

The Representation of Liberal Feminism in Barbie (2023) Based on Rosemarie Tong's Theory

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of liberal feminism in Barbie (2023) using Rosemarie Tong's theory, with female autonomy as the main analytical concept. Using a descriptive qualitative method, the study analyzes selected dialogues, scenes, and actions performed by the character Barbie, collected through repeated viewing, note-taking, and screenshot documentation. The data are organized through an analytical framework of social expectations and identity transformation before being interpreted through Tong's principles of freedom of choice, self-determination, and independence. The findings show that liberal feminism is primarily represented through Barbie's gradually developing autonomy as she exercises freedom of choice, builds self-determination, and demonstrates independence in defining herself according to her own values. Social expectations, expressed through unrealistic standards, restrictive gender roles, and objectifying cultural norms, function as external pressures that push Barbie to question her assigned identity and strengthen her autonomy. This process culminates in an identity transformation moving from an identity crisis, through self-understanding, toward a self-defined identity. The study concludes that Barbie (2023) represents liberal feminism through the interrelation of female autonomy, social expectations, and identity transformation, with autonomy as the central representation and the other elements providing the context and process through which it is achieved.

Keywords: liberal feminism, female autonomy, social expectations, identity transformation, Barbie (2023).

INTRODUCTION

Discussions of women's roles and identities have developed alongside broader changes in social and cultural perspectives on gender, yet women continue to face barriers in many areas of life. The United Nations (2025) reports that women still experience challenges in economic participation, leadership, and decision-making, while UN Women and UNDESA (2025) estimate that roughly 351 million women and girls may remain in extreme poverty by 2030 if current trends continue. The OECD (2023) similarly notes that social norms and institutional barriers continue to limit women's access to opportunity, indicating that women's ability to make independent choices and determine their own lives remains constrained by structural conditions.

One perspective that directly addresses these constraints is liberal feminism, which, according to Tong (2009), emphasizes equality, individual freedom, and equal opportunity for women and men. Within this perspective, female autonomy refers to women's capacity to make decisions and define themselves according to their own values and experiences (Ajmani et al., 2025; Nurdilah & Rahmawati, 2025). In practice, however, women are often constrained by social expectations related to beauty, behavior, and success that are shaped by prevailing cultural norms (OECD, 2023), producing a persistent tension between externally imposed expectations and personal choice.

Film plays an important role in reflecting and shaping such expectations. As a medium of representation, film can reinforce or challenge dominant gender norms and thereby influence public understanding of women's roles (UNESCO, 2021). *Barbie* (2023), directed by Greta Gerwig, is a contemporary example of this dynamic: the film follows its title character as she questions the idealized image of womanhood attached to her, gradually develops self-awareness, and redefines her identity, engaging directly with liberal feminist concerns about freedom, self-determination, and women's capacity for independent choice.

Previous studies have examined liberal feminism through female characters in film using Tong's framework. Pandini and Putri (2025) found that Merida in *Brave* represents liberal feminist values through her rejection of arranged marriage and patriarchal tradition; Fitriana (2025) highlighted the role of education in building self-awareness and independence in *Educating Rita*; Nahdiyati (2009) showed that Beatrix Potter in *Miss Potter* demonstrates independence and resistance to Victorian gender norms; Susilowaty (2022) found that Mulan challenges traditional gender expectations in her pursuit of equality; and Dewi et al. (2022) identified liberal feminist values in *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* through resistance to discrimination. Putri (2024) further argues that *Barbie* (2023) itself represents liberal feminist values through its protagonist's effort to challenge idealized standards of femininity. Taken together, however, these studies concentrate mainly on resistance to patriarchal norms, leaving the relationship between female autonomy, social expectations, and identity transformation within a single analytical framework comparatively unexplored.

