

Breakthrough and Beyond

- An Analysis of Feminism in Barbie

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Abstract: This essay aims to investigate the significant impact of the film "Barbie" on the global film market and the feminist film market through a literature analysis approach. The study involves an analysis of the female characters in the movie to reveal the feminist ideas expressed therein. The research methods primarily include audio-visual language interpretation and comparative analysis with other feminist films or classic female figures, aiming to understand the unique role of "Barbie" in the feminist movement and its influence on the female film market. The study findings indicate that the film "Barbie" exhibits more advanced characteristics in feminist thinking, aligning better with the psychological needs of contemporary women. The movie has elevated feminist films to new heights, increasing their visibility. It has also contributed to breakthroughs in post-feminism, emphasizing the transcendence of gender itself and the pursuit of individual value. The conclusion of this research emphasizes the novel inspiration that "Barbie" brings to the feminist film market, highlighting its unique role in the feminist movement. It provides valuable insights for future research, encouraging a deeper exploration of feminist ideas to meet the evolving needs of society.

Keywords: Feminism, "Barbie", Gender Gaze

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the 2023 hit feminist film "Barbie" which holds significant relevance for breaking the current challenges in the feminist film market and improving the shortcomings of post-feminism. The research primarily analyzes women's portrayal in the movie "Barbie". It conducts a horizontal analysis by comparing "Barbie" with feminist films from different regions during the same period and a vertical analysis with feminist films from different periods in the same region. Additionally, the study utilizes documentary analysis to search and read relevant materials, providing a comprehensive understanding of how "Barbie" contributes to the progress of feminist films. The ultimate goal of this research is to explore the positive impact of the film "Barbie" on the advancement of feminist cinema. At the beginning of the film, the dramatic entry of "Barbie", descending from the sky, quickly evokes the "Monolith" from "2001: A Space Odyssey". This scene pays homage to and draws inspiration from Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey", using the symbolism of the "Monolith" to subtly suggest that the birth of "Barbie" signifies a new era of enlightenment. Similar to how the "Monolith" symbolizes the dawn of a new epoch in human civilization, the birth of "Barbie" also

symbolizes the arrival of another new era. Unlike traditional births, "Barbie" does not emerge from a mother's body, and this unconventional entrance creatively diminishes the prominence of the female maternal identity. In our present society, there is an excessive emphasis on the importance of family in women's lives. A successful woman is often expected to assume the role of a mother, demonstrating the capability to raise exceptional children. This places an unseen yet substantial pressure on women. The responsibility of nurturing, however, should not be solely attributed to women; rather, it is a concept ingrained in them during their formative years by society [1]. This deliberate de-emphasis underscores the value of women at an individual level, emphasizing their intrinsic worth rather than the societal value derived solely from the traditional role of motherhood.

2. An Analysis of the Portrayal of Women in *Barbie*

2.1. Shedding the Reproductive Function from the Identity of Motherhood

In the film, "Barbie" explicitly mentions her lack of reproductive organs, reiterating the movie's focus on a female identity liberated from reproductive functions and romantic relationships, and instead centered on the inner lives of women. The female consciousness portrayed in "*Barbie*" goes beyond the role of being solely a mother. This theme is emphasized in the later part of the film through the character Gloria, portrayed by America Ferrera, who represents a mother in the real world. Gloria, in her pursuit of being a good mother and taking care of her family, had previously overlooked her childhood dreams and neglected her inner needs. After experiencing a "revolution" in the Barbie universe, she finally realizes the importance of attending to her inner needs and valuing her feelings. Ultimately, she breaks free from the confines of a singular motherly role, beginning to listen to the voice within herself.

2.2. Breaking Free from Patriarchy and the Gender Gaze

2.2.1. Breaking Free from Patriarchy

Like many feminist films, "*Barbie*" addresses the oppression and impact of patriarchal society on women, depicting a process of resistance against it. When the male protagonist Ken enters the real world, he realizes the numerous privileges and benefits of male identity in the real world, contrasting sharply with the male status in Barbieland. Consequently, he returns to Barbieland to propagate patriarchal ideologies, attempting to transform "Barbieland" into "Kenland." In this doll world, he seeks to establish a patriarchal society and modifies the "Barbies" to conform to male desires and aesthetics, satisfying the male gaze on female appearances [1]. The "Barbies" become mere accessories to the patriarchal society. Eventually, Barbie successfully dismantles this crisis, representing resistance against patriarchal society and the male gaze. However, the film does not present an extreme outcome of eradicating or causing the demise of the "Kens"; instead, it returns to a balanced state within Barbieland.

