THE SOCIAL REALITY OF WOMEN'S LIVES AS REPRESENTED IN THE MOVIE OF *BARBIE* (2023)

Dwi Husna
Universitas Airlangga
dwi.husna-2022@fisip.unair.ac.id

Abstract	Article Information
Women have historically been depicted through negative stereotypes, portrayed as dependent, vulnerable, and unable to lead. Films often reinforce these roles, emphasizing women's domestic responsibilities while men dominate public spheres. However, the release of Barbie (2023) presents a transformative perspective, advocating for gender equality. This study analyzes the representation of women in Barbie (2023) using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, focusing on signs, myths, and their connotative and denotative meanings. The research uncovers three key representations: (1) women can achieve any aspiration; (2) women can be independent and assertive; and (3) women exhibit courage in the face of oppression. The findings reveal that the protagonist in Barbie reflects the evolving social realities of women, depicting them as strong and independent, contrary to traditional patriarchal views. This shift indicates a progressive decline in outdated gender perspectives, showcasing a positive portrayal of gender equality. Ultimately, Barbie (2023) serves as a significant cultural artifact that promotes a more equitable view of women's roles in society.	

INTRODUCTION

The perception of women as inherently dependent on men remains prevalent in many societies due to enduring patriarchal cultural norms. This belief, which positions men as superior to women, has perpetuated gender inequality and led to the marginalization and subordination of women. According to Zuhri and Amalia (2022), the societal view that men hold a higher status has resulted in significant social injustice for women. Historically, gender stereotypes have depicted women as gentle, emotional, and irrational, while men are seen as strong, rational, and mentally resilient. These stereotypes contribute to the perception of women as less capable leaders and reinforce their secondary status to men, leading to widespread gender disparities (Sulistyowati, 2021).

Social realities, deeply embedded in long-standing cultural patterns, reflect these gender biases. One such reality is the lower societal status accorded to women, perpetuated by patriarchal norms in everyday life. In the past, media representations in newspapers and theatrical performances reinforced these norms. However, as society evolved, so too did the social realities surrounding women's reputations. Mass media began to challenge traditional stereotypes, influenced by feminist movements striving to reshape societal perceptions and elevate women's status. Thus, mass media plays a crucial role in disseminating new ideas and reshaping societal views on gender roles, aiming to portray women as they wish to be seen rather than through the lens of outdated stereotypes.

Mass media, particularly films, serve as powerful tools for shaping public perceptions. Films often depict women as mere accessories to men, reinforcing gender stereotypes. Delviyana (2021) notes that the portrayal of women in films significantly influences viewers' perceptions, especially among children who may take these portrayals as factual representations of reality. Representations in media create broad public perceptions, forming complex symbolic associations that impact societal views on gender roles (Syarief, Jamalullail, & Napitupulu, 2023). Stuart Hall's (1997) theory on representation emphasizes the role of language and mental representation in shaping abstract concepts and societal ideologies.

In social media, women are frequently depicted as focused on their physical appearance rather than their intellect, further perpetuating their objectification and lower status. Research by The Rockefeller Foundation, UN Women, and the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media (GDIGM) highlights the prevalence of these stereotypes in popular films worldwide. The findings indicate that women are often portrayed in sexualized roles and are underrepresented as speaking characters, particularly in action and adventure films (Wardah & Kusuma, 2022).

Previous research has highlighted the shift in female representation in modern films, moving away from traditional stereotypes towards more empowered portrayals. Garabedian (2014) discusses how Disney's recent films depict female protagonists as strong, heroic, intelligent, and independent, breaking away from the need for a male savior. Similarly, Bintariana's (2018) analysis of "Moana" reflects this shift, using semiotic theory to explore the portrayal of women and nature.

This study focuses on the 2023 film "Barbie," which, despite emphasizing physical beauty, presents a strong feminist narrative. The film portrays Barbie as a character who confronts and overcomes patriarchal stereotypes, reclaiming her identity and autonomy. This analysis will utilize Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to examine the denotative and connotative meanings within the film, aiming to explore how "Barbie" represents women and challenges traditional gender roles. The central research question guiding this study is: How are women represented in the 2023 film "Barbie"?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Roland Barthes: Denotation and Connotation

Roland Barthes, a seminal figure in semiotics and literary criticism, introduced pivotal concepts in the study of symbolic meaning, particularly denotation and connotation. These concepts are foundational to modern semiotic analysis and provide a robust framework for understanding how meanings are constructed and interpreted.

a. Denotation: The Basic Literal Meaning

Denotation refers to the most basic and literal meaning of a sign or symbol. This level of meaning is direct and can be identified without needing any special interpretation or context. In semiotics, denotation serves as the structural foundation for reading signs, revealing the primary or physical meaning of the object represented by the symbol. For instance, in the context of photography, denotation involves the straightforward visual description of the objects captured in the image.

b. Connotation: Additional Associative Meanings

Connotation, in contrast, delves into the associative and additional meanings that a sign or symbol carries. These meanings are shaped by cultural, historical, and personal contexts, adding layers of complexity to the interpretation of a sign. Barthes highlighted that connotation introduces elements of ideology and cultural values, enriching the meaning and creating more intricate symbolic relationships. For example, in photography, connotation may involve specific symbolisms associated with the objects, generating deeper emotional or cultural associations.

