

Female Empowerment in Film: The Expression of Contemporary Female Consciousness in the Movie Barbie

Qishu Yang^{1,a,*}

¹University of Westminster, North End Road, Wembley, London
a. w1879383@my.westminster.ac.uk

*corresponding author

Abstract: *Barbie*, one of the most noteworthy films of the year, gained significant attention and achieved great box office success. Several feminists initiated discussions about the film. The movie offers a unique perspective compared to other movies targeted towards women. Specifically, the focus is on the personal development of women by depicting women as protagonists in social contexts, which is an approach to analyzing the inner world of women. *Barbie* represents an important moment in the history of women's cinema. However, public attention towards *Barbie* has overshadowed the film's plot. *Barbie* challenges gender-based stereotypes present in the larger society as well as those specific to *Barbie*, women, and women's cinema. Furthermore, she serves as a role model and a beacon of excellence for women's cinema. The director and screenwriter have taken a courageous step in their journey toward deconstructing patriarchal norms through carefully orchestrated countermeasures. This analysis employs a comprehensive range of sources, including interviews, to scrutinize the character and film from a unique perspective. The study not only examines the movie but also provides a constructive dialogue evaluating women's cinema and their narratives. Ultimately, this exceptional piece of cinema encourages much-needed changes.

Keywords: *Barbie*, Female empowerment, female consciousness

1. Introduction

With the development and spread of the feminist movement, the stereotypical portrayal of women in society has decreased, revealing an independent and autonomous image. Film, as a medium to reflect society, has gradually moved beyond the shallow depiction of female characters, exploring their psychological growth and coping with various relationships, to better express their emotions and inner selves. The release of the *Barbie* film generated significant buzz and social attention. In addition to the strong cast, the film gained attention due to the iconic Barbie brand. As a globally renowned toy, Barbie showcased considerable potential. The film also proved to be a success for director Greta Gerwig, as she became one of the highest-grossing female directors to date [1]. This paper selects the literature research method, refers to a large number of articles and reports, summarizes the evaluation of the film and in-depth discussion of the film, and analyzes the underexpressed views in the film. The film discusses hot topics of women's rights, such as patriarchy, and the autonomy of relationships between men and women, and also explores women's self-growth. The female mindset, solidarity among women, and the emphasis on gender equality presented in the film have had a positive impact on social perceptions. This influence can inspire women to pursue equality and justice in all walks of

life and drive society towards a more inclusive and equal future. The female characters in the film embody inner strength and independence. However, Mattel's release of Barbie dolls has always promoted a female body model, which contradicts feminist ideals. The film, on the other hand, appears to challenge this concept [2]. This paper analyses the film in depth from three perspectives, exploring the awakening of women's self-awareness and the repair and transformation of women's relationships, and concludes with a critical look at how the notion of Barbie as a toy has changed in response to the development of society.

2. Links between Female Consciousness and External Relations in the Movie Barbie

2.1. Self-improvement of Barbie Consciousness

Barbie's cultural impact is a compelling subject due to her ubiquitous presence in the upbringing of children worldwide. According to The Times, Mattel attempted to position Barbie as a symbol of female empowerment, but her physical appearance consistently overshadowed her professional achievements [3]. Mattel's image of Barbie's perfection serves as a restriction on women's freedom and sets a standard for beauty, promoting blonde hair and shapely figures. This can be understood as a reflection of the character Sasha's confrontational comment towards Barbie in the film.

It is worth noting that Mattel had already altered Barbie's body design before the release of this film. In 2016, the doll underwent its most significant modification since its launch in 1959, with the introduction of three additional body types, including the Curvy Barbie [2]. The movie seeks to enhance Barbie's awareness by highlighting ways in which she can grow as a powerful and autonomous character. Barbie is often viewed as a fashion model or homemaker, but in the film, the director presents the ideal Barbie world that showcases Barbie as a girl with various interests and professions that come in different colors and sizes. Robert plays the role of the classic Barbie who contracts an unusual ailment after landing on her heel and must enter the real world to revert to her original appearance. Barbie's initial drive remains to retain a flawless image. This transformation does not reflect a shift in Barbie's consciousness, but rather the consciousness that society has attributed to Barbie, resulting in her portrayal as a more self-sufficient and autonomous figure.