This study therefore analyzes the representation of liberal feminism in *Barbie* (2023) based on Tong's theory, focusing specifically on female autonomy through the dimensions of freedom of choice, self-determination, and independence, and using social expectations and identity transformation as an organizing framework for interpreting how these dimensions develop across the film. Beyond addressing this gap, the study is intended to contribute to feminist film studies by offering a more integrated account of how contemporary films represent women's autonomy, and to serve as a reference for future research applying Tong's theory to film analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Film is not only a form of art and entertainment but also a medium that communicates social, cultural, and ideological values (Supiarza et al., 2020). Hall (2020) explains representation as the process through which meaning is produced and communicated through language, images, and cultural texts; films therefore do not simply mirror reality but actively shape how audiences understand gender, identity, and social expectation. In this study, *Barbie* (2023) is treated as such a cultural text, one that portrays its protagonist's questioning of imposed expectations and her gradual movement toward self-defined choice, making it an appropriate object for examining the representation of liberal feminism through female autonomy.

Feminism, broadly defined, is a movement and body of thought that challenges women's subordination and seeks gender equality (Hooks, 2020). Tong (2009) notes that feminism is not a single ideology but a range of perspectives that explain the causes of women's inequality and propose different solutions to it. Liberal feminism is one of the most influential of these perspectives: it holds that women's inequality results from social, legal, and cultural barriers restricting access to education, employment, and public life, and that women, as rational individuals, are entitled to the same rights and opportunities as men to make their own decisions (Tong, 2009; Tong & Botts, 2018).

Among the principles of liberal feminism, this study focuses on female autonomy, understood as women's ability to make decisions and control their own lives according to their own values and goals (Tong, 2009). Autonomy is examined here through three interrelated dimensions. Freedom of choice concerns women's right to make decisions and exercise control over their own lives, both within and outside the home. Self-determination concerns women's capacity to define their own identity, values, and goals rather than being treated as a means to others' ends. Independence concerns women's ability to think, act, and decide according to their own judgment without excessive reliance on others, including economic and relational independence (Tong & Botts, 2018). Together, these dimensions provide the analytical basis for examining how Barbie exercises autonomy across the film.

To organize the analysis, this study employs a two-part analytical framework. Social expectations are examined through three aspects: standards, the socially constructed criteria that define ideal characteristics and behavior for women; gender roles, the responsibilities and behaviors considered appropriate on the basis of gender; and cultural norms, the shared beliefs and practices that shape how women are perceived and treated. Identity transformation is examined through three stages: an identity crisis, in which the character begins to question an imposed identity; a process of self-understanding, in which she gains deeper insight into herself through experience; and a self-defined identity, in which she consciously chooses who she is. These categories function as organizing tools for the analysis rather than as independent theories; once the data are categorized, they are interpreted through Tong's concept of female autonomy.

Situated among the previous studies discussed above, the present study differs by treating female autonomy, rather than resistance to patriarchy alone, as the central analytical concept, and by using social expectations and identity transformation as an integrated framework for explaining how that autonomy develops across a single film.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative research design with a descriptive approach, appropriate because the aim is to interpret meaning rather than to measure numerical data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach allows the dialogues, scenes, and character actions in Barbie (2023) to be described and interpreted in detail, focusing on how Barbie exercises freedom of choice, self-determination, and independence, and how she responds to social expectations while undergoing identity transformation. The primary source of data is the film Barbie (2023), directed by Greta Gerwig, from which selected dialogues, scenes, and actions relevant to female autonomy, social expectations, and identity transformation were drawn. Secondary sources consist of books and journal articles on liberal feminism and related concepts, most notably Tong's *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, which provides the study's theoretical framework.

Data were collected through documentation: the film was watched repeatedly to ensure a thorough understanding of its storyline, characters, and key events; relevant dialogues, scenes, and actions were then identified, and notes and screenshots of these moments were compiled to organize the material according to the study's analytical framework. The data were analyzed descriptively and qualitatively following the general steps of organizing, categorizing, interpreting, and concluding (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). First, dialogues, scenes, and actions unrelated to the research focus were excluded. Second, the remaining data were categorized according to the analytical framework of social expectations and identity transformation. Third, the categorized data were interpreted through Tong's concept of female autonomy, examining

how Barbie demonstrates freedom of choice, self-determination, and independence, in order to explain how these dimensions represent liberal feminist values across the film.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis identifies three interrelated categories through which Barbie (2023) represents liberal feminism: Barbie's female autonomy, the social expectations she encounters, and the identity transformation that connects the two. This section presents the findings within each category before discussing how, together, they answer the study's research questions.

