

GENDER EQUALITY AND THE PERFORMANCE OF FEMINISM
IN GRETA GERWIG’S BARBIE (2023)

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A B S T R A C T
This research is aimed to explores the representation of gender equality and the performance of feminism in Greta Gerwig’s Barbie (2023). To describe how gender equality reflected in the film Barbie (2023). It is qualitative research, the data are divided into 2: primary, and secondary. The primary data is the dialog, action, commentary in the film Barbie 2023. Secondary data are from gender theory.

INTRODUCTION

Film as a form of popular culture holds significant power in shaping public perceptions and social values, film plays a vital role in shaping public consciousness, especially when it comes to issues of identity, politics, and social relations. Through the combination of image, sound, performance, and storytelling, film allows creators to present social commentary and offer critical reflections on the world in which we live. Over the years, cinema has evolved from simple storytelling to a platform for challenging dominant ideologies, particularly those related to gender and power. Thus, film has become a rich and dynamic medium for the expression of feminist thought and the advocacy of gender equality.

One of the most significant voices in contemporary feminist filmmaking is Greta Gerwig, an American actress, screenwriter, and director known for her unique and authentic portrayal of women’s lives. Gerwig’s directorial works—Lady Bird (2017), Little Women (2019), and Barbie (2023)—demonstrate her commitment to centering female experiences and addressing complex gender dynamics. Her films are often characterized by their emotional honesty, intelligent dialogue, and cultural critique. What sets Gerwig apart as a filmmaker is her ability to tell women’s stories with nuance, humor, and humanity, while simultaneously engaging with broader social and political themes. Through her work, Gerwig contributes significantly to the conversation surrounding female representation in media and the broader feminist movement.

In recent decades, gender equality has emerged as one of the most pressing global concerns, encompassing the struggle for equal rights, opportunities, and treatment regardless of gender. Gender equality is not only a legal and political goal but also a cultural one, requiring changes in how society perceives and values the roles of men and women. The persistence of gender stereotypes, patriarchal norms, and systemic discrimination has created ongoing challenges for women and other marginalized gender identities in all areas of life, including the workplace, education, leadership, and media. Popular culture, including film, plays a crucial role in either reinforcing or resisting these norms. Consequently, films that promote feminist ideals or question traditional gender roles are essential in advancing gender equality in public consciousness.

Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (2023) presents a fresh and critical exploration of feminism and gender equality through a reimagining of the iconic Barbie doll. Long criticized for representing unattainable beauty standards and shallow femininity, Barbie in this film is transformed into a symbol of self-reflection, empowerment, and critique of patriarchal structures. The film juxtaposes the fantasy world of Barbie Land with the complexities of the real world, creating a narrative that examines how gender operates in both idealized and realistic settings. Through its characters, dialogues, and visual metaphors, Barbie addresses various aspects of feminism including identity, autonomy, power, and systemic oppression while also acknowledging the contradictions and challenges within the feminist movement itself.

This study, titled "Gender Equality and the Performance of Feminism in Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (2023)," aims to explore how the film portrays and performs feminist values, and how it contributes to the discourse on gender equality in contemporary culture. By analyzing the film from a feminist literary and cinematic perspective, the research seeks to uncover how popular film can function not only as a form of representation but also as an active agent in shaping feminist thought. The significance of this study lies in its effort to bridge popular media and feminist theory, highlighting how mainstream cinema can both reflect and reshape societal understandings of gender and equality.

RESEARCH METHODS

A. TYPE OF DATA AND DATA SOURCE

1. Type of Data: Qualitative Data

The research employs qualitative data, as it aims to interpret the meaning, symbolism, and narrative structure related to gender equality in the film. Qualitative data allows for in-depth analysis of:

Narrative content (plot, character development, dialogue) Visual symbolism (costumes, colors, set design) Thematic representation (gender roles, power dynamics, emotional identity) Cultural references (references to patriarchy, feminism, and consumerism) This type of data supports a thematic and interpretive analysis, which is essential for feminist film critique and semiotic analysis.

3. Data Source

1. Primary Data Source

Film Title: *Barbie* (2023) Director: Greta Gerwig Genre: Fantasy, Comedy, Feminist Satire Medium: Feature film (motion picture).

