

Commodity Feminism in Barbieland

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For what reason, should the woman worker seek a union with the bourgeois feminists? Who, in actual fact, would stand to gain in the event of such an alliance? Certainly not the woman worker. She is her own saviour; her future is in her own hands. The working woman guards her class interests and is not deceived by great speeches about the “world all women share”. The working woman must not and does not forget that while the aim of bourgeois women is to secure their own welfare in the framework of a society antagonistic to us, our aim is to build, in the place of the old, outdated world, a bright temple of universal labour, comradely solidarity and joyful freedom.¹

Alexandra Kollontai, *The Social Basis of the Woman Question*, first published as a pamphlet in 1909.

The commercial success and pervasiveness with which Barbie has entered the cultural zeitgeist is undeniable. As of October 2023, Barbie has made approximately \$1.44 billion internationally, making it the highest grossing film of 2023. Additionally, it is the highest grossing film by a female director ever, the highest grossing film ever released by Warner Bros., and the 14th highest grossing film of all time. The film’s impact on sales for Mattel has also surpassed the expectations of analysts, who predicted a large increase in revenue after the release of this film/marketing campaign.

According to their estimates, ‘Sales grew 9.3 percent to \$1.92 billion, exceeding projections of \$1.84 billion, as shoppers snapped up Barbie dolls and other mainstays like Hot Wheels cars.’ Mattel has devoted a new section of its online merchandise store to products related to the Barbie film where consumers (or more likely their parents or guardians) are able to purchase a wide array of Barbie themed products, from dolls of the main characters in different outfits to the pink Corvette Convertible that Barbie drives in the film. Much like in the narrative of the film, Barbie has given herself (and the brand she represents) a complete make-over, she has seemingly transcended her previous self, both in aesthetics and in character. Indeed, Barbie has come to be considered a symbol of women’s liberation in popular culture, from patriarchy and sometimes, surprisingly, even from capitalism. It is impossible to deny the impact of the Barbie movie. But what does the film really impart to the audience about the condition of women in contemporary society?

The world of Barbieland

In terms of its presentation, the world of Barbieland is decidedly appealing with its intricately manicured lawns, stylishly

dressed inhabitants and vibrant shades of colour, mostly ranging from bubble gum to the hot pink typically associated with the brand. The major characters also frequently change their outfits to facilitate the real world production of new Barbie dolls immediately available in your local store. Despite its glossy and whimsical aesthetics, however, it immediately becomes evident that Barbie considers itself a work of political fiction, and a progressive one at that. Indeed, as prominent reactionary commentator, Benjamin Shapiro, laments in his YouTube video titled ‘Ben Shapiro DESTROYS The Barbie Movie For 43 Minutes’, the word ‘patriarchy’ is uttered a total of ten times during the film’s runtime.

Greta Gerwig’s movie follows the journey of Stereotypical Barbie (Margot Robbie) from childlike and innocent girlhood to what the film considers to be mature womanhood. On her path, Barbie encounters multiple challenges that are a real part of women and girls’ socialisation process. As a real girl would, Barbie experiences the changes that puberty makes to a girl’s body as well as to her mind. She becomes sad and realizes her own mortality, suddenly develops morning breath and cellulite,

128 leading to a significant identity crisis that provides the catalyst to the film's main narrative. To tackle these supposed flaws, Barbie must leave Barbieland – with its female dominated social roles and go to the real world – a world that is ruled by men, representative of modern society. When she arrives, Barbie duly experiences sexual harassment and infantilisation by men, unrealistic expectations towards women in terms of looks and behaviour and is forced to navigate a fundamentally misogynistic world in which women are disadvantaged simply for being women. There is even a nod towards discrimination against women in the corporate world when it is stated that Mattel has only had one female CEO in the history of the company while the board of directors depicted in the film consists entirely of men. The film also touches on the fact that the inventor of the original Barbie doll, Ruth Handler (Rhea Perlman) who also features in a brief cameo appearance, was not historically credited for her work and ideas.

