartmentalised approaches by revealing how these systems of domination intersect to shape unique lived realities. It allows us to critically engage with not only who is represented in media, but also how and under what conditions power is made visible or concealed. Through this lens, the literature review underscores that understanding media power dynamics demands attention to the interplay of multiple social categories, not isolated ones.

4. Analysis

This analysis examines how *Lioness* represents the entanglement of gender, race, and class in the construction of power. Structured in three thematic chapters, this section explores the multidimensional portrayals of four central female characters, Joe, Kaitlyn, Cruz, and Aaliyah, each of whom embodies different forms of agency and operates within distinct sociocultural and institutional frameworks. By applying thematic analysis to key scenes across both seasons of the series, this study interrogates how intersecting social categories shape characters' access to, negotiation of, and limitations within power structures.

The first chapter focuses on gender and examines how female characters' authority is consistently challenged or diminished within male-dominated environments. Although the women are positioned as leaders or physically capable agents, their power is frequently undermined through narrative devices that reinforce gendered expectations, such as the burdens of motherhood, moral duty, and the demand to justify female strength. Chapter two turns to race, analysing how *Lioness* navigates (or fails to navigate) racial identities. Despite its casting of women of colour in lead roles, the show largely erases explicit racial discourse and relies on stereotypical representations. This strategic invisibilisation of race ultimately reinforces whiteness as the default position of authority and rationality. Finally, the last chapter addresses class, unpacking how socioeconomic status shapes access to power and social legitimacy. The narrative often privileges affluent characters, presenting wealth and institutional influence as markers of competence, while working-class characters are framed through hardship and dispossession.

Across these chapters, the analysis demonstrates how *Lioness* simultaneously disrupts and reproduces dominant media representations. By centring women in roles of tactical and political power, the series challenges traditional norms. Yet, through its portrayal of constrained agency and entrenched hierarchies, it ultimately exposes the limitations of representational diversity without structural critique.

4.1. Gendered Power: Gender as Source and Limitation of Power in Lioness

Kaitlyn, Joe, and Cruz each demonstrate power through distinct qualities. Cruz exhibits exceptional physical abilities; Joe is portrayed as a respected and highly competent team leader; and Kaitlyn embodies a woman capable of intellectually and politically challenging powerful men in high-level political and hierarchical positions. However, despite these manifestations of strength, their gender ultimately serves to undermine their power. This

chapter will first examine the sources of power attributed to each of these women, before turning to how gender-related factors constrain that power. These constraints include their marginal positioning within male-dominated environments, the portrayal of gendered moral responsibilities as burdens, and, finally, motherhood, which is also depicted as an impediment to women's power.

4.1.1. Representing Female Power

Each of the four women embodies a distinct form of power, intricately linked to their respective social, cultural, and political contexts. Kaitlyn, a wealthy white woman, exercises relational power. Joe, an experienced team leader, commands leadership power. Cruz, a working-class yet outstanding soldier, possesses physical power. Aaliyah, the extraordinarily wealthy but heavily constrained daughter of a powerful terrorist, exemplifies material power.

Kaitlyn rises through the ranks to hold significant political and institutional authority that none of the other female characters can reach. As Joe's superior and a close collaborator of Byron, the CIA Deputy Director, she occupies a high-level position within the agency. Unlike her counterparts, she is not involved in field operations or combat, and her polished, professional appearance reinforces her elite status. Notably, she is the only white woman among the four analysed, and she holds the highest level of responsibility within the CIA, with both Joe and Cruz under her command. In the first season, she asks Byron, "You want to talk to the governors or the senators?" (12:55, S1 Ep4), signalling her access to powerful political figures. She frequently attends meetings at the White House with the Secretary of State, a level of access denied to Joe and Cruz. Her role at the CIA grants her privileges; she can arrange private jets for operatives and gain access to restricted areas. Small details reinforce her authority, such as telling her husband, "I'll have my assistant make a reservation at seven" (35:06, S1 Ep3), showing that she delegates routine tasks to preserve her time for strategic matters: a form of privilege that the other three women do not have access to. Kaitlyn's relationship with her husband, Errol, a financial investor, further enhances her power. She relies on his influence, as seen when she asks him to help sway a senator and her spouse using financial arguments. Together, they represent a nexus of wealth and power, as highlighted when Errol reminds her of their "Medal of Freedom dinner tonight" (18:01, S2 Ep5), an elite event that appears routine for them. Kaitlyn is also framed as intellectually formidable. She reads the newspaper over breakfast and engages in strategic political discussions with Errol, who often challenges her views. Their conversations consistently

revolve around politics, strategy, and power. In short, Kaitlyn's power lies in her political position, her influence, but also her wealth. It differentiates her from the other female characters as none of them has a power with such reach: most of their power is more linked to their individual self than their effect on others.

Joe embodies a form of earned power: it derives from her role as a competent and respected team leader. As the head of the Lioness team, she operates on the ground alongside her team, issues orders, devises strategies, and makes critical decisions when needed. Throughout the series, she consistently demonstrates advanced skills and extensive experience. For instance, in Season 2, Episode 4, she single-handedly coordinates both a ground team and a helicopter operator, and her authority is unquestioned. Joe's leadership stems not only from her professional background in the military and the CIA, but also from the respect she commands within her team. She is viewed not only as an authority figure but also as a mentor. Team members seek her advice and trust her judgment. For example, when Cruz is unsure how to respond to Aaliyah after her unexplained absence, she turns to Joe for guidance. Joe is also consistently portrayed in professional attire, wearing neat suits that reinforce her authoritative image. Joe's influence extends beyond her immediate team to her superiors. In Season 2, Episode 7, after Joe is injured and hospitalised, Byron, the CIA Deputy Director, visits her and states: "You, unfortunately for both of us, cannot be replaced. They are a force, you are a force multiplier" (17:22, S2 Ep7). This comment highlights her indispensable value to the CIA, though it also suggests a degree of objectification, as Byron speaks to her utility rather than her personhood. Overall, Joe is portrayed as a powerful and respected leader, whose authority comes from her experience, and is respected and followed by the mostly male team under her command.

Cruz's power, rooted in her physical strength and resilience, is foregrounded throughout the series and seems to derive from a difficult past. She explicitly recognises her strengths, stating, "Talks are not one of my strengths" (08:21, S2 Ep8). From her first appearance, she is framed as an exceptionally capable soldier. In a flashback to her entry into the Marines, she surpasses both male and female records in a pull-up test, and the commander notes her outstanding scores across all assessments, physical and intellectual. Nevertheless, it is her physical prowess that is most frequently emphasised. In Season 1, Episode 2, during an intense torture training exercise, Cruz demonstrates formidable combat abilities; it takes multiple men to overpower her, suggesting her physical capability is on par with or surpasses that of her male peers. Such scenes present her as physically dominant, challenging traditional gender norms and embodying the archetype of a powerful soldier. Cruz is also

marked by a strong sense of self-belief and confidence. In the pull-up scene, when a recruiter doubts her capacity, she responds: “I am telling you I can” (22:07, S2 Ep1). Even when Joe and Kaitlyn question her suitability for a mission, she asserts, “I can, I’ll learn” (38:25, S1 Ep4). This confidence is double-edged: she is empowered by her self-assurance, but she must continually assert herself because others do not readily recognise her capabilities. This contrasts with Joe, whose power is more institutionally recognised and externally validated. Cruz, by contrast, must actively claim her strength and legitimacy, showing that she has not earned her powerful position yet.

Aaliyah’s power is expressed in markedly different terms: through wealth and privilege. Among the four women, she is the most constrained, with her influence limited primarily to financial access, specifically, her father’s wealth. Her introduction in a Louis Vuitton store in the first episode sets the tone for her portrayal. She resides in lavish homes, flies on private jets, employs staff to fulfil her every desire, and indulges in luxury without restriction. Aaliyah exercises a subtle form of agency within her limited sphere. Although she is expected to marry a man chosen by her father and assume the traditional role of wife and mother according to cultural norms, she manages to subvert these expectations. She draws Cruz into her inner circle and engages in a brief romantic relationship with her, an act of rebellion given the risks involved. As Aaliyah acknowledges, “For me to choose love would be the death of me” (35:22, S1 Ep6). Her willingness to risk everything for an authentic emotional connection signals a form of power rooted in defiance and desire for autonomy, even within a highly restrictive environment.

4.1.2. Power in a Male-Dominated World

Despite the powerful traits each woman displays, their authority is consistently constrained by the male-dominated environments in which they operate. Sexism is a recurring theme in their interactions with men, and the female characters are often required to assert their authority in ways their male counterparts are not, at times even reversing traditional gender roles to do so. All four women experience sexism, regardless of their hierarchical position. For instance, a male soldier refers to Joe as “honey” (S2 Ep4, 08:30), despite her superior rank. Similarly, Kaitlyn encounters sexism during an interrogation scene alongside Byron: while she is interrupted repeatedly, the male suspect defers to Byron, whom he does not even know, saying, “You look important” (S2 Ep8, 12:46). The only discernible reason for this perception is Byron’s gender. The show also highlights how gender

expectations hinder female soldiers. When Joe and Kyle's team go undercover in Mexico, they must dress as civilians. Joe is shown wearing a skirt and a small top, which compromises her effectiveness in the field. She explicitly comments on this: "I'd love to see you do a snatch and grab in a fucking miniskirt" (S2 Ep1, 18:39). It becomes evident that her attire, imposed by gendered expectations, impedes her professional capabilities. This aligns with Tasker's (2022, p. 277) argument that female action heroes may be portrayed as competent and capable, but their power is not fully acknowledged or supported within the narrative.