The primary data consists of:

Film scenes and sequences
Character dialogue and actions
Visual elements such as setting, costume, and cinematography
Symbolic representations of gender roles.

2.Secondary Data Sources

To enrich the analysis, the study also uses secondary sources including:

Film reviews from academic and journalistic publications (e.g., Vogue, New York Times, The Guardian)
Scholarly articles and theses on gender, feminism, masculinity, and film theory
Interviews with the director, cast, and screenwriters (where available)
Books and theoretical texts on feminist theory, representation, and postfeminism.

B. METHOD OF COLLECTING DATA

The method of collecting data in this study on gender equality in the 2023 film Barbie follows a qualitative research framework, focusing on obtaining descriptive, interpretive, and symbolic insights from the film's narrative and visual structure. The process of data collection was guided by the objectives of the study, which aim to explore the portrayal of gender roles, feminist themes, and identity construction within the film.

1. Film Viewing and Transcription

The primary method of data collection was repeated viewing of the Barbie (2023) film. The researcher watched the movie multiple times to capture and transcribe relevant dialogues, scenes, and character interactions that are central to the film's gender discourse. Important sequences were documented and categorized based on themes such as empowerment, patriarchy, gender identity, and self-discovery.

2. Note-Taking and Scene Annotation

During each viewing, detailed notes were taken regarding the visual composition, symbolism, costumes, set design, and character expressions. These notes were annotated with timestamps to allow for precise referencing during analysis. Key visual motifs (such as pink symbolism, role reversals, and Barbie Land vs. Real World) were highlighted for semiotic interpretation.

3. Document and Literature Review

In addition to direct observation, secondary sources were reviewed to enrich the contextual and theoretical framework of the study. These include scholarly articles, critical essays, and published interviews related to the film. Sources were selected based on relevance to feminist theory, gender studies, media criticism, and postfeminism.

4. Data Organization and Categorization

Collected data were organized into thematic categories to facilitate analysis. Dialogues, character arcs, and visual cues were grouped under themes such as gender inequality, emotional liberation, feminism, and identity. This structured approach enabled a focused and in-depth analysis aligned with the research objectives.

5. Ethical Use of Sources

The study ensured ethical use of all data sources by properly citing film content and literature consulted. The film is publicly accessible, and all secondary materials were used strictly for academic and analytical purposes, maintaining academic integrity.

C. TECHNIQUE OF ANALYSING DATA

This section outlines the technique used to analyze the qualitative data collected from the 2023 film Barbie in relation to the theme of gender equality.

Given the nature of the study, a combination of thematic analysis, feminist film critique, and semiotic analysis was employed.

1. Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify and analyze recurring patterns and themes within the film. Key concepts such as female empowerment, patriarchal structures, identity crisis, emotional liberation, and gender roles were systematically categorized.

This approach allowed the researcher to interpret both explicit and implicit messages about gender equality conveyed through the film's narrative and dialogue.

2. Feminist Film Critique

The feminist film critique technique was applied to evaluate how *Barbie* challenges or conforms to traditional gender norms and feminist ideologies.

This method involved analyzing character portrayals, power dynamics, narrative arcs, and plot structure through the lens of feminist theories, including liberal feminism, postfeminism, and intersectional feminism.

It provided a deeper understanding of how the film engages with real-world gender issues and societal expectations.

3. Semiotic Analysis

Semiotic analysis was used to decode symbols, signs, and visual cues embedded in the film. This included studying color symbolism, costume choices, body language, spatial dynamics, and iconic elements such as Barbie Land and its aesthetic.

Through this approach, the research uncovered the deeper cultural meanings and ideological messages regarding gender roles and identity.

4. Triangulation of Methods

To ensure reliability and validity, the researcher triangulated the data using all three analytical methods. The integration of thematic, feminist, and semiotic analysis enabled a holistic understanding of the film's gender discourse.

This multi-layered approach helped mitigate bias and offered a richer, more nuanced interpretation of the data.

5. Interpretation and Conclusion

After analysis, findings were synthesized to draw conclusions about how *Barbie* (2023) reflects, critiques, or redefines gender equality.