2.2. Conflicts and Repair of Mother-Daughter Relationships

The relationship between a mother and daughter depicted in *Barbie* film resembles relationships found in other stories. The film portrays conflicts, contradictions, and unexpected events that both must resolve together, resulting in a mutual understanding and reconciliation. The primary difference is that Barbie's mother, Gloria, is crucial in saving Barbie, and she is the master of classic Barbie. She has been shaped by the influence of a patriarchal society, and unlike her daughter's radicalism, she endures and tolerates everything. However, Barbie's arrival brings out a side of her that her daughter cannot comprehend, and from then on, the two of them enter into a relationship of mutual understanding.

The intriguing aspect of the film lies in the shift of the mother's role, as Gloria seeks to fulfill the role of a supportive parent, resulting in the reconciliation of the mother-daughter dynamic. This presents a novel concept: mothers are equally capable of exhibiting impulsiveness, desertion, and fits of anger. Such portrayal provides a new perspective of a woman as a mother as opposed to the typical societal archetype, demonstrating that imperfect mothers can also serve as role models for their daughters. The two daughters in the film are notable, with Gloria's daughter Sarah being an obvious example. Additionally, Ruth's daughter, Barbie, was created as a toy intended for the founder's daughter and has since become a symbol of maternal love [4]. Throughout the movie, these daughters, whether it's the quirky Salad or Barbie experiencing her first taste of tea, are consistently and affectionately accepted by their mother. This is because mothers can embrace their daughters for who

they are, without judgment. By this point, the film depicts mothers pausing so that their daughters can reflect on the progress they have made thus far. By this point, the film depicts mothers pausing so that their daughters can reflect on the progress they have made thus far. These lines have been subtly infused into the narrative.

2.3. Permission and Dominance in Male-female Relationships

In previous *Barbie* narratives, Barbie and Ken formed an unambiguous romantic pairing. Before viewing, some audience members may have been drawn to the marketing slogan "Ken just Ken." The film dances around notions of male superiority and satirizes toxic masculinity. But, it also dedicates a significant portion of screen time to the entire evolution of blonde Ken's transformation from "second nature" to "first nature," and ultimately, from societal gender constraints to his genuine identity. To a significant extent, the text suggests that defining women inevitably impacts on defining men. In the context of a patriarchal society, men also suffer to some extent, and taking on the character of Ken could enable male viewers to grasp the circumstances faced by women [5]. While some men feel affronted by *Barbie* according to current findings, the film's initial stance is not geared toward offending the male demographic.

Towards the end of the movie, Ken attempts to kiss Barbie, but her response is only a gesture of friendliness and should not be interpreted as anything intimate. This scene is amusing and effectively mocks gender stereotypes. Sometimes female actions are nothing but friendly gestures and can be misconstrued as a precursor to further intimacy. However, the male/female relationships in *Barbie* film not only broaden the scope of intimacy beyond heterosexual couples but also underscore women's autonomy and equality, highlighting the potential for friendships to emerge from such relationships, whilst placing romantic ones within a wider emotional and social framework.

3. Progress and Dilemmas of Female Consciousness in Society in the Movie Barbie

3.1. Barbie's crisis and patriarchy

Naylor argues that Gloria's monologue highlights the dilemma experienced by women under patriarchy [6]. Barbie's transition to the real world involves the gradual dismantling of an ideal world while facing challenges on social, cultural, and personal levels, which may cause confusion and disturbance. Barbie symbolizes a woman's exploration of her self-identity and power in a constantly evolving society. Gloria, on the other hand, is akin to Barbie's leader and awaken-er in reality. Gloria is more brave and confrontational than Barbie due to her fight against the patriarchal power and stereotypes that exist in the real world as a woman and a mother. The monologue expresses her confusion and struggles with the dilemmas presented by societal expectations and gender roles. This is dramatized in the film as a means of arousing the Barbies.