Patronising behaviour from male characters is another recurrent form of discrimination. When Joe briefs the Secretary of State at the White House on the Lioness program's objective, he responds with derision: "After you kill the guy, could you be so kind to grab his fucking phone, his computer, and anything else that might have some fucking intelligence?" (S2 Ep1, 14:13). Similarly, Kaitlyn faces condescension from her husband Errol, who minimizes her role by stating, "In the end of the day your job is to make sure our textbooks aren't in Russian" (S1 Ep7, 41:22), a remark that belittles her work and frames it in patronizing, dismissive terms. Cruz's encounters with sexism are compounded by physical and sexual violence. She is attacked by men on multiple occasions. In one instance, while at a nightclub with Aaliyah, she is drugged and taken away with the intent to rape her. Despite her physical strength and military training, Cruz is still portrayed as prey. In Aaliyah's case, her power is diminished differently: her life is entirely controlled by the men in her family. This dynamic will be analysed in detail later in this chapter. These portrayals reflect what has been emphasised in the literature: although women may be represented numerically on screen, they are still framed through a discriminatory lens that fails to convey true gender equality (Gallagher, 2013, p. 23). In *Lioness*, the female characters are not only underrepresented in terms of narrative authority but are also actively discriminated against because of their gender. This aligns with Brandt's (2019, p. 112) concept of "enlightened sexism", the idea that sexist portrayals are re-emerging on television and are tolerated because they appear within a context of supposed gender parity.

Such discrimination often forces the women to assert their authority in exaggerated ways, occasionally reversing gender roles and adopting behaviours typically associated with male dominance. Joe's interactions exemplify this inversion: she mocks Kyle by calling him "Ken doll" (S2 Ep1, 38:58) and sarcastically tells a male commander, "You just be Johnny on the spot with that coffee, would you?" (S2 Ep8, 07:38). Kaitlyn similarly subverts masculine authority when, in response to a commander's comment, "Let me know when we're done dick measuring" (S2 Ep1, 01:42), she replies, "We were done measuring the minute I walked

in the room, Commander" (S2 Ep1, 01:44). Cruz also challenges gender roles through physical dominance, repeatedly defeating male opponents in combat. These moments subvert traditional gender dynamics and offer a form of symbolic empowerment. Yet, these women must also continually defend their authority. When Kyle calls Kaitlyn "Ma'am" in a meeting, she sharply responds: "Don't fucking ma'am me. [stands up] Supervisor Meade. I've earned the title" (S1 Ep4, 11:16). This assertion of her status is necessary in a way that Byron, her male counterpart, never has to experience. Ultimately, this repeated need for self-assertion reveals a paradox in the portrayal of female empowerment: to be seen as powerful, these women must overcompensate, adopt confrontational behaviours, or mimic the very attitudes they are resisting. The fact that they must work so hard to be recognised as powerful underscores the limits imposed by gender. In this sense, their womanhood consistently diminishes their authority.

4.1.3. Gendered Moral Duty

In *Lioness*, the agency of the main female characters is also limited by what is portrayed as a gendered burden: moral duty. Both their motivations and actions are depicted through a gendered lens. Their actions are narratively justified by their personal histories, reflecting Tasker's observation that female power and violence in media must be justified within the story structure (2022, p. 277).

The series frames female power as a result of a cause, necessitating a justification for female power. *Lioness* provides background stories for only two characters: Cruz and, to some extent, Joe, who are also the most morally conflicted. These backstories serve as narrative justifications for their use of violence and sense of duty. Cruz's motivation stems from a traumatic past shaped by male violence: she is an orphan with siblings who are either dead or incarcerated, and she survived an attempted murder by an ex-boyfriend. She finds refuge and purpose in the Marines after being told during recruitment that she could "make a difference" (S1 Ep1, 37:09). Implicit in the narrative is the assumption that Cruz's strength and commitment to the Marines are contingent upon a traumatic personal history. Joe's motivations are similarly framed through legacy and moral conviction. She explains that her work is intended to protect future generations, so her children will not have to speak Chinese or Russian. Joe repeatedly frames her mission in terms of defending human rights. She also references her grandfather, who enlisted in the U.S. Army "three days after arriving to the U.S." (S2 Ep2, 10:54), suggesting that her motivations are both familial and patriotic.

Notably, these justifications are provided only for the women who display the most overt forms of power and violence. In contrast, male characters in the series are not given such explanatory narratives for their use of force or commitment to duty. This supports Tasker's (2022, p. 277) argument that female characters require a moral or emotional rationale to legitimise their engagement in violence, a requirement not imposed on male characters.

Joe's character exemplifies what might be termed the "hero syndrome": she does what she believes is right, often to the detriment of herself and those around her. Her gendered position seems to demand flawlessness: she does not allow herself to appear weak, frequently refuses assistance, and regularly disobeys orders when they conflict with her moral compass. After being shot in the second season, she is ordered to rest for a week, yet she returns to the battlefield just one day after leaving the hospital. Her commitment to duty and saving lives borders on the superhuman. She pleads with her superior: "I can't walk away on a loss. You can't ask that of me. Please" (S2 Ep7, 47:22). While her determination presents her as a strong and independent woman, it also places her and others at risk. In the final episode, she chooses to rescue Cruz and a helicopter pilot, despite orders to return to base. Her team of six soldiers faces overwhelming enemy forces, and nearly all of them are injured as a result, though the two are ultimately saved. This act of heroism comes at a high cost, revealing the paradox of her power: it is both empowering and diminishing. When Joe must leave for another dangerous mission, she tells her husband, "Duty's not a choice, Neal" (S2 Ep7, 13:38). Whether driven by a personal moral code or by the internalised belief that her gender prevents her from showing vulnerability or both, Joe's behaviour suggests that her gender is once again a constraint on her power. Ultimately, Joe embodies what Lotz (2006, p. 81) refers to as the "reluctant heroine", a woman who does not act out of desire, but out of obligation. Like Diana Prince, Joe and Cruz are granted power only through the narrative mechanism of self-sacrifice and moral duty. Their strength is not freely exercised but instead portrayed as a burden, one they must carry because of who they are and what they have endured.

4.1.4. Motherhood as Vulnerability

Can women have it all? According to *Lioness*, the answer appears to be no. The series suggests that women cannot simultaneously be successful in their careers and maintain a fulfilling family life. This tension is introduced from the outset: in the very first episode, Joe's daughter pointedly declares, "I hate it when she's there" (11:09, S1 Ep1), indicating a

fractured and unhappy family. Cruz, notably, has no family, while Kaitlyn's children are only briefly mentioned as grown and emotionally distant. There is no portrayal of an intimate or active parent-child relationship in either case. Joe, by contrast, is married to Neal, a paediatric surgeon, and together they have two daughters. However, despite Neal's demanding profession, he is depicted as the parent responsible for the household and the primary caregiver for their children. Joe, in contrast, is the absent parent, physically distant and emotionally unavailable due to her demanding job. Even Joe acknowledges the toll her work takes on her family. "I'm a bad mother" (7:24, S1 Ep5), she tells her daughter. In another moment of vulnerability, she confesses to Neal, "I can't fucking do this anymore" (37:15, S1 Ep7), before saying she wants to take a desk job. Despite these declarations, Joe is unable to reconcile her career with her home life. At the beginning of Season 2, the family appears content, enjoying breakfast together and teasing Joe about her poor cooking. Yet, the moment Joe is called away on a new mission, that fragile harmony collapses. The narrative makes the message clear: work and family are incompatible for women. As Sweet (2022, p. 219) observes, "motherhood is depicted as being extremely problematic for heroic mothers". The show reinforces this notion, female characters cannot be both effective operatives and nurturing mothers. Motherhood, as depicted in *Lioness*, becomes a liability, another layer of gendered discrimination. As Brandt (2019, p. 113) suggests, female power is still portrayed as incompatible with holistic life fulfilment. Joe thus joins a lineage of powerful female characters whose maternal role diminishes their authority and agency, such as Carrie Mathison in *Homeland* or Meredith Grey in *Grey's Anatomy*.

The psychological burden of Joe's profession further highlights the incompatibility between her role as a mother and her role as a soldier. Her constant exposure to danger begins to distort her perception of everyday life, leading her to see threats everywhere, even in mundane family settings. One day, as she returns home, she watches her youngest daughter selling lemonade with a friend. When a customer offers to display one of the children's drawings in her van and invites the child to step inside, Joe instantly draws her weapon and runs toward the van, fearing a potential kidnapping. The situation, however, is entirely innocent. This moment reveals Joe's hyper-vigilance and deteriorating mental health. Her paranoia becomes a direct consequence of her professional environment, destabilising her personal life. When Neal suggests she take medication to manage her anxiety, she replies, "I'm already on a cocktail of medication to take the edge off. I don't think it's working" (7:54, S2 Ep3). These episodes underscore the profound impact Joe's job has not only on her family dynamics but also on her personal well-being and romantic relationship. Her

internalised sense of duty and exposure to constant threat alienate her from her domestic environment, reinforcing the narrative that women in positions of power cannot fully inhabit their roles as partners and mothers. Her psychological struggle is yet another way in which *Lioness* portrays motherhood, and femininity more broadly, as fundamentally at odds with the demands of heroism. It reflects Brandt's findings on the portrayal of powerful women and the implicit punishments for their success (2019, p. 113): Joe managed to climb the hierarchical ladder in her job, but her personal life and mental health are falling apart.