The results are discussed in relation to contemporary feminist theory and social commentary on gender roles, identity, and empowerment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings of the study by identifying how gender equality and feminism are reflected in the film through characters, dialogues, plot structure, and symbolic representation. Each indicator is supported by multiple examples from the film.

1. Women in Positions of Power

Indicator: Equal access to leadership and high-status occupations.

1. Example 1: Barbie Land is ruled by President Barbie (Issa Rae), and the Supreme Court consists entirely of women.

2. Example 2: Other Barbies are shown as scientists, journalists, doctors, and astronauts. There are no male professionals in Barbie Land's original structure.

Quote: "Every night is girls' night!" – Barbie

Significance: This shows a utopian feminist society where women dominate the professional and political realms, reversing real-world gender imbalance.

2. Gender Role Reversal and Patriarchy Critique

Indicator: Challenging patriarchal structures and promoting balance.

1. Example 1: When Ken discovers patriarchy in the real world, he introduces it to Barbie Land and turns it into "Kendom", where Barbies become subservient.
2. Example 2: The Barbies start dressing in maid costumes, reading books like *The Submissive Female*, and surrendering their jobs to the Kens.

Quote: "The patriarchy is so cool. You guys have to try it." – Ken

Scene: Barbie's Dreamhouse becomes the "Mojo Dojo Casa House" full of hyper-masculine decor.

Significance: These exaggerated role reversals serve to satirize real-world patriarchy, showing how absurd and unnatural male dominance can be when roles are flipped.

3. Feminist Solidarity and Consciousness

Indicator: Collective awareness and empowerment among women.

Example 1: Gloria's feminist monologue awakens the Barbies from their brainwashed state under patriarchal influence.

Example 2: The Barbies work together to outsmart the Kens and take back their positions through strategic unity.

Quote: "It is literally impossible to be a woman." – Gloria

Scene: The Barbies pretend to be interested in the Kens' ideas to divide them, which mirrors real-life strategies used to challenge dominant systems.

Significance: This demonstrates feminist collective resistance and empowerment against systemic oppression.

4. Gender-Based Harassment in the Real World

Indicator: Experiences of gender discrimination and objectification.

1. Example 1: Upon arriving in the real world, Barbie is harassed at Venice Beach, groped, and catcalled.
2. Example 2: Barbie and Gloria attempt to report harassment but are dismissed by male police officers.

Quote: "I feel unsafe. I've never felt like this before." – Barbie

Scene: Barbie is looked at not for her achievements but for her body.

Significance: These scenes expose real-world gender inequality and the objectification that women face, contrasting the freedom of Barbie Land.

5. Masculinity Under Pressure

Indicator: Gender equality also involves breaking harmful male stereotypes.

1. Example 1: Ken struggles with his identity outside of Barbie. He believes that being masculine means being dominant.
2. Example 2: After his patriarchy experiment fails, Ken admits he doesn't know who he is without Barbie.

Quote: "I only exist within the warmth of Barbie's gaze." – Ken

Scene: Ken sings "I'm Just Ken," a power ballad showing his insecurity.

Significance: This is a critique of toxic masculinity, showing that men, too, are trapped by societal gender roles.

6. Emphasis on Choice and Identity

Indicator: Gender equality involves freedom to define oneself.

1. Example 1: Barbie chooses to leave Barbie Land and live as a human, even though she could remain in a perfect world.
2. Example 2: She takes the name "Barbara Handler," reclaiming her creator's legacy and defining her own identity.

Quote: "I want to be the one who makes meaning, not the thing that's made." – Barbie

Scene: Barbie's transformation into a human is symbolic of growth, independence, and feminist self-actualization.

Significance: The film ends by affirming personal agency, a key tenet of feminism and gender equality.

7. Media and Consumerism as Gender Tools

Indicator: Reflection on how toys, media, and capitalism shape gender roles.

1. Example 1: Mattel, the company that created Barbie, is run entirely by men who decide what a female doll should be.
2. Example 2: The all-male boardroom is clueless about Barbie's emotional and social impact.