In the film, the director effectively satirizes Mattel, a company with an all-male executive team whose proposed solution to a problem is to suppress Barbie. While the leaders are depicted as comedic and unwitting, the underlying issues cannot be overlooked. The film presents an idyllic world where females are in charge and patriarchy is absent. However, this is a work of fiction, and the utopian Barbie universe is non-existent in reality. The concept of women's representation has remained constant and evident in various forms, as demonstrated by Mattel's introduction of Barbie dolls with different skin tones and body types. Moreover, the cultural significance and evolution of Barbie, coupled with the changes in gender roles and patriarchal attitudes, further testify to this trend. Although early depictions of Barbie were influenced by a patriarchal society, her continued development epitomizes a commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of women.

3.2. Women's Growth and the Mindset Stalemate

The director completed women's self-exploration and broke society's stereotypes about women in different ways. Female characters in *Barbie* movies tend to cover a variety of careers and interests, including doctors, scientists, explorers, entrepreneurs, and more. These diverse career options help break down the boundaries of traditional gender roles and show viewers that women can succeed in a variety of fields. Although it is only in a utopian world, it still proves the possibility of women in society. The *Barbie* movie also emphasizes the importance of friendship and teamwork between women. The alliance between Barbie and Gloria, although the way to solve the problem is very simple and one-sided, emphasizes the mutual support and cooperation between women. Whether it is Barbie, Gloria, or Sarah, they have all achieved their breakthroughs in the story. They stand out in different situations, which has broken the original stereotype.

Different *Barbie* characters are also a way to break stereotypes. Regardless of Mattel's image in the movie, Barbie limits girls' possibilities to a certain extent [7]. The emphasis on appearance and fashion in *Barbie*'s image may perpetuate certain beauty standards and stereotypes associated with girls' interests. It's important to recognize that *Barbie*'s impact on gender stereotypes and girls' self-perceptions is complex. While the introduction of various Barbie characters is a positive step, the overall marketing and portrayal of Barbie in the media may still have elements that reinforce traditional gender roles and beauty ideals. Therefore, the roles of Gloria and Sarah are particularly important. This is not based on the traditional protagonist halo. Barbie has grown up alone, but with the help of other women, she has tried to find her true self for the first time. Although Barbie is omnipotent, that's not exactly how Barbie is supposed to be.

4. The Impact of Barbie's Thoughts in the Film on the Society

4.1. The Flirtation with Beauty and Ugliness

Beauty is no longer a single concept, and heroine Robbie believes that IPs like Barbie are changing [8]. The *Barbie* movie emphasizes the importance of inner beauty, including qualities such as confidence, friendliness, kindness, and bravery. It also highlights women's independence and self-improvement, but it is not limited to this. The characters explore themes of self-acceptance and self-esteem, encouraging viewers to value their uniqueness, respect the diversity of beauty, accept the heel they cannot stand on, the appearance of cellulite in their bodies, and accept all imperfections. There is also beauty in such acceptance.

And a woman's beauty should not be a reason to be flirted with. When Barbie entered the real world, she was scrutinized by the male gaze, and the camera and images gave strong unsuitable feedback. Even when she changed clothes and entered the police station, a place that is similar to justice and safety, she could not escape frivolous verbal teasing. A woman's physical attractiveness should not lead to flirtatious behavior towards her. Barbie was subjected to the male gaze in real life and the resultant images conveyed highly inappropriate feedback. Even when dressed for a visit to the police station, a place that represents justice and security, she was not spared from this objectification. The director employs comical scenes to depict the minor ordeals women experience daily. With Barbie in a straightforward, novice role in reality, she struggles to comprehend and distrusts sexist behavior and vehemently condemns any unsolicited advances that disrespect women.

4.2. Women's Autonomy in Social Relationships

Barbie movies reflect women's autonomy in social relationships by creating strong, confident, and autonomous female characters. Barbie pursues personal goals, and Ken's choice is also an attitude of Barbie. Not only can Ken choose to be Ken, Barbie does not necessarily need to be omnipotent. The

movie should emphasize the importance of everyone having the right to be themselves. Although only a small portion of the ideas are developed in the film, the *Barbie* film delivers a positive message of female autonomy and resilience, encouraging women to take an active role in social relationships. The film discusses serious and systemic social issues and examines the complexity and contradiction of modern women [9]. Whether it is a girls' night every day, or the final rejection of Ken's kiss, initiative and the power of permission are in Barbie's hands, and women are no longer manipulated accessories in intimate relationships.