The assertion that young girls can be anything they dream of until they are thwarted by systemic misogyny is a clever idea, but the film does not fundamentally address the reality that

misogyny and gendered oppression are a necessary byproduct of capitalism. Misogyny cannot be analysed or even abolished by itself, and the movie often feeds into tired stereotypes. For example, although the film addresses the fact that Margot Robbie is a flawed casting choice to make a point about the harm that lies in dictating a very rigid idea of female conventional attractiveness, they still cast her in the leading role; while all of the other variations, except Weird Barbie (Kate McKinnon) would conventionally be regarded as young and attractive - even if the film makes it explicit that older women should be considered beautiful too. The film also relies on a biological essentialist view of women when genuinely progressive filmmakers past and present have challenged the rigidly fixed taxonomies of gender and the reactionary political dangers inherent in such reductionist conceptions of womanhood. While Barbieland features a wide variety of skin tones, body types and professions - and even a Barbie played by transgender actress Hari Nef - Stereotypical Barbie only truly becomes a woman when she proudly proclaims her scheduled appointment with her gynaecologist. Where adolescent Stereotypical Barbie was once without genitals, she has now, through the

process of coming into womanhood acquired a vagina. The unfortunate implication lingers that one is required to have a vagina to be a woman. This reduction to genitalia as the all-important marker of womanhood appears flimsy at best, misogynistic at worst.

Commodity Feminism

From the outset, the various Barbies' patriarchal domination over the various Kens (in *Barbieland*), as well as the individuality of each Barbie is dependent on their consumer behaviour, their appearance, as well as their chosen profession. Stereotypical Barbie is principally distinguished from the other Barbies by her wide selection of particularly feminine clothing, her luxurious pink Dreamhouse complete with a waterslide and her pink Corvette Convertible. She is thus fundamentally defined by what she owns rather than who she is. Indeed, whenever Barbie hits a major turning point in her narrative arc, an outfit change immediately seems to follow as the most visible sign of the shift in the story. This phenomenon is characterised aptly in the concept of commodity feminism identified by Robert Goldman, Deborah Heath and Sharon L. Smith, who argue that "rather

than fight the legitimacy of feminist discourse, advertisers have attempted to turn aspects of that discourse into semiotic markers that can be attached to commodity brand names.² Thus, the idea of feminism™, newly attached to the Barbie brand, can be moulded into a symbol of feminism, even if the brand had previously only been associated by the general public with little girls playing dress up.

One way the movie achieves this is to turn their own corporate desire for brand diversification into a sense of the possibilities available to women. We are introduced to Lawyer Barbie (Sharon Rooney), Physicist Barbie (Emma Mackey), Writer Barbie (Alexandra Shipp), Doctor Barbie (Hari Nef) and, of course, President Barbie (Issa Rae) to name only a few. The implication is that young girls can be whoever they choose, while the audience are encouraged to buy into this form of commodity feminism by buying as many different Barbies as possible for their daughters. The idea that Barbie equals a commitment to feminism was also strengthened by the conservative backlash, which ironically made the brand appear as a disruptive symbol of opposition to the right's rejection of supposedly feminist media.

But this is to neglect the film's biggest weakness – its simplistic, but also flawed sense of what women's liberation actually entails.

A flawed conception of liberation

Barbie fails to establish a legitimate road to liberation for two related reasons. Firstly, the film implies that women need only realise their oppression to liberate themselves as if a lack of consciousness is the primary limiting factor, not the overthrow of oppressive social structures. Secondly, it assumes that malicious and sexist men are the problem rather than capitalist social structures that exploit the rest of humanity and fuel gendered oppression. Ken initially plays second fiddle in Barbieland reflecting the attitude of young girls to their Ken dolls. But having escaped to the real world and realised the power that men hold there; he returns to transform Barbieland into its misogynistic equivalent. Two points are worth noting as Ken sets about taking over Barbieland. The first is that the Barbies are depicted as gullibly simple, as it is merely by telling them that they are inferior that the Kens usher in their new rule over them. Secondly, Stereotypical Barbie's state of being depends so much on her possessions that she only really becomes aware of her

new subjugated role when Stereotypical Ken takes away her Dreamhouse and throws out her clothes and shoes.

