

An Analysis of Feminist Values in the Film Barbie

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Abstract. The film Barbie presents the real-life struggles and gender identity anxieties faced by women in a humorous yet satirical manner, encapsulating rich feminist ideologies. Centered around the iconic image of Barbie, the film traces her journey from being a predefined perfect doll to gradually awakening and seeking self-worth. Through Barbie's coming-of-age story, the film vividly reflects the various challenges contemporary women encounter and underscores the significance of self-awareness and awakening. At the beginning, Barbie is set in a perfect world but gradually realizes that this is not what she truly desires. She embarks on a quest to discover her inner self and the meaning of her existence, indirectly reflecting on women's contemplation of their identities and encouraging the audience to reflect on their own societal positioning. Through Barbie's experiences, the film highlights female solidarity as a source of strength for personal growth and asserts that the ultimate goal of women's awakening and development is to achieve feminist equality. Women should not be constrained by external expectations but should bravely pursue their dreams.

Keywords: Feminism, Barbie, gender equality.

1. Introduction

The film Barbie is not just an entertainment piece; it is a film infused with feminist reflections. Utilizing the iconic character of Barbie, it profoundly explores the roles and statuses of women in contemporary society. The movie narrates how Barbie, after encountering an imperfect event in Barbieland, becomes aware of a crisis and ventures into the real world with Ken to seek the truth [1-3]. The film delves into issues such as patriarchy and feminism, using Barbie's experiences to provoke deep reflection on gender consciousness and equality, guiding the audience to contemplate gender equality issues in reality. Through her journey, the movie calls for the elimination of gender discrimination and the realization of true gender equality. Barbie's growth trajectory also illustrates that women can shine in any field and should not be restricted by gender. In this way, the film conveys the importance of gender equality to its audience and encourages women to bravely pursue their goals.

2. A Brief Overview of the Film Barbie

Barbie is a feminist masterpiece crafted by female director Greta Gerwig, offering a diverse perspective. The film grossed over \$1.4 billion worldwide, setting a new box office record in Warner Bros. history. It won the Special Achievement Award and received a Best Director nomination at the 81st Golden Globe Awards. Additionally, it was nominated for Best Original Screenplay at the British Academy Film Awards and Best Cinematography by the National Board of Review. Sight & Sound also listed it among the top 50 films of 2023. Gerwig's prominence soared due to this film, leading her to serve as the president of the jury for the main competition at the 77th Cannes Film Festival and appear on Vanity Fair's year-end cover.

The narrative of Barbie follows the sequence in which "Barbieland" is first replaced by "Kendom" and later restored to "Barbieland." The main storyline revolves around Barbie, played by Margot Robbie (hereafter referred to as "Barbie"), as she experiences bodily changes that leave her confused, prompting her and Ken to enter the human world in search of answers. After personally experiencing a patriarchal society and going through a period of disillusionment, Barbie embarks on an exploration of personal value, ultimately achieving self-awareness. Feminist film theorist E. Ann Kaplan posited that even independent female creators can "only create within the discourse they are given." However, Gerwig produced a highly modern and thought-provoking film that defies this limitation. The film's

visuals feature a dreamlike color palette that aligns with audiences' perceptions of Barbie's world. When portraying the Barbie toy universe, the director consciously connects it to reality, adopting a female perspective and using sharp language to challenge phallogentrism, subvert traditional gazes, and strive to construct a feminist discourse space—an idyllic pink utopia showcasing a distinct feminist stance.



Figure 1. Barbie's pink Utopia

3. The Symbiotic Relationship Between Barbie and Feminism

3.1. The Rise of Feminism and the Birth of Barbie Dolls

Feminism originated during the Enlightenment and gradually developed into an organized social movement in the 19th century, exposing and resisting the unequal treatment of women in modern society. By the mid-20th century, labor shortages caused by world wars pushed many women out of their homes and into the workforce, further driving gender structural changes. The pursuit of equal social status, diverse career choices, and fair political rights became the core demands of feminism during this period. In 1959, the first Barbie doll was born (see Table 1). Ruth Handler, the "mother of Barbie," imbued Barbie with a special conceptual significance: "Barbie represents the fact that a woman has many choices." Unlike most dolls on the market, which were designed as infants requiring care, Barbie was inspired by the German adult fashion doll Lilli. With her sleek blonde hair and confident figure, Lilli shifted the focus of female play from caregiving to self-exploration [4-5]. At that time, boys had a wide variety of toy choices, while girls were primarily confined to playing with flat paper dolls that reinforced the "mother" role. By incorporating feminist ideals into children's toys, Barbie paved the way for the integration of feminism into the toy industry.