4.1.5. Chapter 1 Conclusion

To conclude this first chapter of analysis, it becomes evident that gender operates as a structural limitation on the female characters' power. Despite occupying positions of authority, demonstrating physical strength, or possessing financial means, these women's agency is consistently undermined by the male-dominated environments in which they operate. Their power is conditional and constrained, often requiring justification in ways that are not expected of their male counterparts. As Tasker (2022, p. 277) argues, female characters must be narratively motivated to exercise power or violence; they cannot simply be heroic for its own sake. Moreover, when these women do assert their power, it comes at a personal cost. Their professional heroism is shown to be incompatible with a stable or fulfilling family life, reinforcing what Sweet (2022, p. 219) identifies as the problematic representation of motherhood in heroic female figures. Ultimately, *Lioness* presents characters who, while appearing powerful, are emblematic of the "reluctant heroine" (Lotz, 2006, p. 81), women whose authority is perpetually constrained by gendered expectations and whose power remains, at its core, limited by men.

4.2. Strategic Whiteness and Ethnic Minorities Stereotyping

Gender is not the sole factor constraining the power of the main characters in *Lioness*; rather, it intersects with other social categories such as race, producing layered and complex identities. In this context, *Lioness* deploys what can be termed a strategic whiteness that ultimately disempowers ethnic minority characters. This intersectionality results in what Crenshaw (1989, p. 140) describes as "multiply-burdened" individuals. Among the main characters, Joe, Cruz, and Aaliyah all belong to ethnic minorities, while Kaitlyn is the only white protagonist. This chapter argues that although *Lioness* seemingly promotes diversity through its casting, it ultimately reinforces stereotypical power structures by confining characters of colour to narrowly defined roles. The following analysis will begin with the invisibilisation of race, move into the binary portrayal of "virtuous whites" versus "bad others," and conclude with a discussion of how racialised stereotypes are perpetuated through character representation.

4.2.1. Erasing Ethnic Minorities

Although three of the four central characters are women of colour, race is conspicuously minimised throughout the show. Discussions of racial identity are virtually absent. Joe's ethnicity, for example, is only mentioned in season two when she references her grandfather emigrating from the Dominican Republic to the United States. Even then, race is not the focal point of the conversation; it is instrumentalised to support a narrative about duty and national service. Similarly, Cruz's background is reduced to a single sentence in the first episode: her father is Syrian, and her mother is Mexican. Beyond these fleeting references, the racial identities of the characters remain unaddressed, despite the show being set in a contemporary sociopolitical context where race is a central societal concern. Aaliyah's nationality is also obscured. While the narrative suggests she may have Saudi roots, this is never clarified; instead, the show frames her primarily as a Muslim Arab woman embedded in a strict Muslim environment. Although the presence of three women of colour in lead roles appears to challenge the systemic underrepresentation of minorities in U.S. television, as highlighted by Erigha (2015, p. 81) and Tukachinsky et al. (2017, p. 25), the treatment of these characters ultimately reinforces invisibilisation. As Rocchi and Farinacci (2020) observe, such portrayals downplay the ongoing realities of systemic racism by constructing a post-racial narrative universe in which race is rendered background noise, thereby disempowering minority characters.

Notably, the only instance in which race is directly addressed, without serving another narrative function, comes in the form of overt racism. Kaitlyn, referring to a housekeeper associated with a drug cartel leader, states, “I fucking hate these descendants of Spaniards” (S2 Ep3, 2:50) after commenting that the woman “looks Zapotec” (S2 Ep3, 2:44) and suggesting she could be bought. This racist stereotyping is voiced by the only white female character, revealing the privilege that allows her to make such comments, something the minority characters would not do. This instance underscores how race only surfaces in the show when it signals a lack of solidarity among women, aligning with Rocchi and Farinacci’s (2020, p. 35) argument that whiteness is preserved by highlighting division rather than unity across racial lines. The show becomes a relevant example of a diverse cast that does not prevent the reinforcement of stereotypical power structures by confining ethnic minorities to narrowly defined roles.

4.2.2. Constructing the Virtuous White and the Deviant Other

Within *Lioness*, white and non-white characters coexist, but a recurrent narrative structure casts white characters as virtuous while portraying characters of colour in a less favourable light. The examples of Joe versus her husband Neal, and Joe versus her superior Kaitlyn highlight such a phenomenon. Joe’s husband Neal, a white man, is consistently depicted as a caring father, loving partner, and accomplished surgeon. He successfully manages his career while also being present and nurturing toward his daughters, in stark contrast to Joe, who is portrayed as emotionally distant and professionally driven. As a result, Joe is framed as selfish and inadequate, while Neal becomes the implied moral centre of the family, the ‘real’ hero. Neal’s moral virtue is further emphasised through his efforts to shield Joe from being perceived negatively by their daughters. For example, when their eldest child is involved in a car accident and Joe is uncertain whether she can leave her mission to go to the hospital, Neal tells her, “I won’t tell her you’re coming in case you can’t peel away” (S1, Ep4, 19:12). This moment positions Neal as selfless and supportive, in contrast to Joe, who is framed as emotionally distant and prioritising her professional duties over maternal responsibilities. This dynamic supports findings such as those from (McWan & Cramer, 2022), which argue that characters of colour often function in television narratives primarily to “sustain whiteness” (p.321) by being cast as deviant or flawed. Joe’s absence and selfishness only underline Neal’s dedication to their daughter and selflessness, ultimately serving a strategic whiteness.

A similar dynamic plays out between Joe and Kaitlyn. In their professional interactions, Kaitlyn is frequently positioned as composed and rational, in contrast to Joe, who is emotional and reactive. For instance, during a meeting with military commanders about selecting a new Lioness, Joe expresses anger, while Kaitlyn remains diplomatic, telling her, “They’re trying to be helpful in their own way” (S2 Ep2, 03:40). In another instance, Kaitlyn reprimands Joe in a meeting: “Tone, and volume, Joe. Find different levels for both please” (S2 Ep4, 0:45). These moments reinforce a strategic contrast in which the white woman’s calmness is favourably juxtaposed with the emotional volatility of a Black and Latina woman, subtly legitimizing white authority and composure while casting non-white assertiveness as inappropriate or excessive.

Aaliyah's character further reinforces the framing of whiteness as synonymous with goodness, albeit through a different lens. She is portrayed as the archetypal oppressed Arab woman, subjugated by the patriarchal structures of her family and cultural environment. In this framing, Arab men are implicitly cast as dangerous, archaic, and regressive, especially when compared to the modern, democratic values represented by U.S. characters. While a more detailed analysis of Aaliyah’s constrained role will follow in a subsequent section, it is already clear that her representation contributes to a broader narrative that casts non-white cultures as oppressive and white Western values as liberating. Such contrasted representations sustain Tukachinsky et al.’s (2017, p. 26) argumentation: existing power hierarchies between White characters and characters from ethnic minorities are reinforced rather than challenged.

Overall, the representation of women of colour in *Lioness* appears to serve a strategic function: to uphold and legitimise whiteness by portraying minority characters as emotionally unstable, selfish, or culturally constrained. In doing so, the show undermines the potential for these characters to be genuinely empowered, despite their apparent centrality to the narrative.

4.2.3. Stereotypical Ethnic Minorities

Another trope that undermines the agency of ethnic minority characters in *Lioness* is the use of stereotypes. The characters of Joe, Cruz, and Aaliyah are constructed through reductive representational frameworks that essentialize their identities and constrain their narrative complexity, thereby reinforcing dominant social hierarchies. Cruz’s background draws on the familiar trope of a troubled, impoverished upbringing; both Joe, and to some

extent Cruz, are characterised by anger and violence; while Aaliyah is depicted in line with the stereotypical figure of the oppressed Arab woman.

Cruz is constructed through a stereotypical narrative that frames her difficult past as the source of her current strength and moral motivation. In the opening episode, flashbacks depict her working at a fast-food restaurant, living in overcrowded conditions, and having lost the opportunity to attend college due to the trauma of her mother's death. Her siblings are either deceased or incarcerated, her father is absent, and her boyfriend is abusive. In season two, she reveals: "My beatings, they came from a revolving door of my mother's boyfriends" (S2 Ep7, 32:27). These experiences are portrayed as foundational to her resilience and dedication to the Marines. For instance, when confronted by Joe, Cruz stands naked and unyielding, stating, "Knock yourself out, lady, I can stand here al fucking day" (S1 Ep1, 28:12), suggesting that this situation is nothing as bad as what she has faced in her past. Such a narrative implies both that a woman from an ethnic minority is likely to have a difficult upbringing and to be a victim, as well as illustrating again the necessity for a 'backstory' to legitimate and justify her power. This representation mirrors the "ghetto" storyline Yuen (2004, pp. 254-255) identifies in her ethnographic research, in which ethnic minority characters are funnelled into roles shaped by reductive cultural assumptions. Cruz, as a poor Latina woman with a traumatic upbringing, fits this pattern: her personal hardships are used to justify her strength, thereby reducing her complexity to a simplistic cause-and-effect narrative.

Joe, and, to a lesser extent Cruz, are cast within the pervasive stereotype of the angry Black or Latina woman. Joe's frequent use of violent language is particularly striking. Her language includes insults such as "you son of a bitch" (S1 Ep4, 14:20), "fucking shirt" (S1 Ep2, 23:09), or "We'll fucking kill you" (S1 Ep4, 37:55). The frequent use of the expletives "fuck" and "fucking" is particularly striking, serving to underline Joe's anger while simultaneously signaling a perceived lack of composure or professionalism within a context defined by high-stakes responsibility and rigid hierarchical structures. Her physical aggression is also emphasised. In one scene, while on a mission, she violently kicks a wall after being interrupted by a call from her family. Her most intense outburst occurs in season two when, during a confrontation on a military base in Iraq, she tells a commanding officer: "Be very fucking careful the way you fucking talk to me. I'm the highest ranking officer anywhere I fucking go" (S2 Ep2, 39:52), followed by spitting on the ground and shouting, "And this base better start fucking acting like it!" (S2E2, 40:01). The portrayal of Joe as an angry and emotionally unstable character aligns with existing research suggesting that

women of colour are frequently stereotyped as aggressive and unprofessional (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Tukachinsky et al., 2017, p. 32).

