

The Ambivalence of the Construction of Female Figure as a Hero in Barbie in Princess Power

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### Abstract

The purpose of the study is to examine the construction of Barbie in the film “Barbie in Princess Power”, especially to understand the idea of female power. To understand the idea of power, this study uses Campbell’s notion of the archetypal hero’s journey to reveal whether in Barbie’s quest to gain the princess power, this movie still holds the traditional feminine values or provides a space which encourages a woman to be active in public. The finding shows that although in some scenes, Barbie shows a transformation into a heroic figure and embraces some feminist values as developed by the second wave feminist activists and in some way her journey closely resembles the archetype of the hero’s journey, her heroic capacity is undermined through the normalization of her role as a woman, heading back to traditional feminine values —perpetuating roles in domestic spheres.

*Keywords:* Hero, archetype, masculinity, femininity

### The Ambivalence of the Construction of Female Figure as a Hero in Barbie in Princess Power

No one has ever wondered that the plastic doll meant to be a companion of children on their playtime has contributed to prescribe certain aspects that could influence individual psychological and physical development. Many articles mention the influence of Barbie on perpetuating body image. They rework with their body and make an unrealistic effort to gain an hourglass body, perfectly-shaped breasts, and long legs. It is Barbie who has surpassed her role as a toy and provoked young women to emulate her fictitious character. Despite her long-standing controversy mentioning that girls playing with Barbie tend to have lower body image, Barbie remains successful: she is still a name of a cultural icon that symbolizes feminine ideal (Weissman, 1999). Despite all sort of criticism to Barbie, the producer still continues to provide diverse related products: fashion outfit and accessories, doll houses, car and playsets, and movies.

It is not surprising however, that movie delivers a thought provoking messages than other aforementioned products. Barbie is successful to prescribe the ideal femininity for many women because it embodies the society's obsession with beauty and being perfect in physical appearance. Young girls, as the target audiences of the movies, could engage with the content and storytelling of the movies and subconsciously stimulate them to take the representation as their prescription to act and behave in everyday life. When Barbie is represented in diverse roles and it also could encourage them that girls can be anything (Orr, 2009).

Barbie the movie has grabbed the attention of many audiences since the first debut on 1987 and has continued to be reproduced in different narratives since 2001. Barbie has played thousands of characterization with wit and intelligence taken from fairy tale series, embarking an

adventure, as a superhero. However, Barbie essentially is still a doll bringing her feminine body image showcased into various representations in attempt to respond the dynamics of socio-cultural context of the U.S.

Studies have found that the representation of women in films has varied as a response to the growing number of women who leave domestic chores and choose to get involved in politics and social activism. Women have long been the victim of patriarchal culture which sets the foundation and constitutes the binary opposition: between public and private (Landes, 1984). The dichotomy has created a crucial impact to women by limiting their access and advancement. Nonetheless, the idea of separate sphere has seemingly been abandoned by the rising participation of women in public. Studies elsewhere have found that women entering higher education and the number of women sitting at the top position of a company increases over the time. On the basis of changing reality, the rising participation of women in public sphere should reciprocally been implicated with their representation in media. However, when the movies take Barbie as the central figure, it raises a question whether such participation is considered to represent in both the narrative and scenes of the movies.

“Barbie in Princess Power” was produced in 2015, decades after the women’s movement of 1960s. Glancing over the movie, Barbie, of course, is still constructed with her feminine imagery because this doll, as the lead figure of the film, has been considered as a feminine cultural icon. The movie title, to a significant degree, conveys ambivalence in a way that it juxtaposes the term princess and power. Princess, as found elsewhere, refers to the notion of femininity, beauty, tenderness, and submission. Although the princess quality has changed over the time, movies still construct princesses to reinforce female stereotypes. Meanwhile, the idea of power referring to authority, giving commands and performing several actions is frequently

associated with masculine traits of assertive, independent, aggressive, which, to some extent, visualize heroism notion.