Table 1. The Birth and Evolution of Barbie Dolls

Time	Description
In 1956	Ruth Handler was inspired by the German doll "Lily" she found while traveling in Switzerland.
March 9, 1959	Barbie was officially launched at the New York International Toy Fair and became an instant sensation.
The 1960s	Barbies of different occupations and styles were launched, such as nurses and flight attendants, reflecting the independent image of women.
The 1980s	Barbies of African American, Latino and other multicultural images were introduced to reflect diversity.
The 2000s	Launch digital products such as video games and movies to expand brand influence.
2020	Barbie is made of recyclable materials to respond to the environmental trend.

3.2. Female Subjectivity and the Transformation of Barbie Dolls

In the 1970s, feminism entered a new phase with the slogan "Against Beauty Pageants, Pursue Liberation" as a central theme. Beauty contests were seen as tools reinforcing women's subordination, while excessive focus on appearance and body beauty was criticized as objectifying women's subjectivity. This aesthetic control was not just superficial but a deeper manifestation of gender discrimination. Feminists called for breaking free from these aesthetic constraints and advocated for women's right to define their own beauty and seek genuine freedom and liberation. Laura Mulvey, in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, argued that "the film industry operates entirely under the patriarchal gaze, where women exist merely as objects on screen—projections and vessels of male desire." During this period, the glamorous and refined Barbie image was met with skepticism and criticism. While Barbie had distanced herself from an infantile appearance, she was still seen as a projection of male fantasies about ideal female beauty, leading to accusations of objectification and aesthetic uniformity. In response to feminist critiques, Mattel adjusted its Barbie strategy, introducing dolls with diverse appearances and skin tones to promote inclusivity and align with evolving societal expectations of female beauty.

3.3. Barbie's Breakthrough in the Era of Media Activism

In the 21st century, Barbie dolls have sold over a billion units worldwide, generating \$3 billion in revenue, making Barbie the best-selling toy in history and a significant cultural phenomenon. The live-action film *Barbie* made its cinematic debut, sparking widespread online discussion and further expanding the discourse of the feminist movement. Gerwig skillfully used the medium of film to re-examine women's struggles. By constructing Barbieland as a utopia, she satirized the absurdity of patriarchy in the real world. In Barbieland, Barbies hold key societal roles, such as President, lawyer, and Nobel Prize winners, while Ken's only purpose is to compete for Barbie's attention. However, upon entering the real world, the subject-object relationship is completely reversed—Ken experiences the privileges of patriarchy and attempts to impose this system upon Barbieland, causing a gender structure upheaval. Unlike conventional romantic storylines, Gerwig empowers Barbie with autonomy, allowing her to choose the life she desires [6-7]. Notably, instead of attending a job interview, Barbie visits a gynecologist, confronting her biological imperfections. This symbolizes Barbie's acceptance of the reality that she is not a "perfect woman," marking a breakthrough in both cinematic artistry and commercial success.

4. Exploring the Source of Women's Growth Power

4.1. The Deep Bond of Mother-Daughter Relationships

In *Barbie*, female growth is closely linked to motherhood. The film portrays two mother-daughter pairs—Gloria and Sasha, as well as Ruth Handler and Barbie—highlighting the power of female growth. As the story unfolds, the relationship between Gloria and Sasha evolves from symbiosis to confrontation and ultimately to mutual understanding, reflecting the complexity of real-life mother-daughter relationships.

In infancy, close contact with the mother is crucial, a phenomenon known in biology as "symbiosis," which is based on mutual dependence and promotes the development of both parties. Initially, Gloria and Sasha exist in a symbiotic state, where they rely on each other—Gloria provides Sasha with daily care and emotional support, while Sasha depends on her mother's guidance and affection, reflecting traditional mother-daughter role expectations to some extent. However, as Sasha grows, she begins to recognize her individuality and resists being confined by traditional mother-daughter roles [8-9].

Gloria, on the other hand, strives to fulfill her role as a mother, yet Sasha's rebellion and pursuit of independence cause her anxiety over her perceived inadequacy as a mother, as well as a sense of fear stemming from the impending separation from her daughter. This tension, rooted in the conflict

between traditional maternal expectations and modern values, results in a strained and repressive mother-daughter relationship.