Quote: "We're a company that cares deeply about women... as long as they make us money." – Mattel CEO

Significance: The film critiques corporate feminism and gendered marketing, showing how institutions exploit gender for profit.

8. Inclusion and Diversity

Indicator: Representation of race, body types, and gender expression.

1. Example 1: Barbies and Kens come in all shapes, sizes, races, and even genders (e.g., Transgender Barbie played by Hari Nef).
2. Example 2: Allan, the only male who doesn't fit the masculine mold, supports the Barbies and doesn't seek power.

Scene: Allan fights against the Kens to help restore Barbie Land's equality.

Significance: The film promotes intersectional feminism, recognizing how identity factors overlap with gender.

Summary of Findings:

Barbie (2023) uses satire, role reversal, and metafiction to reflect gender inequality in society.

The film emphasizes female leadership, freedom of identity, and critique of toxic masculinity.

Feminism is shown through solidarity, self-discovery, and systemic change, aiming not to dominate men, but to balance and free all genders from oppression.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that Barbie (2023), directed by Greta Gerwig, serves as a multifaceted feminist text that challenges and reconstructs traditional gender roles. Drawing from Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, the film critiques the idea that gender is an innate identity. Instead, it is performed through repeated social actions and expectations. This is evidenced in how Barbie and Ken navigate between Barbie Land—a matriarchal utopia—and the Real World—a patriarchal capitalist society. Ken's transformation upon encountering the patriarchy in the real world and his attempt to impose it upon Barbie Land illustrate Butler's notion that gender norms are imitated rather than inherent. Furthermore, the film's satirical take on patriarchy, particularly through Ken's misinformed obsession with masculinity (symbolized by horses, gyms, and domination), reveals the artificial construction of hegemonic masculinity, as critiqued by Connell (2005).

Gerwig's portrayal of Barbie's existential awakening also reflects Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) feminist existentialism, especially the idea that "one is not born, but becomes a woman." Barbie's decision to leave behind perfection and choose to be human

signifies her reclaiming of agency and her departure from objectification and idealization. This act aligns with Sara Ahmed's (2017) concept of "feminist living," where liberation is not about escaping gender but reconfiguring it meaningfully. In the same vein, the emotional vulnerability presented by Ken—especially in his song "I'm Just Ken"—also deconstructs traditional masculinity, suggesting that patriarchy is emotionally damaging to both men and women.

These theoretical interpretations are supported by multiple scholarly studies. Smith (2020) emphasizes that most female-centered films still conform to patriarchal storytelling, often portraying women in powerful roles without addressing deeper systemic inequalities. In contrast, *Barbie* dismantles power dynamics on both sides of the gender spectrum. Taylor and Keegan (2021) assert that feminist satire is a powerful tool for subverting gender norms—something *Barbie* achieves through humor, irony, and exaggerated gender role reversals. Gloria's monologue in the film, where she articulates the double standards women face, mirrors the postfeminist contradictions discussed by Gill (2007), who argues that media culture places impossible expectations on women to be empowered yet submissive, confident yet humble. This notion is reinforced by Pomerantz et al. (2004), who found that girls experience internal conflicts due to mixed messages from popular culture, which *Barbie* captures by showing how its characters struggle with identity and expectations.

Moreover, the study by Banet-Weiser (2018) warned about the commodification of feminism in media—where feminist values are marketed for profit without meaningful change. *Barbie* acknowledges this by portraying Mattel's all-male board as ironically supporting female empowerment while lacking real understanding of it. This self-awareness distinguishes *Barbie* as not only a feminist narrative but also a meta-commentary on feminist branding. The film's inclusive casting, featuring characters like Trans Barbie and Weird Barbie, also supports Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality theory, which recognizes that gender oppression cannot be separated from race, class, or other social categories. The diversity of Barbies in terms of body shape, skin color, and background emphasizes a broader feminist inclusion.