The majority of stories published and screened have long been dominantly represented by heroic male diverse and rich adventures. Thus, the stories with the rise of a woman who take a lead draw public attention. A study finds that the profit earned from female lead movies surpasses male lead movies (Buckley, 2018). This finding can presumably be attributed to either a thirst for fresh storylines or a response to controversial debates on how female hero should and should not be.

Most prevalent representation of hero is associated to men who have a strict adherence to physical power and great fortitude while, the history reveals that feminine heroism works conversely. Polster finds that traditionally feminine heroism is more acknowledged by the quality of selflessness and emotional fortitude perception than daring and physical strength (as cited in Hartman & Zimberoff, 2009). Regardless of the stereotype, media have increasingly begun to display significant numbers of notable female characters that challenge the typical gender-oriented portrayal of heroism in their responses to the changing society. Thus, this research attempts to explore the ambiguity of Barbie representation and to interrogate whether the movie “Barbie in Princess Power” reshapes its representation in response to the context of American women or still continues to glorify the pattern of presenting female stereotypes. It focuses on understanding the idea of power when it is accumulated by Barbie, an embodiment of a feminine figure.

### **Methods**

The design of the research is descriptive qualitative which takes the movie “Barbie in Princess Power” as the source of the data. Meanwhile, the data are the narratives and the scenes

of the movie taken purposively to reach the goal of the research. To understand the flow of the narrative and establish the perspective of heroism, the archetypal hero journey conceptualized by Campbell is employed in this research. His concept breaks down the hero's journey into some parts in which every part signifies a process of how the character evolves. The end of the process possibly glorifies the status quo or proves that status quo is no longer working. As the object of this research is movie which constitutes signs, semiotic film theory is employed. The particular scene from movie composes the signified and the signifier that identify the signs and codes. A careful read on these scene and codes results to the hidden message or meaning in which the movie tries to inform in unspoken way. Lastly, as this research is conducted within American Studies discipline which takes the argument that all texts are constructed within particular context, it embodies certain context of the time it is produced, in understanding the signs in the movie, all are connected into the context of social and cultural issues of U.S. society in contemporary era.

### **Result**

Glancing over the narrative of *Barbie in Princess Power*, it seems to offer chances for women to enter public spheres and become prominent leading figures. However, the main female character of the movie, Barbie, with all feminine attributes, evokes an ambiguity whether Barbie displays a shift of representation. The archetypal hero journey is a model which allows dissecting the story in order to comprehend the narrative. Campbell has conceptualized a model integrating Freudian, Rankian, Jungian, and Frazerian theory into cohesive pattern of heroic elements which is arranged in three units of monomyth" (Indick, 2014). The monomyth is a well-known form of myth structure of all heroes and legends which is universal and timeless. Thus, Campbell's "Hero with a Thousand Faces" does not describe one hero from one particular

myth, but observes all heroes from all myths that share common universal qualities. The standard path of the journey is represented in a formula comprised of 17 stages and is structured in the rites of passage: departure, initiation, and return. The cycle indicates a process of becoming; the journey of finding one's true self and the transformative adventure of life. By analysing "Barbie in Princess Power" using this formula, the very essence of the implicit narrative of the movie should reveal.

As the princess of Windemere, Kara is beautifully attired and physically good-looking, making her a sexually attractive young lady. She possesses a lovely supporting system of family and friends and all the fancy stuff she could ever ask for. She could possibly be lucky to have been born with privilege and wealth which is rare among the heroes. Regardless of her perfect image, Kara is entitled to a challenging royal duty and responsibility.

The narrative begins with Kara fiercely flying an airplane around the kingdom, crossing the sky, up above the city skyscrapers. Along the sky adventure, she has an idea of establishing a community garden and all of a sudden she experiences a failed landing attempt, the plane is broken. After such accident, her parents reject any future activity which will potentially endanger her. Even, her parents turn down her proposal of establishing the community garden.

