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## From Barbie to Boss: Media Representations, Women's Empowerment, and Symbolic Bodily Agency

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper explores symbolic representations of women's empowerment and bodily agency in media and literature that is centered on the Barbie doll, a long-standing cultural icon of female beauty ideals. Through qualitative thematic analysis of select Barbie-related media (such as the 2023 Barbie film, post-2016 advertising campaigns with diverse body types, children's books and relevant academic critiques), the study detects key patterns in Barbie such as the reversal of traditional gender roles, critique of patriarchal beauty standards, empowerment through self-realization and symbolic references to bodily agency. These representations emphasize contradictions of hegemonic femininity, ridicule the unlivable standards, and participate in ongoing feminist discussions on female solidarity and self-ownership. The analysis shows how Barbie has changed in a manner that extends earlier feminist criticisms while raising an unclear possibility of a mainstream icon used to symbolically challenge gender norms. Bodily agency is examined symbolically in terms of body diversity, self-image, and resistance to commodification rather than in terms of direct behavioral and reproductive outcomes. Reception critiques acknowledge the recognition of more diversity as a celebration as well as a concern for the continued commercialism, shallow beauty standards, and lack of intersectionality. Overall, the paper demonstrates the role that popular media and literature can play as sites of stereotyping, normalizing female leadership, and symbolic negotiation of agency, reclaiming a contested icon of beauty in an attempt to engage with cultural discussions of gender and embodiment.*

**Keywords:** Women's Empowerment, Symbolic Bodily Agency, Barbie Doll, Media Representations, Patriarchy Critique, Beauty Standards, Feminist Media Analysis

### Introduction

Representations of women in media and literature have undergone significant transformation, moving away from traditional stereotypes that confined female characters to domestic, passive, or objectified roles in early advertising and children's storytelling toward more

empowering narratives in contemporary productions. Early feminist criticisms, like the work by Laura Mulvey (1975/1989) about the male gaze, raised awareness of the fact that women were often placed as a spectacle to be viewed, rather than being active in a situation. In recent decades, however, the media representations have gradually defied the patriarchal norms, which reflect wider changes in society to gender equality and expanded roles for women. This evolution aligns with the fourth-wave feminism interventions in focus on intersectionality and digital activism, in which media platforms are used to give more diverse female voices and critique systemic inequalities.

The Barbie doll becomes a prominent cultural icon in this regard. Originally criticized for representing unrealistic beauty ideals, Barbie has evolved over generations through media tie-ins, children's literature, and through cultural discourse, and is not just a symbol of stereotyped femininity, but a place for self-exploration and a criticism of gender as well. Contemporary depictions are more often of Barbie in professional and leadership positions, bucking the conventional expectations associated with appearance. Thematic, this departure from the idealized body of the original doll to a variety of forms (e.g. curvy, tall, petite) symbolically represents a move towards independence, self-control, and acceptance of a complex body. Satirical treatments in literature and media also expose the contradiction of patriarchal demands on beauty and womanhood, and postfeminist problem of empowerment extend. While these portrayals do interact with issues of bodily agency and self-ownership, they are symbolic and indicative of cultural debates rather than of behaviorally transforming people lives.

Media and literature with Barbie therefore provide ambivalent contributions: on the one hand, they critique patriarchy and naturalize concepts of female leadership and solidarity, and on the other hand, they can also serve the commodification and the trivialization of standards. Despite the progressive changes in the images of the media, the symbolic potential of dominant cultural icons such as Barbie in challenging patriarchal norms has been insufficiently studied, especially in regard to the negotiation of themes of body diversity and self-realization in terms of bodily agency. This study examines symbolic representations of women's empowerment and bodily agency in Barbie-related media and literature, not real-life reproductive behavior or decision-making.

### **Literature Review**

Analyses of the portrayal of women in the media and in literature, we find persistent trends of objectification, stereotyping, and restriction to narrow roles in traditional advertising, children's literature and news media (Santo Niccolò et al., 2023). Early representations often focused on domesticity, beauty ideals, or subordination and women were often passive figures rather than active ones. Toys such as Barbie doll embodied this accentuation within the marketing, putting the focus on physical appearance rather than agency. While digital technology and current content have expanded the diversity of representation, stereotyped portrayals of people have been widely used, especially in global advertising and entertainment, where women of color are frequently marginalized or eroticized (Schutte, 2023; Huang et al., 2024). Recent studies see incremental increases in female leadership roles online, though these tend to be tokenistic (Lee, 2025).