Structuralism Analysis: Interplay of Denotation and Connotation

Barthes' structuralist approach in analyzing denotation and connotation emphasizes that language and symbols are governed by specific rules. Structural analysis allows researchers to understand how signs work together, forming structures that organize the relationships between denotation and connotation. By grasping this structure, semiotic research can probe deeper into the mechanisms of meaning-making within language and symbols.

Application to Film Analysis

The framework of denotation and connotation is particularly useful in film analysis, where visual and narrative elements work together to construct meaning. In the analysis of the film "Barbie" (2023), this theoretical approach helps decode the representation of women and the underlying ideological messages. The denotative level involves identifying the explicit content and actions depicted in the film, while the connotative level explores the deeper symbolic meanings and cultural implications.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, utilizing content analysis to examine the representation of women in "Barbie" (2023). The film is analyzed through the lens of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, focusing on key scenes and character portrayals to identify the signs and myths that construct the representation of women. Data Collection

The primary data for this study is the film "Barbie" (2023). Key scenes are selected based on their relevance to the themes of gender representation and empowerment. Additional data includes promotional materials and interviews with the filmmakers to provide context and insight into the intended messages of the film.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Representation of Women as Capable and Independent

Figure 1. The narrator tells that Barbie is a woman and women can be anything (scene 03:01)

Denotation: In the opening scene, the narrator introduces Barbie, emphasizing her diverse roles and professions, from doctor to president. This depiction aims to showcase Barbie as a versatile and capable character, able to inspire real-world women to achieve similar feats.

Connotation: The narrator's statement, "Barbie can be anything, women can be anything," suggests a break from traditional patriarchal norms. This assertion promotes the idea that women do not need to rely on men for financial support or social validation. Instead, they can be independent and successful in their own right.

Myth: Historically, societal stereotypes have confined women to domestic roles, deeming them less competent in professional fields. Despite progress in women's social status, leadership positions remain predominantly male-dominated. The media's focus often reinforces negative stereotypes by highlighting women's vulnerabilities rather than their achievements. However, the film "Barbie" challenges this narrative, presenting women as autonomous and capable of pursuing any career or ambition.

Female Independence and Resilience

Figure 2. Barbie Firmly Rejects Ken and Prioritizes Her Friends (Scene 14:48)

Denotation: In this scene, Barbie rejects Ken's advances, choosing to spend time with her female friends instead. This interaction occurs at Barbie Dreamhouse, a space primarily associated with Barbie and her friends.

Connotation: The film emphasizes the strength of female friendships over romantic relationships. Barbie's decision to prioritize her friends over Ken signifies her independence and the non-necessity of male validation or support. This portrayal aligns with a feminist perspective that values women's autonomy and solidarity.

Myth: Romantic relationships have traditionally been depicted as avenues for male dominance, where women are seen as needing a male partner for completion. The film disrupts this myth by illustrating that women can be self-sufficient and prioritize their own choices and relationships over societal expectations of romantic dependency. This narrative encourages viewers to see women as complete individuals, capable of leading fulfilling lives without necessarily relying on male partners.

Courage to Resist Oppression

Figure 3. Barbie punches a man who deliberately touches her buttocks (Scene 29:25)

Denotation: Barbie reacts to a man's inappropriate behavior by punching him in the face. This occurs in the Real World, where Barbie encounters different social norms and behaviors compared to her own world.

Connotation: Barbie's response to harassment demonstrates her courage and refusal to accept demeaning treatment. This act of defiance against a man's inappropriate behavior highlights her strength and assertiveness, challenging the traditional view of women as passive or submissive.

Myth: Societal norms often portray women as weaker and less capable of defending themselves. This perception contributes to the marginalization of women and their exclusion from public spaces. By depicting Barbie as a character who stands up against harassment, the film counters these stereotypes and promotes the idea that women can and should defend their dignity and rights. This portrayal aligns with second-wave feminism, which advocates for women's liberation and equality in all spheres of life.