Correlating the narrative of Kara to Campbell's notion of the hero's journey, Kara's idea to establish community garden can be interpreted as "a call to adventure". The ambivalence of the movie in presenting the heroic female figure can be from the scenes of a very un-lady-like action but in attire of a lady like way: flying an airplane in a gown and heels. The call to adventure drives her into entering the uncommon field which is contradictory to the feminine traits which should be glorified by princesses. Her initiative to take an action signifies her initial inner power. Embarking the journey which could endanger her life shows her attempt to claim

her own path and go beyond the social constraints adhered as being the princess. The construction of Kara somehow is contradictory with the idea stating that a heroine tends to be approached and awakened by something else to act in order not to break the feminine values. However, Campbell also writes that “the familiar life horizon has been outgrown, so do the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns”. To respond to the shift, Kara is no longer constructed to conform to the traditional gender prescription which confines her in domestic sphere. The self-initiative call could be triggered by gradual realization of situations which do not provide chances to develop her inner power. Therefore, the “refusal of the call” is not applicable on her journey because the internal drive is powerful enough.

The absence of “the refusal of the call” is, at some point, questionable because Campbell notes that the hero sees themselves not intellectually and emotionally capable of carrying the mission. Simply to put, the hero should consider everything in the long run which requires a competence on risk management, strategic thinking, and problem solving. Meanwhile, Kara neither poses a doubt nor questions her vulnerability, capability and plan. Even, the journey brings excitement to her. She imagines herself as a strong-willed person who is ready to go on a quest for freedom and empowerment. However, her constant decision making “reinforces the negative stereotype of women being ruled by emotions rather than professionalism” (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

The third stage of the hero’s journey in reaching into maturity is “the supernatural aid”. However, again the idea of “the supernatural aid” is missing. Instead, this movie presents Kara’s friends: Madison and Makalya who serve to assist her in her self-development. Their friendship has significant effect in transforming her to be wiser and stronger and better ability to accomplish the mission. A number of helps are crucial in her effort to accomplish the mission



and inevitably adds up her confidence level in facing the challenges: to support her emotionally, to perfect her mission, to tailor her incredible hero costume, to invent technological innovation, and to advise her on problem solving. The “supernatural aid” in the hero’s journey is meant to develop male’s independence. Meanwhile, the friends’ aid which is to accompany her to face difficulties in the journey sends a message that women should not be independent. The emphasis on the frequent aids some way diminishes her capacity as a hero, an independent and heroic figure. In line with this construction, Ross argues that women need strategies that combine “communal action, interdependency, and emotional knowing” (Inness, Ross, 2004, p. 233). Women create bonding within the friendship to figure out what is wrong with their life and to fight the patriarchy. This is to say that commonality is Kara’s source of strength—a fundamental aspect of the journey. On the one side, this portrayal attempts to highlight the sisterhood as the main strategy of female action hero. On the other side, the archetypal journey always suggests that heroic action is an independent one “who is able to stand apart from the communities” (Inness, Ross, 2004, p. 232).

A rejection and a complete disregard from her parents are the threshold keeping her from leaving the mundane situation of normality. The queen is a conservative woman who believes that women’s roles are as a mother, a nurturer, and a homemaker while the king is a wise man who possesses a power and influence in the family. The representation of the king highlights the stereotypical belief that a man or a father should be decisive and agentic. Meanwhile, the display of domestic virtue by Kara’s mother implies the continuation of traditional gender roles that should be glorified by their daughter. The impact of this parental influence on gender roles leads to the way children establish their self-concept (Witt, 1997). Gender stereotypes are extremely prescriptive. It emerges from the traditional social roles and power inequalities between men and

women (Prentice & Caranza, 2002). The prescriptive element of gender stereotypes highly promotes in “justifying and perpetuating the status quo”, that women should remain on the domestic area (Prentice & Carranza, 2002, p. 269).