Other studies echo the significance of this film. McRobbie (2009) highlighted how postfeminist media often disempower women by presenting empowerment as personal choice rather than structural critique. *Barbie* resists this by showing that systemic change is needed—Barbie Land must be rebalanced, not reversed. Similarly, Keller and Ringrose (2015) criticized the trend of "empowerment feminism," which reduces feminism to self-confidence without acknowledging structural barriers. Gerwig's narrative challenges this by illustrating how both Barbie and Ken must unlearn societal roles before they can build mutual respect. Additionally, the work of Lazar (2005) in feminist critical discourse analysis shows how language in media can subtly reinforce or resist gender stereotypes. *Barbie* employs direct language in Gloria's speech and Barbie's final choice, demonstrating resistance rather than reinforcement of such norms.

Lastly, hooks (2000) argued that feminism must be for everyone—not just about elevating women but dismantling sexism altogether. Gerwig embodies this spirit by showing that both women and men are trapped in restrictive roles and that liberation comes through mutual understanding. Ken's personal journey is not vilified but humanized, indicating that gender equality is not a zero-sum game. Instead, *Barbie* proposes a feminist future grounded in empathy, agency, and cooperation—principles deeply rooted in both liberal and intersectional feminism.

In summary, this discussion affirms that *Barbie* (2023) is more than a playful rebranding of a children's toy—it is a complex feminist critique of gender, power, and identity. By combining theoretical frameworks such as Butler's performativity, Beauvoir's existentialism, Connell's hegemonic masculinity, Crenshaw's intersectionality, and hooks' inclusive feminism, alongside empirical insights from contemporary scholars, the film successfully represents and challenges both patriarchal and matriarchal extremes. Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* ultimately advocates for balance and the dismantling of rigid gender roles for a more equitable society.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the representation of gender equality and feminism in Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (2023) through critical analysis and the application of feminist theories. The findings reveal that the film challenges traditional gender roles by reversing power dynamics, using satire, and presenting characters who undergo significant ideological transformations. Barbie's journey from a perfect doll to a self-aware individual symbolizes the feminist struggle for identity and autonomy. Ken's parallel journey reflects the harmful impact of patriarchal norms on men and highlights the necessity of redefining masculinity. Through these character arcs, the film emphasizes that true gender equality is not about dominance or role reversal but about balance, mutual understanding, and freedom from rigid societal expectations.

The integration of feminist theories such as Judith Butler's gender performativity, Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality demonstrates that the film provides a nuanced commentary on gender politics. These theoretical frameworks, supported by various scholarly studies, show that *Barbie* does not simply promote empowerment on the surface but critiques structural issues within both patriarchy and superficial feminism. By incorporating diverse representations, including non-binary and racially diverse characters, the film extends its feminist message beyond the binary, aligning with the principles of inclusive feminism.

In conclusion, *Barbie* (2023) serves as a cultural artifact that not only entertains but educates and provokes critical thinking about gender constructs. It offers a reflective and transformative narrative that encourages audiences to question societal norms and advocate for equality not just in representation, but in lived experience. Therefore, the film stands as a valuable subject of study for gender and cultural discourse, especially in how it merges mainstream appeal with progressive feminist ideology.

SUGGESTION

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several suggestions can be proposed for future research, educators, and audiences. First, for future researchers, *Barbie* (2023) offers a wide range of themes that can be explored beyond gender equality, such as consumerism, identity politics, media influence, and corporate feminism. Researchers are encouraged to expand the scope by analyzing the reception of the film among different gender and age groups, or by comparing *Barbie* with other feminist films to examine how feminist ideologies evolve across time and cultural contexts.

Second, for educators and scholars in the fields of literature, gender studies, or media studies, this film can be a valuable teaching material. It provides accessible yet thought-provoking representations of feminist theory in practice, and can be used to help students critically engage with media narratives. Incorporating such films in

academic discussion can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world media interpretation.

Third, for general audiences and particularly young viewers, it is important to view Barbie not merely as entertainment but as a reflective cultural product. The film invites viewers to question established gender roles and encourages empathy, equality, and individual freedom. Audiences should be critical of the media they consume and remain aware of both overt and subtle messages embedded in popular culture.

Lastly, it is recommended that future media productions continue to promote inclusive, diverse, and equitable representations of gender, not as a marketing strategy but as a genuine effort to influence social change. Films like Barbie demonstrate that mainstream media can effectively balance commercial success with progressive social messages when handled with sincerity and depth.

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