Literature on media effects shows a two-sided process: perpetuating traditional gender normative images through stereotypical repetition, and at the same time enabling progressive media images disrupting them (Ward & Grower, 2020, as cited in Santo Niccolò et al., 2023). Feminist critiques have long broken-down icons like Barbie for her unrealistic body proportions, consumer-based identity and white, heteronormative identity. Post-2016 analyses focus on the

brand's diversification of introducing different body types and skin tones as a symbolic change of interpreting bodily variability as an assertion of self-ownership and resistance of objectification. In literary and cultural treatments, changing Barbie imagery acts symbolically to examine autonomy in terms of diversity and self-realization, and not recording direct behavioral outcomes. Contemporary critiques of the limitations of neoliberal discourses of empowerment. Barbie's diversification (i.e. inclusive body shapes, professional roles) takes place within a consumer framework in which agency is marketed through accessories and aesthetic customization. This approach, of course, individualizes empowerment because the focus is on personal choice rather than on structural critique and the possibility of feminist ideas being appropriated by marketable aesthetics. Such developments are part of broader developments in media, in which visible expansion goes hand in hand with commercialization and a lack of intersectionality, restricting the potential for criticality of symbolic progress in market-oriented systems.

### **Literature Gap**

Although much scholarly literature has been devoted to the role of media in reinforcing gender inequalities by objectifying and portraying women in stereotypical ways, the existing literature is characterized by an extreme focus on the adverse effects of cultural symbols such as the Barbie doll, including its reinforcement of patriarchal norms and distortions of body image, without discussing the transformative positive effects on women empowerment and gender equality (Santo Niccolò et al., 2023; Huang et al., 2024). This lack of balance hinders the interpretation of how the unconscious icons in media and literature can trigger positive transformations in societal attitudes, especially those that are being disseminated to the global population via play items and stories. Moreover, there is still a significant lack of literature that explicitly demonstrates the connection between symbolic representations of Barbie, its themes of bodily agency manifested through various body types and self-determined roles, to reproductive autonomy, although there is a growing body of research that shows that media exposure is a determinant of contraceptive use and health behavioral choices (Ghose et al., 2024; High Impact Practices, 2025). Intersectional analyses also indicate that there are still existing gaps because empowerment discourses around the Barbie brand continue to prioritize the experiences of white, cis, and heteronormative people, overlooking other racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic viewpoints and not truly considering the compounded oppressions (Sutherland and Feltey, 2017; Byrnes et al., 2024). Finally, the decisive issue is the necessity of a well-established empirical study of the impact of symbolic media on actual behaviors surrounding reproductive rights, women leadership, and control over their bodies to bridge the narrative effects with the concrete changes in fertility intentions and gender equity activism (Luo et al., 2024; Michael, 2025).

### **Problem Statement**

In spite of the large shifts in the media's representation of women, the overriding cultural icons continue to struggle through complex conflicts between empowerment and commodification. The Barbie doll is a clear example of this kind of symbolic ambiguity: long criticized for reinforcing unrealistic ideals of beauty and the consumer-driven assumption of femininity, its more recent incarnations via diversified body types, professional roles and satirical takes do provide symbolic challenges to traditional social expectations of gender whilst remaining within commercial frameworks. This duality does raise questions to the extent that such representations are capable of negotiating the bodily agency and female leadership without reducing the empowerment to marketable aesthetics. Scholarly attention has tended to focus on either the reinforcing effects of stereotypical depictions or the progressive potential of

various kinds of imagery, while the ambivalent play between the critical and the commodifying in icons such as Barbie has yet to be explored in any great detail. In particular, the symbolic treatment of bodily agency has been manifested through themes of body diversity and self-ownership which has received limited analysis in relation to wider discourses on gender norms. In light of this gap, this study focuses on the symbolic ambiguity of Barbie in today's media and literature by exploring the tension between the narratives of empowerment and the continued commodification of Barbie rather than focusing on the direct effects on real-world behaviors or rights.

### Research Objectives

1. Analyze media and literature's critique of patriarchy and its effects on gender roles through Barbie as a beauty symbol.
2. Explore portrayals of female agency and bodily autonomy in representations of Barbie.
3. Assess the potential symbolic influence on audience perceptions.
4. Propose ways media and literature can further advance gender equality and reproductive rights via cultural symbols.

### Research Questions

1. How does the Barbie doll symbolize the transformation from stereotypical femininity to empowered leadership in media and literature?
2. In what ways do media representations challenge or reinforce patriarchal norms affecting women's empowerment?
3. To what extent do the potential symbolic influence on audience perceptions?
4. What role does popular culture play in bridging the gap between feminist ideals and societal change through beauty icons?

### Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, centered on thematic content analysis, to examine symbolic representations of women's empowerment and bodily agency in Barbie-related media and literature. The analysis focuses on a selected corpus of texts produced after Mattel's 2016 introduction of diversified body types (curvy, tall, petite), which marked a significant shift toward inclusivity in the brand.