Cruz, while less overtly aggressive, also displays physical violence, most notably when she punches Joe multiple times in the final episode of season one. After completing a mission that involved betrayal and near-death, Cruz's anger culminates in violence. Her inability to express this emotion in any other way reinforces stereotypes about women of colour as prone to aggression. Scholars have long noted this pattern (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Tukachinsky et al., 2017, p. 32), and the portrayal of Joe and Cruz adheres closely to these established tendencies. In contrast, Kaitlyn, the sole white female protagonist, is never portrayed as physically violent and rarely uses aggressive language. When she uses it, it is usually to make a point rather than to express her anger. For example, when she says "Let me know when we're done dick measuring, I'll start the briefing" (S2 Ep2, 01:42); it highlights a legitimate anger when confronted to a sexist behaviour. This contrast once again upholds a racialised hierarchy of morality and behaviour, reinforcing whiteness as inherently superior. Moreover, while it is noteworthy that Joe and Cruz are part of the CIA, a body ostensibly working against criminality, the morally ambiguous means they often employ complicate this distinction. Their methods blur ethical boundaries, placing them in a grey area that aligns with media tendencies to associate women of colour with criminality (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Tukachinsky et al., 2017, p. 32).

Additionally, all three non-white women are significantly younger than Kaitlyn. This supports Eschholz et al.'s (2002, p. 315) findings that white women are typically portrayed as older and more authoritative, while women of colour are relegated to youth-associated roles, diminishing their perceived power. Joe's portrayal also includes an emphasis on her sex life: despite exhaustion, family conflict, or even injury, she and her husband Neal often engage in sexual activity upon her return home. In stark contrast, Kaitlyn, who shares a similar lifestyle, is never portrayed in a sexual context. This aligns with research showing that Latina women are disproportionately depicted as hypersexual (Tukachinsky et al., 2017, p. 32), reinforcing yet another racialised stereotype in Joe's characterisation.

Joe is also shown manipulating other women, particularly those from ethnic minorities, to achieve mission objectives. This behaviour reveals an abuse of power and a lack of ethical boundaries. For instance, when Cruz is conflicted between her mission and her love for Aaliyah, Joe reframes the situation to serve strategic ends: "I know you've been abused, you have no friends and family. You gave yourself to the Marines and then to me. And now you have a noble purpose. But it can't make you feel loved and wanted. And people

need that. And she made you feel that. But don't think she's in love with you. You're her last straw of freedom before becoming a baby maker" (S1 Ep7, 20:28). Joe turns the situation in a way that forces Cruz to believe Aaliyah cannot give her the same reward as the mission can, using her position as a mentor to strengthen her point. A similar tactic is used with Joe Carillo, the new Lioness in season two, when Joe pressures her to join the program: "Do you love your country"; "Your country needs you"; "Your country needs more"; "It's a simple fucking question" (S2 Ep2, 44:07). In both instances, Joe exploits vulnerabilities to coerce cooperation, reinforcing her depiction as morally ambiguous. This corresponds with scholarly findings that women of colour are often represented as less ethical and less professional (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000; Tukachinsky et al., 2017). Ultimately, Joe and, to a lesser extent, Cruz, embody multiple racialised stereotypes, which collectively underscore the hegemony of whiteness in television narratives.

Aaliyah is portrayed through the Western lens of the oppressed Arab woman, another stereotype that diminishes minority power. As the daughter of a terrorist, she is immediately positioned as submissive and powerless in the face of patriarchal control coming from within her family. Upon meeting Cruz, Aaliyah remarks: "A woman can't buy jewellery for herself, because it doesn't mean anything, it has to be given to you" (S1 Ep3, 37:09), suggesting her internalisation of gender-based objectification. Aaliyah's lack of agency is repeatedly emphasised. She expresses her desire not to marry but concedes that her opinion is irrelevant: "I don't want to get married […] what I want is not factored into the equation" (S1 Ep4, 2:27). These admissions occur only in secluded moments, such as while swimming with Cruz, indicating her fear of surveillance. Indeed, Aaliyah is constantly monitored, not only by bodyguards and drivers but also through extensive domestic surveillance. Her character embodies the essentialist narrative that Muslim women lack autonomy and independence, a stereotype critiqued by Abu-Lughod (2002, p. 786). Aaliyah's life is controlled by her father, her future husband, but also broader cultural constraints.

Indeed, Aaliyah frequently generalises her situation to all Muslim women, as when she says: "It's not just husbands they choose for you, they choose it all" (S1 Ep3, 22:54). This sweeping claim oversimplifies the diverse experiences of Muslim women and contributes to the demonisation of Muslim men, pointed at with 'they'. *Lioness* frames 'they', the Muslim men, as responsible for Arab women's lack of freedom and overall unhappiness. The combination of this demonisation with the notion of a Western saviour, here, a Western operative sent to eliminate a terrorist, reinforces an orientalist framework that asserts Western moral and cultural superiority (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 789). Aaliyah's powerlessness is

compounded by the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and geopolitics. Her line, “For me to know love would be the death of me” (S1 Ep6, 35:22), encapsulates the entangled constraints of her identity as a queer Muslim woman. In her case, marginalisation is not merely symbolic; it places her in existential danger. Thus, Aaliyah’s character epitomises how stereotypical representations can obscure complexity and agency, ultimately reinforcing structures of Western dominance.

4.2.4. Chapter 2 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that *Lioness* employs a strategic whiteness that systematically undermines the agency of its minority characters, reinforcing racialised power structures despite an ostensibly diverse cast. As Crenshaw (1989) reminds us, characters like Joe, Cruz, and Aaliyah are “multiply-burdened” by intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Their racial identities are either invisibilised or stereotypically portrayed, diminishing their narrative authority. Joe and Cruz embody the "angry woman of colour" and “ghetto” tropes, while Aaliyah is framed through orientalist notions of the oppressed Arab woman (Abu-Lughod, 2002). In contrast, whiteness, personified by Kaitlyn, is depicted as calm, rational, and morally superior, reinforcing the racial hierarchy identified by Mastro and Greenberg (2000) and Tukachinsky et al. (2017). Moreover, as Rocchi and Farinacci (2020) argue, whiteness is preserved by highlighting division among women of colour, rather than solidarity. Even when portrayed as central to the plot, minority characters remain structurally disempowered, often used to affirm white virtue or justify U.S. geopolitical dominance. Thus, *Lioness* perpetuates dominant narratives that associate whiteness with order and non-whiteness with chaos, ultimately reinforcing the cultural and political hegemony that marginalises ethnic minorities in mainstream television. Race, in *Lioness*, is not incidental, it is foundational to how power is distributed.

4.3. Social Hierarchy: The Construction of Power Through Class

The four central female characters in *Lioness* occupy markedly distinct positions along the socio-economic spectrum, and such variations in wealth directly influence their levels of power and social agency. The narrative actively constructs a hierarchical social framework within which class operates as a primary organising force, determining not only access to material resources but also the scope of each woman's autonomy, social mobility, and symbolic capital. This hierarchy is neither subtle nor incidental; rather, it is foundational to the show's portrayal of interpersonal dynamics, professional authority, and self-perception.

As previously discussed, any analysis of class representation within *Lioness* must be approached through the lens of intersectionality. Social class in the series does not function in isolation, it is inextricably intertwined with race, gender, and institutional positioning, producing nuanced variations in the characters' experiences and degrees of power. The interplay between these social categories shapes how each woman is perceived by others, how she perceives herself, and how she performs her role and exercise her power within the broader social order. In this way, *Lioness* not only reflects but also critiques the ways in which capitalist societies internalise and enforce rigid class boundaries.

Crucially, wealth in *Lioness* is not portrayed as a neutral or static marker of success; rather, it becomes an identity-shaping force. The characters do not simply inhabit different classes; they embody them, often with an acute awareness of what each class is socially "entitled" to do or to be. The performance of class thus becomes an implicit and often involuntary act of self-regulation, whereby characters adapt their behaviour, aspirations, and even their emotional expressions according to the constraints and expectations associated with their class positioning. This chapter will first explore the constructed hierarchy of social classes as depicted in *Lioness*, before turning to the ambiguous and often contradictory power dynamics among the four women. Finally, it will analyse the series' critical portrayal of the ultra-rich, particularly through the character of Aaliyah, as a complex case of privilege coexisting with constraint.

4.3.1. Constructing the Social Hierarchy in *Lioness*

Lioness delineates a clear social stratification, represented through four female protagonists who collectively span the socio-economic spectrum: the ultra-rich, the educated upper class, the newly wealthy, and the working poor. This narrative architecture establishes a symbolic and functional hierarchy in which power and legitimacy are allocated primarily

according to wealth, with minor exceptions that expose the limitations and contradictions of this system. Importantly, the ultra-rich are somewhat marginalised, as seen through Aaliyah's character, occupying a paradoxical space of both excessive privilege and constrained agency, a dynamic explored in greater detail later in this chapter.