As her parents’ perceptual bias limits her activity choices, Kara starts to face an obstacle—she happens to express her refusal to change. If the situation is correlated to Campbell’s notion of archetypal hero, the episode that Kara experiences can be understood as her stage of “crossing of the first threshold”. This stage is meant to be a boundary between the old dull life and the brand-new life. Most importantly, there is a threshold guardian standing as a gatekeeper at the boundary between the known and the unknown. Campbell contends that “the hero must encounter the threshold guardian at the entrance to the darkness, unknown, and danger” (Campbell, 2004, p. 71). To correlate with Campbell’s notion, in reaching to maturity as a woman, Kara should also encounter the threshold guardian who clearly sends a message to Kara to stay at home and forget her mission. Their constant rejection to Kara’s idea to create a community garden—the idea of collective contribution which is associated with public sphere in which women have no room for it shows her parents’ function as the threshold guardian to protect her from the danger of public sphere embodied through the community garden she wants to create. However, Kara is very passionate and self-assured with her idea.

Scrutinizing the scenes in detail, observing Kara’s mom’s irrational protective manner of not letting Kara cut the ribbon at the museum ceremonial for safety reason, in the context of gender socialization, the function of the threshold guardian in this movie is to discourage Kara to enter public sphere which is considered as dangerous space for girls and women. It is also to send a message that the ways Kara’s parents protect and control their daughter embody the notion of the function of a parent as a threshold guardian to keep their children to glorify the

feminine values. In this context, Kara's mother in expecting her daughter to commit on one sex-typed role shows the function of a mother to socialize the traditional sex roles or the guardian of the established norms and values. However, this strict adherence to traditional gender roles is challenged by Kara. She figures out that her mom's expectation draws her back to the opportunity on overlooking potential to develop her inner self.

The failure of conquering the threshold guardian leads her to enter "the belly of the whale" where the ego and skill are fully transformed. Campbell asserts that the hero displays its intention and purpose to be apart from their known zone by traversing the threshold guardian but it is unsuccessful and it seems to have been eaten by the unknown (Campbell, 2004). "The belly of the whale" symbolizes the womb where the hero transits from the ordinary to the unexplored in order to reborn with indestructible power and ultimate fearless. In child development process, "the bell of the whale" can be interpreted as maturity process from a boy into a man through his separation to his mother and friendly environment of a home. In this movie, the process that represents Kara's arrival into "the belly of the whale" is vague; she does not face hardship and woe to annihilate herself, she is neither "slain, dismembered, nor scattered over the land or the sea" (Campbell, 2004, p. 58). Thus, this movie continues to say that a girl does not need to transform into a woman through experiencing a hardship of life because she does not need to leave her friendly environment of home to gain her maturity. However, the movie still provides an insight to respond the recent context that supports women's desire to be equal with men both in public and domestic spheres. The movie presents a scene of Kara getting bitten by the magical butterfly which transforms her into a superpower woman. In a closer look, the bug is not naturally born with that power but it coincidentally absorbs the elixir created by Baron, the royal assistant. Baron is envious with the authority and the highness of the King. Therefore, he mixes

some ingredients into an elixir to help him reborn with superpower ability. Unfortunately, the elixir downs the grain and spills the bug. This scene seems to say that Kara's power is not gained through her hardship quest, like the hero's quest, instead, it is accidentally accumulated. In this sense, her heroism is problematic; she gains the power and becomes a hero because of the luck factor rather than her competence and perseverance. The formula prevails; no matter how hard she climbs, how loud she speaks, she could not be superior as men.

Despite the unpleasant ambivalence of her construction of a female hero, the movie still presents Kara's heroic actions of fighting the crime and rescuing action which is against the cult of a true womanhood and supportive of woman's participation to public sphere. Firstly, she rescues her kitten from top of the tree, which is somehow also problematic to say as a heroic action. Saving her kitten embodies the feminine quality of a woman as a caretaker and a nurturer. The love and affection to animal resembles the love and affection mothers provide to their family. The embodiment of femininity offers insight into the result of the lack of exposure to activity outside the home and women's roles are home centred by which inherited from her parents' ideal (Gender Differences in Family Caregiving, n.d). In essence, this account views the pervasiveness of traditional gender role within the family.