In the classical Chinese novel "*Journey to the West*", there is a chapter that describes a completely female-dominated society called "Womenland". In this country, only women reside, and all social responsibilities are undertaken by females. Moreover, the presence of males is actively rejected. Similarly, in the film "*Barbie*" "Barbieland" is portrayed as a women-centric paradise, but with significant differences. While the rulers in "Barbieland" are exclusively female, the male characters represented by "Ken" are still an integral part of the world. The female leadership in "Barbieland" does not imply absolute female supremacy but rather acknowledges the capabilities of women. This suggests that the rejection of patriarchal ideologies in the film is not about creating a purely "feminist society" but rather about empowering women to seek balance, freedom, and the courage to resist. This symbolism also reflects the two stages of the historical women's movement: the fight for

women's political and educational rights, aiming to eliminate gender differences and change the status of women. However, the female themes in "*Barbie*" go beyond this, offering a diverse perspective and depth beyond these historical parallels.

2.2.2. Breaking Free from Gender Gaze

When many feminist films address the concept of gender gaze, they often focus on the male gaze. They reflect on the impact and constraints imposed on women by male aesthetics, urging women to break free from the distorted anxiety caused by the male gaze and bravely showcase their true selves. In the film "*Barbie*" apart from depicting scenes where men scrutinize Barbie's outfits in real-world scenarios and Ken transforms the "Barbies" into delicate women conforming to male aesthetics, two special characters are introduced in Barbieland.

In Barbieland, there are "Weird Barbie" and "Allan." "Weird Barbie" plays the role of the "witch" in Barbieland, also acting as a "mother" figure. In male aesthetics, women who deviate from the prescribed norms are often labeled as witches, stigmatizing this group. "Weird Barbie" becomes an outcast in the refined "Barbieland" due to a lack of human care, making her a marginalized figure in Barbieland. Unconscious gender biases are based on unconscious associations with gender [2]. The presence of the "witch" image signifies that patriarchal discipline and male aesthetics remain the survival rules and fundamental existence of Barbieland. However, this untrained character becomes the turning point for Barbie to resist Ken's establishment of a patriarchal paradise and serves as an inspiring "mother" for Barbie. This symbolizes Barbie's encounter with breaking the male gaze and patriarchal discipline, representing an exposure to diverse aesthetics.

All the males are referred to as "Ken," so who is "Allan"? There's a line in the movie: "Barbie and Ken shouldn't live in the shadows," and then, "And Allan." This represents the ideal of Barbieland. Barbieland is not an absolute feminist society; it emphasizes freedom and balance. Allan signifies the existence of a minority, and he can be a sexual minority or anyone who determines the meaning of their existence. The inclusion of the character "Allan" adds depth to the humanistic care in "*Barbie*". "*Barbie*" not only focuses on women and men but also queer identity groups or any non-mainstream group. An ideal society requires the indispensable connection of every part and every individual [3]. This is not the first time the Barbie film series has touched on "queer" themes, but "*Barbie*" has surpassed the ordinary "queer" topics, moving beyond discussions limited to sexual orientation and gender recognition, and delving into deeper issues of self-identity [4].

2.2.3. Beyond Post-Feminism

The feminist movement and feminist films have gradually recognized the limitations of modern feminist consciousness and activism. Post-feminism emphasizes group differences rather than simply advocating for gender equality [5]. Post-feminism is a feminism that is more in tune with young women [6]. However, in today's consumerist society, many things that claim to be feminist set up consumption traps for women, and the excessive emphasis on female identity is undoubtedly a form of constraint. Barbie, evolving from a commodity to a doll, gradually becomes aware of the profound meaning of life and death. Undoubtedly, she has transcended gender and begun to contemplate the existential meaning and value of life that every individual needs to ponder.

3. Differential Comparisons of Feminist Cinema

3.1. Horizontal Comparison: Different Regions in the Same Period

In recent years, the international film market has gradually recognized the market for films with female-centric themes. Films focusing on women and feminism from different countries and regions have emerged, captivating global audiences.