Sasha's brave decision to return to Barbie Land and save the other Barbies becomes a pivotal moment in the transformation of their relationship. Through this experience, Gloria gains insight into Sasha's inner world, realizing that as a young woman of the new generation, Sasha seeks independence and self-fulfillment. Likewise, Sasha gradually understands the struggles and dilemmas faced by Gloria as a woman of the previous generation. At this point, a profound emotional resonance emerges between them.

Both Gloria and Sasha yearn for understanding and acceptance, striving to embrace their true selves. This shift allows their traditional mother-daughter dynamic to evolve into a more modern relationship. They first establish themselves as independent women before identifying as mother and daughter. By supporting each other and treating one another with mutual respect and equality, they embody female solidarity, uniting in their fight for their own rights.

4.2. The Strong Alliance of Sisterhood

"Sisterhood" is a significant political term in Western feminism, emphasizing the deep connection among women through shared experiences and mutual understanding. This bond, rooted in women's unique perspectives and self-definition, fosters identity affirmation and empowerment, serving as a fundamental force in the advancement of feminism.

Due to their unique physical and psychological experiences, women are often able to empathize with one another, offering support and encouragement that form the foundation of meaningful sisterhood—an essential driving force of feminist progress. The main storyline of *Barbie* revolves around Barbie's search for her human companion, Gloria. Throughout this journey, the unity and mutual assistance among Barbie, Gloria, Sasha, Ruth, and Weird Barbie collectively contribute to the construction of female agency, awakening women's independent thinking and self-identity.

Initially, Sasha views Barbie as the culprit behind the regression of the feminist movement. However, as she interacts with Barbie, her perspective gradually shifts. When Barbie falls into despair and contemplates giving up, it is Sasha who insists on returning to Barbie Land to save Barbie and the other Barbies.

For Gloria, Barbie was more than just a toy during her childhood—it was a close companion that gave her strength during difficult times. When Barbie finds herself lost and struggling, it is Gloria's firm and powerful words that awaken Barbie's feminist consciousness, ultimately inspiring all the Barbies in the same way.

By standing together in solidarity, women encourage and uplift one another, using their intelligence and experiences to propel the feminist movement forward. Under the illumination of sisterhood, the rise and growth of female subjectivity become increasingly evident, injecting new momentum into feminist discourse. This bond continues to inspire women to improve themselves, forging a new chapter in feminism.

4.3. The Pursuit of an Ideal Destination

In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett critically analyzes the pervasive dominance-subordination dynamics between genders, emphasizing how this inequality has become deeply ingrained in cultural ideology. Patriarchal society skillfully reinforces this hierarchical gender order through institutions such as the family, schools, churches, and legal systems.

Both Barbie Land and Ken Land are products of patriarchy, reinforcing the traditional gender hierarchy based on dominance and subordination. The film critiques patriarchy and advocates for an egalitarian ideology centered on "androgyny."

The concept of "androgyny" transcends the binary opposition between genders, dismantling hierarchical gender relations and liberating individuals from the constraints of gender norms, ultimately advancing true gender equality. Virginia Woolf elaborates on the state of an "androgynous mind," stating:

"Only when the strengths of both genders coexist in harmony, complementing each other spiritually, can the mind achieve a normal and comfortable state. Even in men, the feminine aspect of the mind plays a role; the same applies to women, who must also engage with the masculine aspect of their intellect."

In an androgynous mind, male and female thought processes and strengths are equal and harmonious, transcending the divisions and conflicts inherent in traditional gender roles. This state ultimately leads to a liberation where both men and women achieve a shared spiritual resonance [10].

The character of Allan serves as a quintessential representation of androgyny in the film. Overlooked by the patriarchal system, Allan transcends gender boundaries—he neither conforms to rigid gender stereotypes nor seeks to rebel against or accommodate societal expectations. Instead, he simply pursues his true self. With a combination of gentleness and bravery, Allan breaks free from the constraints of gender norms, embodying the essence of an androgynous mind.

5. Conclusion

In summary, Barbie pioneers a new path for feminist commercial films, offering the market and audiences a richer cinematic experience. Beyond its artistic value, the film serves as a powerful reflection of reality, fostering the awakening of female self-awareness and advancing the progress of gender equality while critically examining consumerism.

Moreover, through Barbie's journey of self-discovery, the film conveys the core tenets of feminism, encouraging women to boldly pursue their dreams. By addressing contemporary feminist issues, Barbie makes a significant contribution to feminist discourse, prompting audiences to deeply reflect on the roles and status of women in society.

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