Female Autonomy

Female autonomy emerges as the central representation of liberal feminism in the film, developing gradually through Barbie's freedom of choice, self-determination, and independence rather than appearing as an immediate achievement.

1. Freedom of Choice

Freedom of choice is evident in several turning points: when Weird Barbie offers her the choice between returning to her familiar life or learning "the truth about the universe," when she chooses to travel to the Real World to find the girl playing with her, and when she ultimately decides to become human rather than remain a doll created by others. In each case, guidance is offered by other characters, but the decision itself belongs to Barbie alone, consistent with Tong's (2009) view of women as rational individuals capable of directing their own lives.

2. Self-Determination

Self-determination becomes visible as Barbie begins to question the "Stereotypical Barbie" identity long attached to her. After experiencing physical and emotional changes in the Real World, she tells Gloria that her concern is no longer simply about beauty but about no longer fitting the image of perfection Barbieland expects of her; later, reflecting with Ruth Handler, she concludes that becoming human is "something I discover I am" rather than something asked for. Both moments show Barbie defining herself through her own experience rather than accepting an identity imposed by others, reflecting Tong's (2009) argument that women should determine their own identities according to their own values.

3. Independence

Independence is demonstrated most clearly in Barbie's relationship with Ken and with Ruth Handler. When Ken realizes he has defined himself entirely through Barbie, she tells him he must "figure out who you are without me," insisting that identity should not rest on relationships, possessions, or social roles, a claim that applies to her own independence as much as to his. Later, when Barbie asks Ruth for permission to become human, Ruth's reply that "you don't need my permission" reinforces the same principle: that women hold the authority to determine their own futures without external approval.

Social Expectations

Social expectations function in the film as external pressures that, rather than simply obstructing Barbie, help set her development of autonomy in motion.

1. Beauty Standards

Standards are represented most directly through Gloria's speech describing the contradictory demands placed on women, who are expected to be beautiful, successful, confident, and caring while never "getting old," "being rude," or "getting out of line"—an impossible ideal that, per Tong (2009), liberal feminism explicitly rejects as a restriction on women's individuality.

2. Gender Roles

Gender roles become explicit once Ken establishes "Kendom" in Barbieland: Barbies who had been doctors, lawyers, and even the President now occupy purely domestic and supportive functions, with one former president recalling that she went from running the country to "cutting a Ken's steak for him." This reversal illustrates how traditional gender roles, in Tong's (2009) terms, restrict women's opportunities by placing authority with men and support with women.

3. Cultural Norms

Cultural norms surface when Barbie and Ken first arrive in the Real World and Barbie receives unwanted comments about her appearance from strangers, leaving her feeling self-conscious in a way she had never experienced in Barbieland. This normalization of evaluating women by appearance rather than ability reflects what Tong (2009) identifies as a central injustice liberal feminism seeks to correct: women being valued for their bodies rather than respected as rational individuals.

Identity Transformation

Identity transformation unfolds across three stages that connect Barbie's experiences of social expectations with the development of her autonomy.

1. The Beginning of Identity Crisis

The identity crisis begins subtly when an unprompted thought of death disrupts a dance party in the ever-perfect Barbieland. It becomes more evident when Barbie notices that her feet are no longer arched in the stereotypical Barbie shape and later falls, rather than lands gracefully, from the roof of her house. These physical disruptions symbolize the gradual collapse of an identity built entirely upon perfection.

2. The Process of Self-Understanding

Self-understanding develops through Barbie's encounters in the Real World. She gradually realizes that crying is a natural part of being human and later, while sitting beside an elderly woman at a bus stop, tells her she is beautiful. This moment marks a significant shift in Barbie's perspective, as she begins to associate beauty with authenticity, individuality, and lived experience rather than youth and physical perfection.