At the lowest end of this socio-economic spectrum is Cruz, whose character embodies many of the damaging stereotypes often associated with poverty. Her background is characterised by systemic neglect, personal trauma, and limited access to education or opportunity. As the daughter of an unknown father and a deceased mother, and as a survivor of repeated abuse, Cruz's narrative arc mirrors the representation of the working-class woman as a figure of endurance and victimisation. These characteristics align with Bullock et al.'s (2001, p. 231) analysis, which identifies common tropes attached to portrayals of the lower classes in media, namely, associations with criminality, sexual vulnerability, violence, and dysfunction. Within the span of a few episode, Cruz embodies almost all these elements: she is mistreated by a violent boyfriend and is aggressive toward him in return; she is sexually assaulted; and her dysfunctional family is mentioned several times.

By contrast, Kaitlyn, a wealthy and well-educated white woman, is framed as the epitome of upper-class success and respectability. There is no suggestion of a troubled past or unstable family history; her life is marked by order, control, and refinement. She appears perpetually composed, dressed in expensive attire, and maintains a carefully curated appearance that includes plastic surgery and other visible markers of affluence. Kaitlyn not only embodies wealth but also performs it through her bodily aesthetics and speech. Her whiteness, importantly, does not function in isolation but intersects with her class position to reinforce a hegemonic ideal; she is not just rich, but the 'right kind' of rich: white, authoritative, attractive, and cultivated. This reinforces Behm-Morawitz et al.'s (2018, p. 219) observation that media representations of upper-class women often portray them as aspirational figures who are both romantically desirable and socially successful.

Joe occupies a middle ground in this hierarchy. She is a woman of colour who comes from an immigrant background, and while she has ascended to a position of material wealth and professional influence, her 'new money' status is repeatedly emphasised through her lack of cultural and behavioural fluency in elite settings. Joe's character is emotionally volatile, often aggressive, and marked by strained personal relationships, especially with her daughter and husband. Joe's emotional volatility underlines her difficulty in fitting into this upper-class world and position of authority. For example, upon her arrival at a military base in Iraq, Joe reacts with visible frustration when she does not receive the level of recognition typically

accorded to someone of her rank. She expresses her anger by spitting on the ground and asserting her authority, exclaiming, “this base better start fucking acting like it!” (S2 Ep2, 40:01). These aspects of her portrayal draw attention to the instability often associated with upward social mobility among minorities, particularly when they are unable or unwilling to assimilate fully into upper-class norms. Joe's character disrupts the narrative of seamless class ascent, revealing instead the persistence of race and gender-based limitations even for those who have ostensibly ‘made it’.

Cruz’s and Joe’s positions are both marked by varying degrees of exclusion from elite spaces, and their social identities are further constructed through their perceived lack of knowledge and cultural capital. Cruz, in particular, is portrayed as lacking intellectual sophistication, a narrative choice that implicitly equates poverty with ignorance. Conversely, Kaitlyn is presented as both educated and wise, often functioning as the voice of rational authority within the group. Joe, while knowledgeable in a professional context, lacks Kaitlyn’s composure and strategic foresight. This differential framing of intelligence reflects the deep entanglement of class and epistemic authority, certain forms of knowledge are valued more than others, and those who possess them are granted greater legitimacy. The differential intellectual framing of the characters reflects Kellner and Share’s (2019, p. 3) observation that media narratives often valorise the wealthy while marginalising the poor. This example also illustrates intersectionality in a pronounced way: the only white woman is depicted as possessing the greatest influence, an outcome of her wealth, cultural capital, and elevated social position. This aligns with findings by Sutherland and Feltey (2017), drawing on Allen (1998), which suggest that portrayals of powerful women in media tend to privilege those who are white and middle class. The idea of ‘codes’, unspoken norms, values, and behaviours specific to particular social classes, serves as a recurring motif throughout the series. Cruz’s discomfort in the luxurious, hyper-elite world inhabited by Aaliyah is not merely a matter of material difference, but one of cultural dislocation. She does not know how to dress, speak, or behave in a way that aligns with the expectations of that world. This misalignment signals her outsider status and reinforces the boundaries of class-based inclusion. Such moments in the narrative underscore how deeply internalised and performative class distinctions are, as well as how difficult they are to transcend.

Ultimately, *Lioness* constructs a clear, if complex, social hierarchy. At its summit is Kaitlyn, the wealthy, educated, white woman who exemplifies hegemonic privilege. Below her are Joe, the upwardly mobile but culturally misaligned professional; Cruz, the undereducated and trauma-scarred working-class woman; and Aaliyah, the ultra-rich yet

politically compromised outsider. This arrangement does not simply reflect material realities but communicates powerful cultural messages about who is entitled to knowledge, authority, and legitimacy within contemporary society.

4.3.2. Ambiguous Power Relationships

The hierarchical pyramid depicted in *Lioness* manifests itself in complex and ambiguous relationships among the four central women. While a clear hierarchy is present, the boundaries between professional roles and private life remain blurred in their interactions. For example, Kaitlyn and Joe share a friendship in addition to their working relationship. Yet, can such a friendship truly be equitable when one holds authority and decision-making power over the other? Their dynamic constantly fluctuates between extremes, going from close colleagues who trust and respect one another to a strict hierarchical relationship where Kaitlyn has authority over Joe. In the third episode of the first season, for instance, they are shown having lunch in a restaurant, casually discussing terrorist strategies and developing theories together, interacting as intellectual equals in that moment. Similarly, when Joe expresses concerns about Cruz, Kaitlyn tells her, "She's your field agent, do what you think is best" (S1 Ep2, 12:09), demonstrating trust and professional respect. However, Kaitlyn's authority over Joe is unmistakable. In formal settings, Joe refers to Kaitlyn as "Ma'am", whereas Kaitlyn addresses Joe by her first name, reinforcing an imbalance. When Joe assures Kaitlyn she will do her best on a mission, Kaitlyn replies curtly, "I didn't ask for your best, do it" (S2 Ep2, 33:38), displaying an authoritarian tone that stems from her superior rank. Interestingly, their hierarchical roles momentarily dissolve when they confront male superiors. In Season 1, both women are stripped of control over their own mission, despite having greater expertise, rendering them equal in the face of that injustice provoked by men.

A similarly ambiguous power dynamic develops between Joe and Cruz. Initially, Joe exerts absolute authority over Cruz, asserting, for example, "Get used to it, because that's our relationship" (S1 Ep1, 33:33), after Cruz expresses frustration at being constantly ordered around. However, by Season 2, a degree of mutual respect emerges. Joe seeks Cruz's input regarding the selection of a new Lioness operator and praises her insight, saying, "You got smart" (S2 Ep5, 17:28). Cruz responds pointedly, "I've always been smart. You just didn't notice" (S2 Ep5, 17:33). This exchange underscores Cruz's awareness of her own value and the need to assert it in the face of class-based invisibility. It also reflects broader systemic issues, whereby the upper classes often fail to recognise the capabilities of those beneath

them in the social hierarchy. In Cruz's case, as well as in Joe's case, their ambiguous relationships with another more powerful woman are synonymous with a relationship with a woman from a higher class. It reinforces Kellner & Share's findings, highlighting the celebration of the rich and powerful in the media (2019, p. 3).

Cruz's role in the Lioness operation further exposes the dehumanisation of working-class women of colour. She is instrumentalised, a Latina woman from a working-class background used as a tool by those with significant power and responsibility. Her disposability is evident in scenes such as when Kaitlyn, in Cruz's presence, asks Joe, "You trust her on a commercial flight alone?" (S1 Ep6, 29:10), and when Cruz is referred to explicitly as a "sacrifice" (S1 Ep6, 22:46). These instances highlight not only her lack of agency but also the way class and ethnicity intersect in her objectification. Additionally, Cruz is depicted as an outsider within Aaliyah's ultra-wealthy social world. She is unfamiliar with the cultural codes, references, and expected behaviours in such elite environments. In the first episode, Aaliyah casually mocks Cruz for her lack of travel experience. Later, when the two women bond during a spa day, Cruz's discomfort is evident. Observing this, Aaliyah asks in astonishment, "You've never had a facial?" (S1 Ep6, 7:09), underscoring the vast social and cultural gap between them. While Aaliyah herself is curious and kind toward Cruz, her friends are openly disdainful, referring to Cruz on several occasions as a "dog" or a "stray dog". These insults reveal a violent rejection rooted in classism, exposing how Cruz's working-class status marks her as inferior and unwelcome within elite circles. This form of class violence, and the broader hierarchy presented in *Lioness*, reinforce longstanding stereotypical representations noted in academic literature. Ethnic minority characters are disproportionately portrayed as belonging to lower socio-economic backgrounds and facing hardship, while white characters are often positioned in the upper class and are portrayed as aspirational, both materially and physically. The ambiguous power dynamics between the female characters thus align with these representational patterns and further support Sutherland and Feltey's (2017, p. 628) argument that contemporary narratives often depict power as something acquired and exercised on an individual level, thereby reinforcing neoliberal ideals of self-reliance and meritocracy. However, the illusion of mobility in *Lioness* ultimately proves hollow. Despite their efforts, the characters remain constrained by structural factors, particularly gender and race, which continue to limit their ability to ascend the socio-economic hierarchy.