The corpus comprises:

- The 2023 feature film *Barbie* (directed by Greta Gerwig), as a primary narrative text;
- 15 post-2016 advertising campaigns featuring diverse Barbie dolls (selected from official Mattel YouTube channels and global marketing materials, emphasizing themes of career, body diversity, and self-expression);
- 10 children's books from the Barbie publishing line (2017–2024), chosen for their focus on professional roles and empowerment narratives; and
- 12 key academic and cultural critiques of Barbie published between 2016 and 2025, providing interpretive context.

Data collection involved systematic review of visual and narrative elements, including body imagery, occupational roles, and discursive framing of agency. Thematic coding was conducted iteratively, identifying recurring patterns such as reversal of gender expectations, symbolic assertions of self-ownership, and tensions with commodification. Coding drew on feminist media theory to interpret explicit and implicit messages surrounding beauty standards and bodily agency.

The study is restricted to a single cultural icon and a limited number of texts, reducing generalizability to broader media landscapes. Findings rely on interpretive analysis, introducing

potential researcher bias despite efforts at transparency. Audience reception is addressed only through secondary critiques, not primary empirical data.

### **Analytical Framework**

The criticism the symbol levels at patriarchy is excellent and multidimensional, dismantling unhealthy ideals of toxicity by changing diversity, and expressing the draining contradictions of being subjected to beauty police. The sense of empowerment is a result of self-realization where the original Barbie turns her back on the ideas of constant perfection in favor of the diverse forms as the forms of agency. Coded though prominent hints to bodily control are enabled by the development of Barbie into inclusive forms, which are the embodiment of self-magee control over body image and body destiny, not subject to plasticity. This transition to embodied diversity as opposed to idealized, fixed femininity implicitly suggests ideas of reproductive and personal sovereignty where acceptance of diversity suggests defiance against regulations on the aspects of fertility, aging, and physical agency that are historically monopolized within the patriarchal paradigm. The overall effects of the symbol are not only in the play, as there exist positive images of female solidarity and leadership connected with the increased consciousness of empowerment in the world audience.

Gender equity, in particular, has been discussed in the real world because of cultural figures such as Barbie, as well as media exposure has led to a normative change in discussions on inclusive decision-making in both personal and social domains (Ghose et al., 2024). Although not talking about reproductive rights directly, the focus on choice and bodily self-ownership is indirectly similar to the argument of contraceptive access and fertility autonomy, and it shows how symbolic discourses can legitimize the discussion of health and rights in constraining situations. The reaction of the audience towards Barbie as a symbol of beauty has been negative, as it was provoking. Its changing diversity was lauded by many to regain it as an icon of empowerment, and inclusive body types were considered by many as a statement of collective opposition. It was, however, denounced by critics as shallow, its consumerist roots and neoliberal individualism commodifying feminism, so as to water down radical possibility into marketable beauty ideals, and lacking any substantive intersectionality. On reproductive matters, the symbol was questioned because it was not explicit and the indirect treatment of body agency was lauded by some as subtle symbolism but denounced by others as insufficient in the face of worldwide reversals on rights, in failing to directly challenge systemic dictatorship of fertility and health of women.

The analysis confirms the transformative power of media and literature to change the norms towards more female agency due to the fact that Barbie is the catalyst of the massive discourse about the performativity of beauty and the power of women to determine themselves. The symbol can help revise the cultural perception of gender limitations through ideological reversal and diversity focus, and this aspect demonstrates the ability of mainstream icons to balance entertainment with activism and allow people to be more independent and equal.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Thematic analysis of the selected corpus shows the presence of various recurring patterns in Barbie representations after the 2016 diversification initiative of Mattel. The feature film Barbie (Greta Gerwig) 2023 uses satirical techniques in the narrative to critique the original doll's slender, disproportionate figure to an unattainable and constraining ideal of femininity. In contrast, the movie involves prominent body types of curvy, tall, petite, and different skin tones with messages that emphasize the variance of all types of bodies, self-acceptance, and the rejection of uniform perfection. Post-2016 advertising campaigns have, however, regularly featured Barbie in numerous professional roles, such as scientist, physician, president,

astronaut and athlete. These depictions represent a significant departure from the previously fashion dominated imagery and shift attention towards achievement, leadership and capability. Similarly, the selected books for the children (2017-2024) highlight career aspirations, personal development and supportive female friendships and thus rein decorate the motifs of solidarity, mutual encouragement and individual agency.