3. From Socially Constructed Identity to Self-Defined Identity

Finally, Barbie reaches a self-defined identity when she consciously chooses to become human, accepting the ordinary and imperfect experiences of human life instead of the manufactured perfection of Barbieland. Consistent with Tong's (2009) view that women should have the freedom to define themselves and determine their own futures, this

decision completes Barbie's transformation from an identity assigned by others to one she constructs for herself.

Discussion

Taken together, these findings answer the study's three research questions by demonstrating that liberal feminism in Barbie (2023) is represented through the interaction of female autonomy, social expectations, and identity transformation rather than through a single aspect of women's empowerment.

Female Autonomy as the Core Representation of Liberal Feminism

First, liberal feminism is represented primarily through Barbie's female autonomy, which develops through freedom of choice, self-determination, and independence rather than through resistance alone. This finding extends Fitriana (2025) and Nahdiyati (2009), who associate liberal feminism with women's independence and decision-making, by demonstrating that these qualities operate as three interconnected dimensions of autonomy instead of a single undifferentiated characteristic. The analysis therefore suggests that autonomy in Barbie is portrayed as a gradual process in which women actively make choices, define their own identities, and exercise independence in determining their futures.

Social Expectations as the Context for the Development of Autonomy

Second, social expectations—including beauty standards, gender roles, and cultural norms—function not merely as barriers but as the external context that stimulates Barbie's critical awareness and encourages the development of her autonomy. Unlike previous studies such as Pandini and Putri (2025) and Dewi et al. (2022), which primarily interpret liberal feminism as resistance to patriarchal structures, the present study argues that these expectations also serve as catalysts for personal transformation. Barbie's encounters with contradictory expectations in the Real World become the experiences through which she questions socially constructed ideals and gradually develops a more autonomous sense of self.

Identity Transformation as the Process of Achieving Autonomy

Third, Barbie's identity transformation—from identity crisis through self-understanding to a self-defined identity—illustrates the process through which female autonomy is ultimately achieved. Rather than presenting autonomy as an inherent characteristic, the film depicts it as the outcome of reflection, experience, and conscious decision-making. This finding suggests that liberal feminism in Barbie concerns not only women's equal rights and opportunities but also their freedom to define their identities according to their own values and aspirations.

Overall Interpretation

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Barbie (2023) represents liberal feminism through the interconnected relationship between female autonomy, social expectations, and identity transformation. Female autonomy functions as the central representation of liberal feminism, while social expectations provide the external conditions that challenge Barbie's existing identity, and identity transformation represents the developmental process through which she ultimately becomes an autonomous individual. Together, these three dimensions present liberal feminism as both a social and personal journey toward self-determination and authentic identity.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the representation of liberal feminism in Barbie (2023) based on Rosemarie Tong's theory, using female autonomy as the main analytical concept and social expectations and identity transformation as the framework for organizing the analysis. The findings show that female autonomy is the primary representation of liberal feminism in the film, developed through Barbie's freedom of choice in leaving Barbieland and choosing to become human, her self-determination in questioning and redefining the "Stereotypical Barbie" identity, and her independence in making decisions without relying on others' approval. Social expectations, represented through standards, gender roles, and cultural norms, function as external factors that prompt Barbie to question the identity constructed for her and that strengthen her autonomy rather than simply restricting it. Finally, Barbie's identity transformation, moving from an identity crisis through self-understanding to a self-defined identity, illustrates the process through which this autonomy is ultimately achieved. In conclusion, Barbie (2023) represents liberal feminism through the interconnected relationship between female autonomy, social expectations, and identity transformation, with autonomy functioning as the central representation, social expectations providing the external context that challenges it, and identity transformation illustrating the process through which Barbie becomes an autonomous individual who defines herself according to her own values, experiences, and choices. Future research may extend this analysis by applying other feminist perspectives, such as radical, socialist, or existentialist feminism, to Barbie (2023), or by examining other major characters, such as Gloria, Weird Barbie, or Ken, to explore additional dimensions of gender role and identity representation in the film.

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