Secondly, Kara helps to protect the journalist guy from material construction falling on him. She holds the iron punctually to prevent it from crushing the guy. The guy looks helpless; he neither runs away nor moves to different direction, he rather poses a defence gesture without moving. This illustration, to some extent, shows that Kara has challenged the stereotype that women are weak and helpless: she has successfully saved the life of a man who cannot protect himself. This scene is also ambivalent in presenting her heroic action. She becomes heroic

because the man is helpless. It does not give the equal position between the woman and the man, to say for example that a man and a woman can mutually cooperate to handle various problems.

Meanwhile, during the rescuing action Kara not only shows her physical strength and endurance but she also tries to strike a pose while holding the iron above her head as the guy begins to take picture of her. She smiles, her eyes look at the camera. This depiction indicates that Kara embodies narcissism as she proudly exposes her sexy body while doing good deed. However, this representation is in stark contrast with male heroism that remains calm, cool, and elegant ever since most people adored him. In this respect, “Barbie in Princess Power” paradoxically constructs the young woman in the film: as an active subject who is able to use her strength and physical power to help other people in trouble but at the same time as a passive object of the gaze through the way the camera scrutinizes her body to subconsciously send a message to the audiences of the importance to glorify their feminine body.

Additionally, in an evacuation mission of occupants from burnt building, Kara has rescued a mannequin instead of a person. She does not realize that the victim is still trapped inside the building. Again, the scene is ambiguous in presenting female ability in public. Although Barbie is heroic, and the audiences could say that she fulfils the qualification of a female hero through her attempts to do heroic actions, the film still presents a barbie as a stupid young girl who could not differentiate between a human and mannequin. In other words, the film questions woman’s rational quality and competence when she has to act in unexpected situation.

Along the journey, Kara never *meets with the goddess* who provides the hero with guidance and comfort throughout the hard times. Campbell suggests that the goddess is symbolized by a woman who comes with warmth and power to transfer and support the hero. More importantly, the goddess is the source of all quests; the final task of the hero to win the

boon of love (Campbell, 2004). Correlated with Kara's heroic journey to the stage as mentioned by Campbell, Kara, as the lead female character does not experience a meeting with the goddess as does archetypal hero journey have in his quest. If the stage *meeting with the goddess* might be decorated in a logical way to say the importance of the stage in the hero's journey, Kara as a female hero ought to meet a god. However, this stage is absent in the movie to say that it is not important anymore to provide a scene of a romantic relationship of the lead female character with a god. A romantic relationship is important in development process of a man into maturity. It is important also for a young girl, to meet a prince as her soul mate in her development process from a girl into a woman. The absence of the scene can be interpreted that the film in some way does not continue to glorify the fairy tale themes of the main purpose in women's life to meet their right prince who will lead them to have happy life ever after.

Despite the omission of *meeting with the goddess*, or meeting with a god for the female lead character, this film underlines the importance of friendship to build sisterhood for women. In this film, Madison and Makalya involve in Kara's journey and create some innovative outburst. Madison and Makalya support her to use the power of truth and justice by catching criminals and rescuing people. They reconstruct Kara's bedroom into laboratory which houses a number of sophisticated machines; full GPS navigation real-time tracking capabilities, emergency scanners, satellite imaging, and everything she needs to back up a modern superhero on the go. Furthermore, they also give her a beautiful yet intelligent birthday gift, a ring with multiple functions; full navigation, barometric altimeter, a holographic view screen, Austrian crystals, and a miniature lip gloss. The presence of Madison and Makalya is not merely to highlight the sisterhood but to challenge the stereotype of women in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). Yet, research findings mention that women have been

underrepresented in STEM jobs (Beede et al., 2011). Thus, Barbie in *Princess Power* in its response to the recent context of the demand for relatively equal position of men and women presents a support to technology use which may lead to a change on an equality between men and women. At the same time, however, their enjoyment in cosmetic, jewellery, and dresses is still emphasized in this movie to produce a meaning of women's tendency to consume. This idea evokes the postfeminist value where women put feminine symbol into the spotlight and glorify their beauty through consumption a lot of feminine accessories.