The Shift in Media Representation

The film "Barbie" (2023) marks a significant shift in how women are represented in media. Unlike traditional portrayals that often reinforce gender stereotypes, this film presents a more nuanced and empowering depiction of women. Through its narrative and characters, the film advocates for gender equality and challenges the patriarchal structures that have historically limited women's roles in society.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the film "Barbie" (2023) through a semiotic lens has revealed significant insights into the representation of women and feminist themes within the cinematic narrative. This section discusses the key findings of the research and their broader implications in terms of gender representation, empowerment, and societal perceptions.

Empowering Representations of Women

One of the central themes that emerged from the analysis is the empowering representation of women in the film. Barbie's character is depicted as multifaceted, possessing diverse professions and identities that defy traditional gender norms. This portrayal aligns with contemporary discourses on gender equality and challenges the notion that women are limited to specific roles or occupations based on societal expectations.

The denotative elements, such as Barbie's various professions and roles, directly convey the message of women's agency and capability to excel in diverse fields. This portrayal not only celebrates women's achievements but also serves as a powerful statement against gender stereotypes and limitations.

Furthermore, the connotative meanings associated with Barbie's character deepen the narrative of empowerment. Her ability to embody different roles symbolizes not just individual empowerment but also societal progress towards gender inclusivity and acceptance of diverse identities.

Friendship, Independence, and Female Solidarity

The film also emphasizes themes of friendship, independence, and female solidarity, particularly through Barbie's interactions with other female characters. Scenes depicting Barbie prioritizing her friendships and asserting her independence from male characters like Ken highlight the importance of female bonds and support networks.

This aspect of the film challenges traditional narratives that prioritize romantic relationships and male-female dynamics. By showcasing strong and supportive female friendships, the film promotes the idea that women can thrive and find fulfillment outside of traditional romantic roles.

Moreover, Barbie's independence and assertiveness send a powerful message about women's autonomy and decision-making agency. Her refusal to conform to societal expectations or prioritize romantic relationships over her own desires and friendships resonates with contemporary discourses on women's rights and empowerment.

Resilience Against Oppression and Patriarchal Norms

Another significant theme that emerges from the analysis is Barbie's resilience against instances of oppression and patriarchal norms. Scenes where Barbie stands up against derogatory treatment or challenges oppressive behaviors symbolize a broader narrative of female empowerment and resistance.

Barbie's courage to confront oppression not only reflects individual agency but also signifies a collective struggle against gender-based discrimination and inequality. Her actions inspire viewers to challenge oppressive norms and advocate for gender equality in various spheres of life.

Furthermore, the film's portrayal of Barbie as a resilient and courageous character counters stereotypes that portray women as passive or submissive. By depicting Barbie as a proactive agent of change, the film contributes to reshaping societal perceptions of women's capabilities and strengths.

Implications for Gender Representation in Media

The findings of this research have several implications for gender representation in media. Firstly, the film "Barbie" (2023) demonstrates the potential of media narratives to challenge traditional gender norms and stereotypes by portraying empowered and multifaceted female characters.

Secondly, the emphasis on female friendships and solidarity in the film encourages a shift in focus from romantic relationships to diverse forms of meaningful connections among women. This shift not only broadens the representation of women's experiences but also promotes inclusivity and diversity in media narratives.

Moreover, the depiction of Barbie's resilience and agency serves as a model for promoting positive role models for young audiences, especially girls. By showcasing strong, independent, and empowered female characters, media can play a crucial role in shaping positive attitudes and perceptions towards gender equality.

CONCLUSION

The representation of women in the film "Barbie" (2023) illustrates a significant shift in how female characters are portrayed, reflecting broader societal changes towards gender equality. Traditionally, women have been viewed through a patriarchal lens, often depicted as dependent on men and confined to specific roles. However, this film challenges these stereotypes by presenting a protagonist who embodies independence, strength, and agency. Barbie's journey in the film showcases her ability to navigate and resist patriarchal structures. She demonstrates that women can be autonomous and self-reliant, as seen when she refuses to prioritize Ken over her friends and stands firm in her decisions. This defiance against traditional gender roles highlights the diminishing influence of patriarchy in contemporary media representations. The film further emphasizes women's empowerment by depicting Barbie as capable of defending herself against harassment. This portrayal contrasts sharply with the historical depiction of women as passive and vulnerable, showcasing a modern feminist narrative where women assert their rights and challenge societal norms. In summary, "Barbie" (2023) serves as a cultural artifact that reflects and promotes the evolving perception of women in society. By using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, the film's connotative and denotative meanings reveal a narrative that encourages women to break free from traditional gender constraints and aspire to roles of leadership and independence. This study underscores the importance of media in shaping public perceptions and advancing gender equality.