4.3.3. Framing the Ultra-Rich

The extreme wealth portrayed through Aaliyah is accompanied by a profound disconnection from the rest of the world, depicting her and her environment as existing within an insular 'bubble', a bubble that, paradoxically, limits her agency. The initial encounter between Cruz and Aaliyah takes place in a Louis Vuitton store, immediately setting the tone for the extravagant lifestyle that defines Aaliyah's character. She inhabits opulent residences, surrounded by private drivers, bodyguards, and domestic staff. When Cruz arrives at her home with visible bruises, Aaliyah summons a private doctor to examine her on-site. Her affluence affords her the ability to consume without constraint, for instance, when she damages Cruz's dress, she casually remarks, "Don't worry, I'll buy you five more" (S1 Ep7, 13:02). During a spa day she organises, the entire spa staff is brought to her estate. Her wealth enables everything to come to her, eliminating the need for her to reach out to the world, but also transforming her into an outsider disconnected from reality.

However, this self-contained "world within a world" (S1 Ep7, 7:47), as Aaliyah describes it, resembles a gilded cage more than a space of liberation. She is driven everywhere not by choice, but because she lacks a driver's licence. Medical professionals and service providers are brought into her home, which subtly prevents her from leaving its confines. Her bodyguards, ostensibly there for protection, also function as monitors, reporting her actions to her fiancé. The fear she has of the outside world is explicitly expressed: "In Beverly Hills, if you have a nice purse or a nice car, they follow you home and rob you. If you're pretty enough, they take you too. There is no more safe in the world. But there is a special world inside that world" (S1 Ep7, 5:44). Aaliyah is alienated from society at large, her wealth marginalises her. When Cruz confesses feeling embarrassed about not being wealthy, Aaliyah responds, "That's what I like about you. I want to see it, it's where you live" (S1 Ep5, 36:50). Her curiosity about Cruz's background reveals a longing for a sense of normalcy. In essence, Aaliyah possesses unlimited material resources but exercises almost no agency over the fundamental decisions shaping her life.

This portrayal of extreme wealth oscillates between idleness and moral decay. Aaliyah and her social circle are characterised by leisure and superficiality, engaging in constant partying, flirting, and dating. In the fourth episode, for instance, the group is shown vacationing on a beach in the Hamptons after arriving by private jet. One friend crudely refers to another as "what a whore" (S1 Ep4, 0:37), underscoring the shallowness of their interactions. For them, dating and indulgence seem to be the only concerns. Aaliyah herself

says of her upcoming wedding, “For me it’s perfect. I plan nothing. I show up, we have a party, have another party” (S1 Ep7, 5:03). Her material excess appears to compensate for her lack of autonomy, reinforcing the metaphor of a golden prison.

The ‘bubble’ of extreme wealth is also associated with criminality. Aaliyah is the daughter of a powerful terrorist, a narrative thread that intertwines opulence with moral corruption. Cruz, representing a lower-class perspective, is acutely aware of this disparity and expresses implicit judgment. Her statements, “I lack the trust fund for endless vacation” (S1 Ep3, 33:02) or “One thing this job taught me: crime sure fucking pays” (S2 Ep5, 28:37), convey a sense of resentment towards the upper class. This criticism, while existing, is marginal, aligning with Kendall’s ‘bad apple’ frame theory (2011, pp. 29-79), which portrays misconduct by wealthy individuals as isolated incidents, thereby protecting systemic privilege from scrutiny. The distant other that Aaliyah’s dad represents is the bad apple, but Kaitlyn, for instance, is not portrayed as evil or deviant because of her wealth.

Furthermore, this framing of the ultra-wealthy is deeply entangled with racial representations. As noted in the preceding analysis and literature review, ethnic minorities are disproportionately portrayed as criminals. This dynamic is replicated in *Lioness*, where Aaliyah’s Arab family is explicitly represented as a terrorist organisation. Furthermore, this portrayal aligns with Hunt’s (2004) findings, which suggest that upper-class families are frequently depicted as emotionally fractured and unhappy (pp. 187-189). Aaliyah’s character embodies this trope: despite her wealth, she is profoundly unhappy and constrained, lacking control over her life and environment. Her depiction thus reinforces a broader critical narrative: that extreme affluence isolates individuals socially and emotionally, turning material privilege into a form of entrapment rather than empowerment.

4.3.4. Chapter 3 Conclusion

In *Lioness*, class is not merely a backdrop but a central axis around which power revolves. This chapter has demonstrated how the series constructs a stratified social world in which access to authority and autonomy is intricately tied to wealth. As Bullock et al. (2001) highlight, media often rely on entrenched class stereotypes, seen in Cruz’s portrayal as poor, vulnerable, and disposable, while upper-class characters like Kaitlyn are rendered aspirational, embodying control, composure, and cultural capital (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2018). Yet, *Lioness* also complicates these representations. Joe’s volatile position as a woman of colour navigating new wealth reflects the instability of meritocratic ideals, while Aaliyah’s

ultra-wealth portrays extreme privilege as a gilded cage, evoking Hunt's (2004) insights into the emotional alienation of the affluent.

Power in *Lioness* is thus always partial, ambiguous, and refracted through class. Even when characters cross professional boundaries, their interpersonal dynamics remain shaped by underlying hierarchies. The illusion of class mobility falters under the weight of racial and gendered constraints, revealing structural barriers that personal agency cannot overcome. In its depiction of these intersecting inequalities, *Lioness* exposes the enduring force of class in shaping who gets to lead, and who is left behind.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate how *Lioness*, a contemporary spy-thriller centred on female protagonists, represents power and its intersection with gender, race, and class. This conclusion is structured in three parts: an answer to the research question, a discussion of the theoretical and societal implications, and a reflection on the study's limitations and suggestions for future research.

5.1. Answer to the Research Question

Motivated by the show's popularity and critical acclaim, this research was guided by the following question: How is power represented in the spy thriller Lioness, particularly in relation to gender, race, and class? Through a comprehensive literature review, this study established an intersectional framework for analysing power on screen. Prior research demonstrated that women, particularly women of colour and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, remain underrepresented and are often portrayed through reductive or stereotypical lenses (Brandt, 2019; Collins, 2011; Erigha, 2015; Mastro, 2009; Tukachinsky et al., 2017).

The thematic analysis of *Lioness* focused on four central female characters, mostly non-white and from distinct social classes. Despite occupying positions of apparent strength, each character's power is consistently undermined by external constraints. Even Kaitlyn, the most hierarchically empowered, must navigate a system entrenched in patriarchal norms. Gender, however, is not the only axis of marginalisation. Race and class also shape each woman's access to authority and legitimacy. The show constructs a façade of diversity while reinforcing white hegemony and class privilege through stereotypical depictions. Although the women possess different forms of power: relational, physical, professional, or material, their ability to exercise such power is limited by their identities. Ultimately, *Lioness* portrays power not as liberatory, but as conditional, constrained by intersecting social hierarchies.

5.2. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study offers a detailed analysis of power representation in *Lioness*, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, by focusing on a single television series, the research does not claim to provide generalisable conclusions about the spy-thriller genre or broader television trends. Future studies should expand the scope by including a wider range

of series, ideally across different genres, to build a more comprehensive picture of how intersectional power is represented on screen.

Second, this research focused exclusively on four main female characters. Other groups, including men from ethnic minorities or disabled characters, for example, were excluded. Examining how other marginalised identities experience power, or lack of power, would provide valuable insight into the broader dynamics of representation. Future studies might explore how masculinity intersects with race and class in similar media contexts, or how power is negotiated by queer and disabled characters in traditionally hierarchical environments.

Additionally, this study concentrated on textual analysis and did not explore how audiences interpret or respond to these representations. Incorporating audience research, such as interviews or focus groups, would help assess whether the disempowering narratives identified in this study are indeed internalised or resisted by viewers. Such work would bridge the gap between production and reception studies.

Finally, while the use of qualitative thematic analysis allowed for rich and nuanced interpretations, this approach is inherently subjective and potentially influenced by researcher bias. Nonetheless, methodological transparency and consistency in the coding process support the validity and reliability of the findings. Future research could benefit from combining qualitative and quantitative methods to further strengthen the conclusions.

5.3. Societal and Theoretical Implications

The findings have significant implications for media representation and its societal effects. While *Lioness* presents itself as progressive through its focus on women in powerful roles, it reproduces structural hierarchies rooted in gender, race, and class. As Bandura (2020) notes, mediated representations shape social cognition. When women of colour are repeatedly depicted as emotionally volatile, ethically conflicted, or structurally powerless, as is the case with Joe, Cruz, and Aaliyah, such portrayals risk being internalised by audiences as reflective of reality. This can perpetuate existing workplace and societal biases, particularly those that question the competence or professionalism of women from minority backgrounds (Tukachinsky et al., 2017; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000).

Moreover, *Lioness* reflects a neoliberal narrative of power, portraying success as a product of individual effort rather than structural privilege. This aligns with Sutherland and Feltey's (2017) critique of media that frame meritocracy as a universal truth, thereby

obscuring systemic barriers and attributing failure to personal shortcomings. In doing so, the show contributes to a broader media discourse that delegitimises structural critique and reinforces the marginalisation of women who do not conform to hegemonic norms. These findings underscore the need for more nuanced, intersectional approaches to media storytelling, ones that interrogate, rather than replicate, systems of oppression.

Finally, this intersectional analysis of *Lioness* highlighted how race, gender, and class remain entangled in shaping who gets to be powerful and how such power is legitimised or constrained within military fiction. Considering the underrepresentation of women in this genre, especially women from ethnic minorities, this analysis not only critiques the current state of media portrayals but also contributes to a broader understanding of how narratives can evolve. As the genre slowly diversifies, studies like this one can inform and inspire more nuanced, equitable storytelling that resists reductive tropes. In this way, critical engagement with texts like *Lioness* is not only an academic exercise but also a call to reimagine who gets to lead, fight, and survive in the cultural landscapes we create. The future of military fiction depends not just on representation, but on the willingness to interrogate the power structures that shape it.