The 2022 American film *"Everything Everywhere All at Once"* is not a feminist film but a film with a strong female lead. It tells the story of a mother and daughter reconciling, using this narrative as a thread to explore the meaning of existence. The 2021 Chinese mainland film *"Hi, Mom"* tells the story of a daughter traveling back to her mother's youth and helping her mother find happiness. The story of *"Hi, Mom"* has touched countless audiences, successfully portraying two very typical female characters. The daughter believes that she and the family have trapped her mother, hoping her mother will choose a better husband, thus changing her life for the better. However, the mother never regrets her choices, and if given another chance, she would still choose to be the mother of her daughter. Women in East Asian family relationships often embody qualities of selfless dedication, and this love and sacrifice are deeply moving. The daughter wishes to sacrifice herself for her mother's happiness, while the mother chooses to labor and endure poverty throughout her life for the sake of her daughter.

The charm of the women in this film lies in the mutual sacrifice and dedication between mother and daughter. The film perfectly illustrates the resilience and tenderness of women in many East Asian families. It also reflects the dilemma faced by many East Asian women, influenced by societal culture and traditional beliefs, sacrificing much of their energy and time for family and others, giving up many possibilities and choices to devote themselves to family and raising children as their striving goal and ultimate meaning [5].

On the other hand, *"Barbie"* breaks away from the idea of women dedicating themselves to the family, downplays the maternal identity, and focuses more on the pursuit of individual value. It reminds the audience that throughout a woman's life, besides the roles of mother and daughter, and beyond family life, energy should also be devoted to oneself. It encourages the exploration of personal pursuits and meanings [7].

The Chinese mainland feminist film *"Send Me to the Clouds"* from 2019 tells the story of a 30-year-old woman diagnosed with uterine cancer. She bears the pressures of family, faces career challenges, deals with physical pain, and at the same time, cannot ignore her desires for love and intimacy. After learning about her cancer diagnosis, she finally breaks free from societal constraints and starts focusing on her inner desires and physiological needs [8]. She realizes that refusing to bear the burden of the family is not disobedient, expressing romantic feelings for a man is not as difficult as it seems, and desire for sex is not something to be ashamed of. The gaze and constraints imposed on women are like a mountain, and unlike *"Barbie"*, *"Send Me to the Clouds"* pays more attention to specific real-world issues, addressing the pressures and challenges faced by a 30-year-old woman in modern society, including the inescapable sexual repression [8].

The 2022 French-Belgian film *"Darva"* focuses on the difficult growth of a violated girl into a young woman. It tells the story of a girl's self-awakening. The protagonist, Darva, is like an exclusive "Barbie doll" of her father who violated her. Stories similar to *"Lolita"* often depict the harm of the male gaze to women, and more tragically, the "fawning" exhibited by these girls is also worth noting. *"Darva"* places a female character at the center, narrating how women endure the unbearable. Isn't this exactly what *"Barbie"* refers to as "de-glamorizing"? How to avoid and resist the harm that the male gaze may bring. *"Barbie"* tells this less somberly and oppressively.

The 2019 South Korean film *"Kim Ji-young: Born 1982"* sparked a discussion in Korea about the plight of women. The girl grows up ordinary, chooses marriage, hides her name, becomes a silently

sacrificing mother, and gets used to disappointment and sacrifice. One story reflects the pain points of society, bringing to the surface a problem that is immensely significant but often overlooked [9].

The 2022 Japanese film *"The Freckled Miss Who Doesn't Want to Fall in Love"* is a movie that addresses the realities of modern life, particularly the declining birth rates in recent years. The film tells the story of a single woman who is reluctant to marry or engage in romantic relationships. Simultaneously, it serves as a feminist film. The freckled miss alters the ending of *"Cinderella"*, asserting that a girl's dream doesn't necessarily have to involve marrying a prince. Adding a hopeful touch to the story, a young boy in the film shows a keen interest in the modified ending of *"Cinderella"*, indicating that the awakening of feminist consciousness occurs not only in women but also in men. This parallels the reconciliation between Ken and Barbie in *"Barbie"*. In both films, men are portrayed as allies of feminism.

Whether in East Asia or the Western world, feminist awakening is prevalent, and feminist films are flourishing. What sets *"Barbie"* apart is its use of a more diverse perspective to narrate the challenges and issues faced by women in contemporary society. It employs a lighter tone to elucidate feminist ideologies and promote the women's movement. While other films reflect sorrow and oppression, *"Barbie"* uses more entertaining, relaxed, and commercial language to convey that the women's movement is not as burdensome. Women may face pressures from family, and societal opinions, endure sexual repression, and suffer the harm brought by the male gaze. However, today, women can break free from these constraints and traditional societal norms more easily and confidently, and men should be allies in feminism as well.