4.3. Women's Self-awareness

Personal growth and self-exploration have become part of feminist films, and the story will no longer focus on the hero, but on Barbie and ordinary women. The concept that needs to be clarified is that Barbie does not represent ordinary women. Whether you admit it or not, there is still an inherent label on classic Barbie. Her figure and appearance will not reduce women's self-anxiety because of her core transformation. However, the director tried to focus on women's independent thinking, self-acceptance, and pursuit of dreams. Barbie and Gloria have different strengths, which reminds people that women have unlimited possibilities. Women can break into the high-level world of all men and have the right to challenge everything.

Or try to think about a question, when Barbie no longer has a perfect body shape and appearance, what is left of Barbie? When she walked out of Utopia and saw women in the real world, she felt detached and the fantasy was shattered. When she sat at the bus stop and saw naturally aging women, she couldn't help but say the words "You are beautiful." This was Barbie. The key to completing the conceptual change. Barbie forcefully throws stones that are opposite to her previous perfect image. Strength and resilience come from within, not from the outside [10]. The ultimate goal of Barbie's exploration of the external world is to find herself within. Another character, Ellen, is the highlight of the movie. He does not belong to Barbie, nor does he belong to Ken. This character perfectly balances the gender contradictions in the movie, conveys a soft point of view, and also strengthens Gloria's return to save Barbie. Gloria's rescue of Utopia is also her reconciliation with herself in the real world, and she passes on her experiences to the brainwashed Barbies. In the process, Gloria, who seems to have been doing nothing, proves that Their value also means that ordinary women are not ordinary, but shine their light in ordinary lives.

5. Conclusion

All said and done, *Barbie* is a film that covers a lot of ground, and the director's ambition is so great that it puts the focus squarely on women. This is a movie without male highlights, but that does not prevent the male characters from being interesting and rich. *Barbie* attempts to break society's stereotypes of women, tear off the fixed labels of hypocrisy, create a new concept, and lead women to show their confidence and ability. This is a highly entertaining film. No matter what, it has played a key milestone in feminist films. Female directors and feminist films will gain higher attention in the film market, and women's self-exploration and growth will also be a popular type of movie. At this point, the *Barbie* movie shows the best value. Beyond that, the question of film and society and capital as embodied in *Barbie* remains worth exploring. Afterward, the character relationships and plot movements in the film can be analyzed from these two directions.

References

- [1] Larasati, D. (2023) 'Barbie' Budget Breakdown: How the Greta Gerwig Film Became the Biggest of the Year. <https://collider.com/barbie-movie-box-office-budget/> (Accessed: September 25, 2023).
- [2] Barbie has a new body cover story (no date). Time <https://time.com/barbie-new-body-cover-story/>.

- [3] Dockterman, E. (2023) 'How Barbie Came to Life,' *Time*, 27 June. <https://time.com/6289864/barbie-time-cover-story/>.
- [4] Chu (2023) *Do you understand? According to director Greta Gerwig, Barbie is really a mother-daughter story*, *A Day Magazine*. <https://www adaymag.com/2023/07/28/barbie-about-motherdaughter.html>.
- [5] Henley, S. (2023) 'No, The Barbie Movie Is Not Anti-Men,' *TheGamer* [Preprint]. <https://www.thegamer.com/barbie-movie-anti-men-ken-feminism/>.
- [6] Naylor, R.L. (2023) 'Why Barbie and not Oppenheimer: A Film Review of Barbie, directed by Greta Gerwig. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2023.,' *Endeavour*, 47(3), p. 100873. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.endeavour.2023.100873>.
- [7] Sherman, A.M. and Zurbriggen, E.L. (2014) "'Boys Can Be Anything": Effect of Barbie Play on girls' career cognitions,' *Sex Roles*, 70(5–6), pp. 195–208. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-014-0347-y>.
- [8] Barbie projects the importance of self-acceptance - ProQuest (2023). <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2839688595?pq-origsite=primo>.
- [9] Rosenblatt, K. and Tolentino, D. (2023) *The 'Barbie' movie ushers bimbo feminism and hyperfemininity into the mainstream*.
- [10] Voza, S. (2023) '4 things the Barbie movie teaches us about resilience and leadership,' *Fast Company* [Preprint]. <https://www.fastcompany.com/90927763/barbie-movie-resilience-leadership>.