Visual and textual parts in the corpus emphasize the diversity of bodies as an integral theme: in advertisements and book illustrations, dolls with varying physiques, abilities and ethnic features are often displayed, often with taglines about self-expression, confidence and 'being yourself'. Nevertheless, the fashion and accessories still maintain a great importance, the occupational lines are often accompanied with long-range customizable clothes, styling tools and aesthetic improvements. Academic critiques used in the analysis repeatedly note that the features of inclusion are strongly integrated into consumer-driven marketing strategies. Reception evidence taken from secondary sources suggests a much-divided response. Popular commentary of social media platforms as well as consumer reviews often praise the introduction of various bodies as a significant step towards empowerment and greater acceptance. Conversely, there are scholarly analysis critiques of the continuity of aesthetic prioritization, as well as some shortcomings of intersectional depth of representation in aesthetic prioritization, especially racial, cultural and socioeconomic variance representation (beyond surface-level representation).

The patterns that we have identified above shed light on the deep depth of symbolic ambiguity that is built into the modern Barbie media. The repeated portrayal of professional roles in advertisements, children's literature and the 2023 film work to symbolically subvert traditional gender hierarchies by transforming Barbie from a passive object of visual consumption to an active and multi-dimensional subject that can be authoritative and accomplished. The satiric framework of the film heightens this disruption of the traditional feminine, questioning the performativity of traditional femininity with hyperbolic depictions of bodily perfection and its accompanying absurdities. Concurrently, the constant centrality of fashion accessories and the customization of aesthetics throughout the corpus, shows how empowerment discourses continue to be inextricably tied to practices of consumption. This entanglement is an echo of neoliberal formulations of agency, in which self-realization is formulated mainly in terms of individual aesthetic individuation by choice, not in terms of collective or systemic transformation. Although themes of body diversity symbolically suggest the possibilities of self-ownership and resistance to the commodification of the body, the inclusion of such themes in the context of a commercial branding necessarily restricts their subversive potential. The polarized reception only contributes to the crystallization of this ambivalence: affirmative popular readings render diversification into the sign of cultural advancement and extension of representation and critical scholarly voices emphasize the risks of superficiality and co-optation of the feminist discourse and lack of attention to crossing axes of identity and power. Ultimately, these representations become complicated arenas of symbolic negotiation, and they simultaneously reclaim and limit a historically-fought over cultural icon. They allow for the ongoing public deliberations around norms of gender, embodiment and agency, yet are nevertheless subject to the imperatives of market-driven media production in ways that suggest the problematic nature of achieving substantive critique in a context of mainstream commercial production.

### **Recommendations**

1. Integrate feminist literary criticism into literature and gender studies curricula to analyze contemporary Pakistani fiction and deconstruct gender stereotypes.

2. Promote novels like *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* in literary and academic circles to highlight anti-stereotypical portrayals of women.
3. Encourage further intersectional research on the portrayal of gender, conflict, and resistance in postcolonial literature.
4. Develop pedagogical resources, such as teaching guides, to facilitate gender-critical classroom discussions of literary works.
5. Create platforms in media and academia to amplify women writers and critics discussing female representation in literature.
6. Support emerging writers through grants and workshops to produce works that challenge traditional gender norms.
7. Foster interdisciplinary dialogue among literary scholars, psychologists, and sociologists on gendered trauma and resistance in conflict narratives.

### Conclusion

The development of Barbie as an icon of idealized beauty then to professional leadership and variation in the body represents larger cultural negotiations of women's roles within the media and literature today. As seen in the analysis, post-2016 representations, especially in the 2023 film, advertising campaigns and children's books, use satire, occupational variety, and inclusive body types with the intention of symbolically subverting traditional hierarchies of gender and appearance-based expectations. These elements re-contextualize Barbie as an active agent of self-realization, solidarity and feminist critique, bringing women's capacity for autonomy and collective strength into the foreground in the face of ongoing constraints. Central to this change is the new focus on feminist agency: the corpus shows how Barbie stories tell symbolically the right of women to define their own identities, bodies and aspirations outside of patriarchal objectification. Through satirical unveiling of performative femininity and the celebration of various embodiments, these representations take back female subjectivity, depicting agency, not as dependent on perfection, but on self-determination, mutuality and resistance to commodification.

This paper supplements to Barbie's symbolic contribution for a mainstream cultural icon: Barbie is defined as a powerful space for questioning gender norms, as well as to amplify themes of feminist agency and corporeal self-ownership, while preserving public discourse around embodiment in commercial media places. By reworking a historically contested subject, these texts demonstrate popular culture's capacity to be a part of, and to extend now, the work of feminist critiques to be sure but in ambivalent ways. Ultimately, the results lend support to the importance of the symbolic content of the analysis to understand the role of media artefacts in cultural conversations on feminist agency. Nevertheless, the possible nature of this interpretive work points to possibilities for future research. Empirical audience studies based on surveys, interviews or reception analysis are needed to understand how different viewers actively interpret and appropriate these representations to throw some light on the extent to which symbolic assertions of agency translate in meaningful feminist engagement in everyday contexts.

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