REFERENCES

Anthony, A. K., Okorie, S., & Norman, L. (2016). When Beauty Brings Out the Beast: Female Comparisons and the Feminine Rivalry. Gender Issues, 33, 311–334. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-016-9158-5

Bintariana, D. (2018). Representasi Perempuan dan Alam dalam Film Moana Karya Sutradara Ron Climents dan John Musker (Kajian Semiotik Roland Barthes). Jurnal Sapala, 5(1), 1–13. Retrieved from https://ejournal.unesa.ac.id/index.php/jurnal-sapala/article/view/28459

Delviyana, K. (2021). Pengaruh Terpaan Media Sosial Instagram @netflixid terhadap Minat untuk Menonton Film di Netflix (Studi Pada Followers Instagram @netflixid) (Universitas Lampung). Universitas Lampung. Retrieved from http://digilib.unila.ac.id/66953/3/SKRIPSI FULL-KLARA DELVIYANA - Klara Delviyana.pdf

Fisk, S. R., & Overton, J. (2019). Who Wants to Lead? Anticipated Gender Discrimination Reduces Women's Leadership Ambitions. Social Psychology Quarterly, 82(3), 319–332. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/0190272519863424

Garabedian, J. (2014). Animating Gender Roles: How Disney is Redefining the Modern Princess. James Madison Undergraduate Research Journal, 2(1), 22–25. Retrieved from https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1009&context=jmurj

Hayati, Y. (2016). Representasi Gender dalam Sastra Anak di Indonesia (1st ed.). Padang: FBS UNP. Retrieved from http://repository.unp.ac.id/21941/1/Representasi Gender Dalam Sastra Anak di Indonesia..pdf

Indriyani, R., & Rakhmawati, Y. (2018). Representasi Gender Tokoh Diana dalam Film Wonder Woman. Jurnal Komunikasi, 12(2), 183–201. https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.30813/s:jk.v12i2.1717

Odegard, A. (2021). Who Falls in Love First? The Role Gender Plays in Love Expression. Canadian Journal of Family and Youth / Le Journal Canadien de Famille et de La Jeunesse, 13(3), 99–108. https://doi.org/10.29173/cjfy29647

Press, A. I., & Liebes-Plesner, T. (2016). Feminism and Hollywood: Why the backlash? Media Report to Women. The Communication Review, 19(4), 267–279. https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2016.1237717

Sulistyowati, Y. (2021). Kesetaraan Gender Dalam Lingkup Pendidikan Dan Tata Sosial. IJouGS: Indonesian Journal of Gender Studies, 1(2), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.21154/ijougs.v1i2.2317

Syarief, F., Jamalullail, & Napitupulu, F. (2023). Representasi Makna Persahabatan Kata Jancuk Dalam Film Yowisben 2 (Analisis Semiotika Ferdinand De Saussure). Jurnal Media Penyiaran, 3(1), 17–28. Retrieved from http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:AJDfDcGRcpMJ:jurnal.bsi.ac.id/index.php/jmp/article/download/1773/1267&cd=11&hl=ban&ct=clnk&gl=id

Thadi, R. (2014). Citra Perempuan dalam Media. Jurnal Ilmiah Syi'ah, 14(1), 27–38. https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.29300/syr.v14i1.1423

Thornham, S. (2010). Teori Feminis dan Cultural Studies. Yogyakarta: Jalasutra.

Wardah, S. K., & Kusuma, R. S. (2022). Semiotic Analysis of Women's Representation in the Animated Disney Film Raya and The Last Dragon. Proceedings of the International Conference on Community Empowerment and Engagement (ICCEE 2021), (661), 176–186. https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.220501.020

Zuhri, S., & Amalia, D. (2022). Ketidakadilan Gender dan Budaya Patriarki di Kehidupan Masyarakat Indonesia. Murabbi : Jurnal Ilmiah Dalam Bidang Pendidikan, 5(1), 17–41. Retrieved from https://ejournal.stitalhikmah-tt.ac.id/index.php/murabbi/article/download/100/99

Hidayati, Tuti. (2018). Student Language Anxiety in Learning English: Examining non-English Major Students in Rural Area. *IJELTAL (Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics), 2(2),* 2018.

Khotari, C. R. (2004). *Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques,* Ed. 2, New Dehli: New Age International Publishers

Nation, I.S.P. & Newton, Jonathan. (2009). *Teaching ESL/EFL Listening and Speaking*. New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis

Lirola, María Martínez. (2018). Introducing Global Issues in A Language Classroom: Knowing Other Cultures by Analysing Multimodal Texts from NGOs. *ASIAN TEFL*, Vol 3(1), 2018

Mahammed, Azilah & Mohd Rawian, Rafizah. (2018). English Learning Motivation of First-Year Students in Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA). *ASIAN TEFL*, Vol 3(1), 2018

Ristanti, S., et al. (2016). A Study on the Ability in Listening Comprehension on Descriptive Text by the 2nd Semester Students of English Study Program FKIP-UR JOM, 3(1), 2016