3.2. Vertical Comparisons: Different Periods in the Same Region

In regions of Europe and America where the feminist movement has actively progressed, the portrayal of women in films has undergone significant transformations. Early Hollywood films established stereotypical female archetypes, categorizing women in structuralist narratives as representing maternity ("Earth Mother"), feminine charm ("Femme Fatale"), irrationality, wisdom, and destruction ("Witch"), as well as innocence and purity ("Sacrificial Victim") [9]. Female protagonists in films such as *"Gone with the Wind"* and *"Waterloo Bridge"* from 1939 were women seeking love amidst war and turmoil. They embodied both the charming "Femme Fatale" and the innocent "Sacrificial Victim." In these films, the fates of the female protagonists were turbulent, swept away by the tides of history. Despite their struggles, they lacked true freedom.

However, in 1962's *"Cléo de 5 à 7"*, the female protagonist breaks free from societal repression at a crucial moment in her life, discovering her true self. The pursuit of love by women is no longer just about heterosexual relationships but involves contemplation. Women begin to think that their love should also be reserved. As the film's dialogue puts it, "They only want to be loved. They are afraid to give, afraid of losing. They only love incompletely. Their bodies are only toys, not their lives."

The film *"Thelma & Louise"* released in 1991, is considered a representative feminist work that challenged the patriarchal society. It tells a story of growth, transformation, and self-redemption, revealing the courage behind female vulnerability. Despite portraying some extreme actions, the movie successfully showcases the impactful strength of women.

In contrast, the 2013 film *"Nymphomaniac"* focuses on the narrative of sex and love, shifting away from the theme of the struggle for women's status. Instead, it emphasizes the self-identity within a woman's inner world. After facing a series of challenges, the female protagonist chooses to embrace her "sexuality." This decision signifies an acknowledgment of her identity as a "nymphomaniac" and, more importantly, a recognition of her true self. The film opposes conventional and hypocritical notions of love and challenges the dictates of a consumerist society, presenting a rebellion against the moral doctrines of a patriarchal world.

The 2019 film "*Marriage Story*" reflects the struggles women face in intimate relationships—women's sacrifices and the oppression of patriarchy. The movie doesn't favor either gender in relationships, allowing us to witness the helplessness of both men and women in intimate connections.

Moving on to the recent "*Barbie*" film: The portrayal of women in cinema has been evolving. Transitioning from simplistic and tragic screen images, women have gradually become more complex. The characters are now portrayed with struggles, regrets, and imperfections, ultimately revealing a majestic strength that emphasizes the power of women. This evolution continues with a focus on societal doctrines and the contradiction of female sexual repression [10]. The narrative shifts toward women's lives and marital statuses, culminating in films like "*Barbie*" which adopts a diversified perspective to tell stories of women seeking self-discovery. The representation of women in cinema has become increasingly profound, closer to real life, and capable of providing audiences with strength and contemplation.

4. Conclusions

The research findings suggest that the film "*Barbie*" is an outstanding work in contemporary feminist cinema, introducing new perspectives that play a role in breaking through post-feminist theories. Consequently, the research concludes that feminist films, and feminism as a whole, should not solely revolve around reflections on gender identity but should also emphasize the improvement of one's personality. This study provides valuable references for future research directions, particularly influencing the focus of the feminist film market on the predicament of women in family relationships and the oppression brought by societal identities.

Future research should shift towards breaking free from external gazes, reinforcing gender identity, and delving into profound investigations of self-meaning and life values. The feminist movement and feminist cinema have undergone lengthy development and have now entered a new phase, facing new challenges. "*Barbie*" undoubtedly signifies the film industry's heightened attention to the women's topic market, introducing fresh themes to feminist discussions. In today's context, where consumerism and postmodern feminism create new challenges for women, "*Barbie*" addresses a new dimension—feminism should not only involve reflections on gender identity but also encompass the acceptance and recognition of one's personality.

Whether male, female, or part of a sexual minority group, individuals should reconsider their intrinsic value, de-emphasize their gender and identity, and focus on addressing internal issues and needs. Breaking free from external scrutiny and refusing to be categorized, individuals can pursue personal value and the meaning of life, as emphasized by "*Barbie*" with the statement, "Barbie and Ken shouldn't live in the shadows" followed by, "Allan".

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