6. References

Abu-Lughod, L. (2002). Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others. *American anthropologist*, *104*(3), 783-790

Babbie, E. R. (2021). The practice of social research (Fifteenth edition). Cengage.

Bandura, A. (2002). Social cognitive theory of mass communication. In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), Media effects: Advances in theory and research (2nd ed., pp. 121–154). Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Bartis, D., Centineo, N., Ciralsky, A., Ebersol, C., Hawley, A., Holmes, J., Klein, G., Liman, D. (2022-2025). *The Recruit* [TV series]. Hypnotic; Lionsgate Television; Perfectman Pictures

Bay, M., Bost, B., Clancy, T., Cuse, C., Ellison, D., Form, A., Fuller, B., Goldberg, D., Krasinski, J., Neufeld, M., Roland, G., Ross, M., Sackheim, D., Tyldum, M. (2018-2023). *Jack Ryan* [TV series]. Amazon Studios; Paramount Television Studios; Platinum Dunes; Push, Boot; Skydance Television; Sunday Night.

Beaubaire, D., Bernard, P., Ferland, G., Gordon, S., Gunn, J., Hochman, M., Neinstein, P., Rashid, M., Ryan, S., Sherak, W., Tossou, N., Vanderbilt, J. *The Night Agent* [TV series]. (2023-present). Exhibit A; MiddKid Productions; Proiect X Entertainment; Sony Pictures Television.

Beers, B., D'Elia, B., Nowalk, P., Rhimes, S. (Executive Producers). (2014 – 2020). *How to get away with murder* [TV show]. ABC Studios; Nowalk Entertainment; Shondaland.

Behm-Morawitz, E., Miller, B. M., & Lewallen, J. (2018). A model for quantitatively analyzing representations of social class in screen media. *Communication Research Reports*, *35*(3), 210-221.

Bevan, A. (2015). The National Body, Women, and Mental Health in Homeland. Cinema Journal, 54(4), 145-151. https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2015.0048

Bilge, S. (2010). Recent feminist outlooks on intersectionality. *Diogenes*, *57*(1), 58-72.

Boeije. H. (2010). Chapters on data analysis. In Analysis in qualitative research (pp. 83-121).

Boylorn, R. M. (2008). As seen on TV: An autoethnographic reflection on race and reality television. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *25*(4), 413-433.

Brandt, J. (2019). "As Seen on TV": Gender, Television, and Popular Culture. In *Gender and Pop Culture* (pp. 107-123). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004411586_006

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In American Psychological Association eBooks (pp. 57–71). https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004

Brennen, B.S. (2017). Qualitative research methods for media studies (2nd ed.). Taylor & Francis Group. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315435978

Bromell, H., Cahn, D., Cary, A., Cuesta, M., Danes, C., Gansa, A., Glatter, L., Gordon, H., Harbinson, P., Johannessen, C., Klick, M., Nir, A., Nyswaner, R., Raff, G., Stiehm, M., Telem, R. (2011-2020). *Homeland* [TV series]. Cherry Pie Productions; Keshet Studios; Fox 21 Television Studios; Showtime Networks; Studio Babelsberg; Teakwood Lane Productions.

Bruckheimer, J., Henderson, J., Ellis, T., Kapinos, T., Littman, J., Modrovich, I., Wiseman, L. (Executive Producers). (2016-2018). *Lucifer* [TV series]. Jerry Bruckheimer Television; DC Entertainment, Warner Bros. Television

Bullock, H. E., Wyche, K. F., & Williams, W. R. (2001). Media images of the poor. *Journal o f Social Issues,* 57(2), pp. 229-246.

Busselle, R., Crandall, H. (2002) Television viewing and perceptions about race differences in socioeconomic success. *Journal o f Broadcasting & Electronic Media,* 46(2), pp. 265-282.

Campione, K. (2023, August 2). Special Ops: Lioness: Taylor Sheridan espionage off to strong start with record audience on Paramount+. *Deadline*. https://deadline.com/2023/08/special-ops-lioness-taylor-sheridan-espionage-thriller-ratings-record-audience-paramount-1235447977/

Collins, R. L. (2011). Content analysis of gender roles in media: Where are we now and where should we go?. *Sex roles*, *64*, 290-298.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), Article 8. http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8

Dates, ,.J & Stroman, C. (2001). Portrayals of families of color on television. In .J Bryant & J. A. Bryant (Eds.), Television and the American family (pp. 207-225). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Downs, E., & Smith, S. L. (2010). Keeping abreast of hypersexuality: A video game character content analysis. *Sex roles*, *62*, 721-733.

Erigha, M. (2015). Race, gender, Hollywood: Representation in cultural production and digital media's potential for change. *Sociology compass*, *9*(1), 78-89.

Eschholz, S., Bufkin, J., & Long, J. (2002). Symbolic reality bites: Women and racial/ethnic minorities in modern film. *Sociological Spectrum*, *22*(3), 299-334.

Falvey, J., Fields, J., Frank, D., Long, C., O'Connor, G., Sackheim, D., Schiff, S., Weisberg, J., Yost, G. (2013-2018). *The Americans* [TV series]. Amblin Television; DreamWorks Television; Fox Television Studios; Fox 21 Television Studios; FX Productions; Nemo Films.

Fiig, C. (2010). Media representation of women politicians from a gender to an intersectionality perspective. *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*, (2-3). https://doi.org/10.7146/kkf.v0i2-3.28013

Gallagher, M. (2013). Media and the representation of gender. In *The Routledge companion to media & gender* (pp. 23-31). Routledge.

Gerbner, G., & Signorielli, N. (1979). Women and minorities in television drama, 1969-1978.

Glasser, D., Hutkin, D., Kidman, N., Kosinski, G., Saldaña, Z., Sheridan, T., Wagner, J., Yari, B. (2023-present). *Lioness* [TV series]. Blossom Films; MTV Entertainment; Productions Cinestar; 101 Studios Studios.

Goepfert, A. (2018). *Colorblind love and Black love on purpose: Black feminist thought, casting, and the invisibility/visibility of Black womanhood on television* (Master's thesis, Colorado State University).

Hancock, A. M. (2007). Intersectionality as a normative and empirical paradigm. *Politics & Gender*, *3*(2), 248-254.

Hunt, M. O. (2004). Race/ethnicity and beliefs about wealth and poverty. *Social Science Quarterly,* 85(3), pp. 827-853.

IMDb. *Episode list*. Retrieved on January 16, 2025, from https://www.imdb.com/title/tt13111078/episodes/?season=1

Jakobsson, P., & Stiernstedt, F. (2018). Voice, silence and social class on television. *European Journal of Communication*, *33*(5), 522-539.

Jansz, J., & Martis, R. G. (2007). The Lara phenomenon: Powerful female characters in video games. *Sex roles*, *56*, 141-148.

Jaworski, A., & Thurlow, C. (2018). Mediatizing the “super-rich,” normalizing privilege. In *Elite Discourse* (pp. 34-45). Routledge.

Jenkins, P. (Director). (2017). *Wonder Woman* [Film]. Warner Bros. Pictures.

Jhally, S.,&Lewis, .J (1992). Enlightenedracism: The Cosby Show, audiences, andthemyth of the American dream. Boulder, CO: Westview.

IMDb. *Episode list*. Retrieved on January 16, 2025, from https://www.imdb.com/title/tt13111078/episodes/?season=1

Kellner, D., & Share, J. (2019). Representation of class. *The International Encyclopedia of Media Literacy*, 1-6.

Kendall, D. E. (2011). *Framing class: Media representations of wealth and poverty in America*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Kennedy, H. W. (2002). Lara Croft: Feminist icon or cyberbimbo?. *Game studies*, *2*(2), 1-12.

Kirby, P. (2015). The girl on fire: The Hunger Games, feminist geopolitics and the contemporary female action hero. *Geopolitics*, *20*(2), 460-478.

Kondrat, X. (2015). Gender and video games: How is female gender generally represented in various genres of video games?. *Journal of comparative research in anthropology and sociology*, *6*(01), 171-193.

Mangan, L. (2023, July 23). Special Ops: Lioness review – like a female Mission Impossible. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2023/jul/23/special-ops-lioness-review-like-a-female-mission-impossible?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Mastro, D., & Greenberg, B. S. (2000). The portrayal of racial minorities on prime time television. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 44(4), 690–703. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15506878jobem4404_10

McG. (Director). (2000). *Charlie's Angels* [film]. Sony Pictures Releasing.

Moshe, M., & Simeunović Bajić, N. (2022). Female soldiers in TV series: A comparative analysis of Israel and Serbia. *Northern Lights: Film & Media Studies Yearbook*, *20*(1), 27-40. https://doi.org/10.1386/nl_00029_1

Muñoz González, M. E. (2018). The Americans: domesticity and regendering of classical spy narratives (No. ART-2018-109885). 10.5817/BSE2018-1-7

McWan, B., & Cramer, L. M. (2022). Progressive Racial Representation or Strategic Whiteness?: Raj and Priya Koothrappali in The Big Bang Theory. *Southern Communication Journal*, *87*(4), 312-323. 10.1080/1041794X.2022.2085781

Oppenheimer, B., Goodman, M., Adams-Price, C., Codling, J., & Coker, J. D. (2003). Audience perceptions of strong female characters on television. *Communication Research Reports*, *20*(2), 161-172. https://doi.org/10.1080/08824090309388812

Rocchi, M., & Farinacci, E. (2020). Shonda Rhimes's TGIT: Representation of womanhood and blackness. *Series-International Journal of TV Serial Narratives*, *6*(1), 29-41.