Although Campbell states that the hero's quest can be experienced either male or female, the stage of the hero meeting *women as the temptress* undermines women's opportunity to undergo metamorphosis into a maturity. In this situation, the man can be a self or an agent but women embody both the goddess and the evil. In the movie, the omission of *meeting with the goddess* implies into an absence of the stage *women as temptress*. If in the hero's journey, the male hero faces *women as temptress* who attracts his lust and desire, Kara, as the female figure encounters a different temptation, in this case something that puts her to an integrity test whether she is capable in working in public. It turns out that Kara begins enjoying her fame and glory: she is overwhelmed by her own reputation and takes credit of her work. Her arrogance has consumed her consciousness as a self or an agent who is able to endure various tests. She pursues to be the centre of attention which puts her into the position as the object of gaze rather than focusing to work. By way of illustration, the movie continues to portray the stereotype of women's narcissism.

Having encountered the complexities and observed the root of the problem, the figure of father has influenced Kara before starting the journey. The father's power and authority often overshadow their son (the hero). Thus, the hero must oppose the father prior to endure the

transformation, to gain the mastery of the universe, while the daughter stands against her mother to gain the mastery of the world (Campbell, 2004, p. 125). However, when the hero is female, the stage *atonement with the father* is quite explicit; Kara has left her ego behind in order to obey her father before she gets her father's mercy and blessing to facing Baron. Meanwhile, this stage is complicated in a way that she is atoned with her father, not with her mother.

Although many movies have explicitly presented women's ability in fighting, either martial arts, punching, or boxing, this movie does not provide the scenes of Kara's physical combat. Rather, the fight is presented on the battle of the flow of energy from their hand which, to a significant degree, demonstrates a shallow fighting action. However, still the movie presents Kara winning over Baron that embodies the stage *apotheosis* to say that the tasks and trials have been accomplished, where the divine found and the wisdom resigned. In a closer look, Kara and Corrine celebrate the win, 'the divine found'. Kara and Corine also realize that "it is not bad for two people who can stand each other" and "the two is better than one". In this light, the ideal of sisterhood remains fundamental within the journey of female figure as hero.

The stage *the ultimate boon* marks the end of hero's struggle and tough times where the hero is transformed into a brand new and glorious state (Campbell, 2004). This stage is represented as the enemy is put into jail and Kara is honoured as the hero of the kingdom of Windemere. At this point, Kara is achieving the boon which makes her easier to use the power to spread the love and to do good deeds. Lastly, the stage *refusal of the return* does not apply in the journey since Kara is much more triggered to use her power to establish the community garden.

As the enemy has been defeated, Kara then crossed the *return threshold* where she goes back to her ordinary world with the *freedom to live*—establishing community garden. Eventually, community garden is where the society, mostly women, come together to plant and harvest



vegetables and fruits. However, the community is highly associated with feminine traits. More importantly, the activity of community garden requires a ‘nurturer’, which is regarded as fundamental aspect of femininity. All in all, with the restoration of the disruption that puts back the female hero in her domestic sphere, the narrative of the heroic journey of the female figure is put under a question: whether this movie really challenges the normative prescription of traditional gender role.

### **Conclusion**

In an attempt to look at the heroic quest of the female figure of Kara, in the movie *Barbie in Princess Power*, this movie presents Kara who has the look of Barbie who undergoes a journey in her transformation from a young woman into a mature woman. Some scenes show that the movie agrees to support women’s involvement in public sphere, though with some certain notes. However, this movie, in line with Campbell’s notion of his ambiguity in stating that the heroic quest can be experienced by both men and women, presents the lead female figure who does not experience all of the troubles which the hero faces in his journey which turns him into his maturity. Although the narrative of the movie presents mostly all of the stages that the hero faces, some compromises in some extent have been made to suit the traditional gender prescription. The study identifies that Kara’s journey is set off from domestic to public and in the end, it is returned to domestic. To put it another way, although there is an attempt to possess the full authority over the public sphere, it is normalized to return to the domestic sphere, which includes the reduction of her capacity as a hero. However, this condition is in line with the women in 21st century who are still mingle in the in-betweenness—playing a conflicting image—and in the end, they cannot move beyond the patriarchal culture.

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