When this happens, a minority of enlightened Barbies band together in a ritual to magically educate all of the other brainwashed Barbies out of their state of subjugation. Once they have learned who their enemy is, they pit the Kens against each other as romantic rivals to distract them from a democratic vote to restore Barbieland to its previous matriarchal system of governance - with the previously noted President Barbie back at the top of the hierarchy. Liberation from oppression is thus merely one critical thought and one referendum away from being realised for all women. Once the Barbies have been restored to their original positions of power, moreover, patriarchy ceases to exist – but in its place is the original system of hierarchy and subordination as the men and the women merely change places.

Genuine liberation for women means liberation for all from systems of oppression, including those rooted in gender, not merely the replacement of men at the top of an unjust hierarchy.

As Kollontai writes,

[Proletarian women] do not see men as the enemy and the oppressor; on the contrary, they think of men as their comrades, who share with them the drudgery of the daily round and fight with them for a better future. The woman and her male comrade are enslaved by the same social conditions; the same hated chains of capitalism that oppress their will and deprive them of the joys and charms of life.³

It must be a collective project to liberate all from systems of gendered oppression. Any movement that does not recognize this fact is doomed to failure. Women's liberation is not simply a question of false consciousness and cannot be voted in over the heads of individual men. Neither is it a question of appointing female instead of male CEOs, presidents, or judges. Ultimately it is the undemocratic system of bourgeois class rule mediated through the capitalist economy and occasional elections, that keeps women in their subjugated position, not the individual Kens of this world. Since capitalism cannot function without the unpaid and unappreciated reproductive labour of women, especially

women of colour and women from the Global South, the subjugation of women is a prerequisite for the maintenance and preservation of the capitalist system. As Nancy Fraser aptly puts it in an interview for the New York Times: 'feminism is not simply a matter of getting a smattering of individual women into positions of power and privilege within existing social hierarchies. It is rather about overcoming those hierarchies. This requires challenging the structural sources of gender domination in capitalist society[...]'⁴ Unfortunately, none of this is possible, let alone visible in a movie created by a capitalist firm to sell more dolls through a clever story and the weaponisation of nostalgia.

Conclusion

Though sporadically touching on relevant contemporary issues of gendered oppression, *Barbieland* remains steadfastly removed from the world of real working women and thus remains what it purports to be - a fantasy. In the end, the film is a product of the culture industry in capitalism,⁵ and thus cannot transcend the conditions under which it was produced: a system built to maximise the profitability of art, meticulously constructed to be just progressive enough to appeal to a

mainstream audience largely consisting of young women and girls, whilst never fundamentally challenging the system under which these people are oppressed.

One positive effect of the film's release has been that basic questions of feminism have once again broken into popular discourse. It is simple enough for teenagers to understand its messaging and provides an easily understandable, if flawed idea of patriarchy. In the end however, it is weighed down by its bourgeois feminist approach to women's liberation and its commercial mandate to popularise Matell's key merchandise. Ideally, the film will provide a new generation of young women with a starting point in progressive education; a lens into the conditions under which women live and a steppingstone to a solution that rises above that offered in the film.

Endnotes

¹ Alexandra Kollontai. 1980. *Selected Writings*, edited by Alix Holt, New York, W. W. Norton & Co.

² Robert Goldman, Deborah Heath, and Sharon L. Smith. 1991. Commodity feminism. *Critical studies in Mass Communication*, Vol. 8 Nr. 3, pp 333-351.

³ Alexandra Kollontai. 1980. *Selected Writings*, edited by Alix Holt, New York, W. W. Norton & Co.

⁴ Gary Gutting and Nancy Fraser. 2015. *A Feminism Where 'Lean In' Means Leaning On Others*, New York, New York Times Archive.

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. 2010. *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer Verlag.