Ross, G. (Director). (2012). *The Hunger Games* [film]. Color force.

Rotten Tomatoes. (n.d). *Lioness*. Rotten Tomatoes. Retrieved May 16, 2025, from https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/lioness

Said, E.W. (1995). Introduction. In *Orientalism* (pp. 1-28).

Scharrer, E., & Blackburn, G. (2018). Cultivating conceptions of masculinity: Television and perceptions of masculine gender role norms. *Mass Communication and Society*, *21*(2), 149-177.

Scott, R. (1997). *G.I. Jane* [Film]. Buena Vista Pictures; Largo Entertainment.

Sink, A., & Mastro, D. (2017). Depictions of gender on primetime television: A quantitative content analysis. *Mass Communication and Society*, *20*(1), 3-22.

Slack, J. D. (2006). The theory and method of articulation in cultural studies. In *Stuart Hall* (pp. 124-140). Routledge.

Smith-Shomade, B. E. (2002). *Shaded lives: African-American women and television*. Rutgers University Press.

Stasiulis, D. (1999) 'Feminist Intersectional Theorizing,' in P. Li (ed.), *Race and Ethnic Relations in Canada*, p. 347–397. Toronto: Oxford UP.

Sutherland, J. A., & Feltey, K. M. (2017). Here's looking at her: an intersectional analysis of women, power and feminism in film. *Journal of gender studies*, *26*(6), 618-631. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2016.1152956

Sweet, A. (2022). Moving into the mainstream: Pregnancy, motherhood and female TV action heroes. *From the Margins to the Mainstream: Women in Film and Television*, 217.

Tasker, Y. (2011). Soldiers' stories: military women in cinema and television since World War II. Duke University Press. 10.1215/9780822393351

Tasker, Y. (2022). Can women be superheroes? Reflections on American cinema and beyond. *From the Margins to the Mainstream: Women in Film and Television*, 271.

Tukachinsky, R., Mastro, D., & Yarchi, M. (2017). The effect of prime time television ethnic/racial stereotypes on Latino and Black Americans: A longitudinal national level study. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *61*(3), 538-556.

U.S. Department of Defense. (2025, March). *Department of Defense releases annual demographics report - Upward trend in number of women serving continues*. https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/article/3246268/department-of-defense-releases-annual-demographics-report-upward-trend-in-numbe/

Warren, M. E. (1992). Max Weber's Nietzschean conception of power. History of the human sciences, 5(3), 19-37.

Yuen, N. W. (2004). Performing race, negotiating identity: Asian American professional actors in Hollywood.

Yuen, N. W. (2010). Playing “ghetto”: Black actors, stereotypes, and authenticity. In *Black Los Angeles* (pp. 232-242). New York University Press.

7. Appendix

7.1. List of Episodes

Season	Episode Number	Title	Original release date
1	1	Sacrificial Soldiers	2023-07-23
1	2	The Beating	2023-07-23
1	3	Bruise Like a Fist	2023-07-30
1	4	The Choice of Failure	2023-08-06
1	5	Truth Is the Shrewdest Lie	2023-08-13
1	6	The Lie Is the Truth	2023-08-20
1	7	Wish the Fight Away	2023-08-27
1	8	Gone Is the Illusion of Order	2023-09-03
2	1	Beware the Old Soldier	2024-10-27
2	2	I Love My Country	2024-10-27
2	3	Along Came a Spider	2024-11-03
2	4	Five Hundred Children	2024-11-10
2	5	Shatter the Moon	2024-11-17
2	6	2381	2024-11-24
2	7	The Devil Has Aces	2024-12-01
2	8	The Compass Points Home	2024-12-08

7.2. Themes and Codes Examples

Theme 1: Gendered Power Codes Examples

Category	Quote / Observation	Episode / Time
Power in a Male-Dominated World	Joe forced into miniskirt: “Try doing a snatch and grab in this”	S2E1, 18:27
Power in a Male-Dominated World	Joe plays dumb girlfriend in cartel town: “Babe, are those guns?”	S2E1, 23:17

Category	Quote / Observation	Episode / Time
Power in a Male-Dominated World	Kaitlyn is the only woman among 10 men during a raid meeting	S2E6, 27:53
Moral duty as a gendered burden	Joe not following orders: “I didn’t say we were gonna do it” / “The job is to try”	S2E6, 32:44 / 32:59
Female Power	Cruz: “I am telling you I can give you fifteen right now” (pull ups) breaks physical records	S1E1, 22:07
Female Power	Joe: “Nobody picks my asset but me… I run it.”	S1E2, 02:56
Female Power	Cruz fights male officer in training, beats him up and earns respect	S1E2, training scene
Motherhood as a weakness	Joe: “We’re sacrificing our children…trading them for professions”	S1E6, 29:54
Moral duty as a gendered burden	Joe: “I wasn’t sure I still had one [home] to come to”	S1E6, 49:53
Female Power	Joe arrives from private jet, car waiting, suited up - she is an important person	S1E2
Power in a Male-Dominated World	“Let me know when we’re done dick measuring...” / “We were done measuring the minute I walked in…”- Kaitlyn	S1E2, 01:42 / 01:44
Moral duty as a gendered burden	Joe chooses to kill undercover agent to avoid torture	S1E1
Motherhood as a weakness	“She’s exactly like me except she doesn’t have a husband and two daughters” - Joe	S1E6, 26:22
Motherhood as a weakness	“We’re sacrificing our children… trading them for professions” - Joe	S1E6, 29:54

Theme 2: Strategic Whiteness Codes Examples

Category	Quote / Observation	Episode / Time
Stereotypical Minorities	Carillo's mom: "You're never gonna have babies like this"	S2E6 - 32:08
Good Whites vs. bad minorities	Kaitlyn to Joe: "You can't trust any of them" (talking about Zapotecs)	S1E3 - 03:42
Good Whites vs. bad minorities	Kaitlyn shares classified info with husband to manipulate oil markets	S1E6 -04:12
Invisibilisation of ethnic minorities	Maid is ignored while delivering newspapers, not acknowledged by Kaitlyn & Erol	S2E1 -09:00
Invisibilisation of ethnic minorities	"She looks Zapotec", ethnic framing by Kaitlyn	S1E3 -02:44
Stereotypical Minorities	"If only they knew the pain of looking beautiful" Aaliyah / about men	S1E6 - 06:47
Stereotypical Minorities	Once they're far from the beach (and the ears), Aaliyah confides in Cruz "I don't want to get married either" / "what I want is not factored into the equation" (2:27) / "at least he's kind" (2:29)	S1E4 - (2:27)
Stereotypical Minorities	"I'll never know love" - Aaliyah	S1E6 - 34:28
Stereotypical Minorities	"I play here. When I am married I will live in Riyahd. In my contry, my culture, to say no is to shame both families. I would be taken back to Riyahd, locked away or killed" – Aaliyah, crying, after Cruz told her she can say no to arranged marriage	S1E6 - 35:05
Stereotypical Minorities	"For me to choose love would be the death of me" - Aaliyah	S1E6 -35:22
Good Whites vs. bad minorities	Neal calling Joe, who's still on a mark (abroad on a mission). Neal taking care of the organisation: youngest daughter is with a neighbour. Joe asks Neal if she should	S1E6 -18:59

Category	Quote / Observation	Episode / Time
	call her, Neal says no because “I haven’t delivered the news yet” / in charge of the domestic organisation	
Good Whites vs. bad minorities	“I won’t tell her you’re coming in case you can’t peel away” - Neal to Joe, no trust in her coming	S1E4 - 19:12
Stereotypical Minorities	Joe is making Cruz go on the deck, Cruz hits her again, Joe blocks her and takes over “You ever lay a fucking hand on me again and we’re gonna figure this out until the sun comes up - are we clear?”	S1E8 - 50:45

Theme 3: Social Hierarchy Codes Examples

Category	Quote / Observation	Episode / Time
Framing the Ultra-Rich	Aaliyah shocked when Cruz reveals she never had a facial: “You’ve never had a facial?”	S1E6 - 07:09
Constructing the Social Hierarchy in Lioness	“I lack the trust fund for endless vacation” - Cruz	S1E3 - 33:02
Constructing the Social Hierarchy in Lioness	“Crime sure fucking pays” - Cruz, reacting to elite neighborhood	S2E6 - 28:37
Ambiguous power relationships	Joe to Kaitlyn “can I have 2 hours?” / “yeah, but you can’t have three”	S1E5 – 05:16
Ambiguous power relationships	Joe to Cruz to convince her not to blow up the mission for Aaliyah : “I looked the only person I ever loved in the eye, lied to her, then blew her world apart”	S2E6 - 12:10
Ambiguous power relationships	After the meeting, only Joe, Kaitlyn and Westfield in the room, Joe says “what the fuck was that”, Westfiled “not	S2E6 – 24:56

Category	Quote / Observation	Episode / Time
	here" and Joe turns to Kaitlyn for an ally, but Kaitlyn says "not another fucking word"	
Ambiguous power relationships	Joe leaves the room after angrily screaming, Kaitlyn wispers calmy "that went like I expected it to", / appearing as the calm, controlled person	S2E2 - 03:06
Framing the Ultra-Rich	Aaliyah, the fiance, Cruz and Aaliyah's friend group go to surf club in Hamptons: dressed fancy, chauffeurs, expensive things, alcohol, private table etc.	S1E4
Framing the Ultra-Rich	Episode opening on a beach party in the Hamptons, everyone in bikinis partying with music. Aaliyah's friends talking about a guy friend flirting with a girl "what a whore"	S1E4 - 00:37