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## Embracing Desire: The Exchange of Women According to *Barbie*

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What made Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* the highest-grossing film of 2023? Realistically, it is an amalgamation of factors: the iconic duo of Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling playing the leads, the story built around one of the world's top-selling nostalgic toys, the colorful set designs, the catchy music, and the humorous script. But a major factor that caused *Barbie* to rise above other films was the public buzz over its feminist themes. *Barbie* reimagines gender systems, juxtaposing a seemingly Edenic, matriarchal society called Barbieland to the real world, known to Barbieland's inhabitants as Los Angeles, California. When a breach between the worlds propels Robbie and Gosling's characters—Stereotypical Barbie and Stereotypical Ken—to Los Angeles, they quickly learn that it is not the mirror world they'd assumed. Ken takes his revelations back to Barbieland to convert it into a patriarchy, while Barbie takes a different journey of self-discovery. What begins with a bewildering change in her sense of self leads to an unpleasant form of self-consciousness. She feels for the first time what it means to be an object of others' desires. Her quest to discover and act on her own—which coincides with the rebalancing of Barbieland—centers the film's message about female autonomy in a patriarchal society.



Over the past several decades, the idea of gender as a “social construct” has become more readily accepted, especially in feminist thought. “Kinship systems,” as described by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, underlie and shape the formation of gender roles, thereby creating and perpetuating models of “proper” gendered behavior that become normalized social constructions. Lévi-Strauss explains how such systems operate. The construction of kinship systems, he argues, relies on a principle he calls “the exchange of women.” Women are “exchanged” (most prominently in marriage and courtship practices) as submissive, objectifiable “gifts” that promise to guarantee social alliances among men (the presumed heads of families in most cultures). Social alliances between families and within communities (kinship systems) are built this way, and the resulting

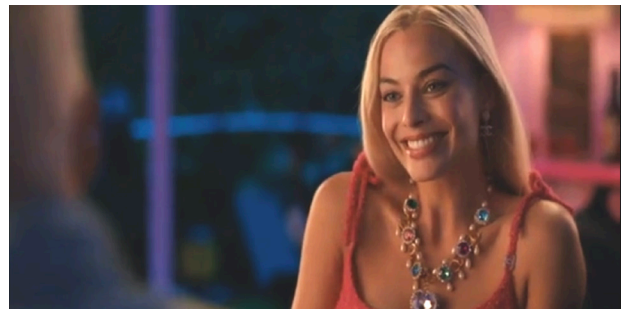
practices become cultural norms. A groom gaining permission for marriage from a bride's father, for instance, is still a common practice in many cultures across the globe. Such a practice may seem like an innocent sign of respect for the father, but it carries a long, sexist history of fathers literally owning their daughters and giving them away in property exchanges.

Cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin takes up and advances Lévi-Strauss's theories of kinship and gender construction in her famous essay, "The Traffic in Women." Rubin suggests that the principle of "the exchange of women" is still at work in modern cultures because men are trained to actively pursue their desires while women are trained to be passive recipients of desire. That is, male desire is presumed active and female desire passive. "If a girl is promised in infancy [to a man]," Rubin writes, "her refusal to participate as an adult would disrupt the flow of debts and promises [in the system]."

It would be in the interest of the smooth and continuous operation of such a system if the woman in question did not have too many ideas of her own about whom she might want to sleep with. From the standpoint of the system, the preferred female sexuality would be one which responded to the desire of others, rather than one which actively desired and sought a response. (Rubin, 41–42)

For a male-dominated system to function, in other words, it needs women who don't pursue their own desires. Men should want women to remain submissive (passive), and women should want to be empty vessels for the desire of the men who actively seek them out. So, what happens when women do pursue their own desires—especially desires that don't align with what men want and therefore disrupt the system's unspoken rules? As it happens, *Barbie* shows us such a disruption.

The guitar sequence is key in staging the film's reimagining of active desire. The Kens, under the guidance of Stereotypical Ken, have chosen to live in a new system where their wants are valued over those of the Barbies. In other words, Ken has successfully restructured Barbieland to more accurately mirror the patriarchy of the real world. As the sequence progresses, however, we watch how the Kens and the system are negatively impacted once the Barbies refuse to respond to those attracted to them and pretend to actively desire other Kens. The sequence hints at a subtle yet effective variant of the familiar kinship system while presenting how it can be disrupted when women choose to challenge its norms.



In the sequence's first half, we see Stereotypical Barbie and Ken enact stereotypical roles of men and women in a patriarchal structure, and we also see how Ken communicates his active desires. The sequence starts with some shallow shot-reverse shots between Stereotypical Ken and Barbie. As a result, we get to see two perspectives. Ken is wearing a ripped denim vest that purposefully shows off his muscles. He passionately plays the guitar while smoldering and staring intensely at

his love interest, Barbie. As Ken sings, Barbie smiles and nods, giving the impression that she's interested. In other words, Ken is portraying his active desire while Barbie passively listens. According to Rubin, this is how a patriarchal society stays stable. In this scenario, Barbie and Ken represent women and men. The way they dress and act is meant to imitate constructed gender in the real world—the very reason they are identified as “Stereotypical” Barbie and Ken. However, Ken doesn't realize that Barbie's passivity is only part of a strategy to get Barbieland back to its original, female-dominated structure. Before this sequence, the Barbies collectively agree that the new, male-dominated Barbieland (now “Kendom”) strips them of their power, so they make a plan to take it back.



The sequence continues with a smash cut that works as a graphic match. Both characters are on screen, looking lovingly into each other's eyes, while the time and location shift. Instead of daytime, it is night, and they've moved from the “Mojo Dojo Casa House” to the beach. This serves two purposes. For one, it is comedic. The title card that says “4 hours later” and the dark lighting show how long Ken's been performing, which is hilarious to the audience, who are mercifully spared the tedium of listening the whole time. The graphic match, however, also showcases an uncomfortable lack of change. Then, when the song's chorus begins, the camera zooms out to an extreme long shot. Gerwig makes this choice to indicate that male dominance is not just Stereotypical Ken's presumption but that of all the Kens. They are all playing guitar and singing their patriarchal anthem while the Barbies pretend to submit to them. The following shots cut to different pairs of Barbies and Kens, creating a list-like effect that deepens the sense of the stability, pervasiveness, and monotony of this structure. Even though they are different characters, they are all Barbies and Kens who act the same way, just like humans amongst other humans.

The sequence's latter half, however, focuses on how this stability is weakened once the Barbies lose interest in the Kens. A (pre-planned) diegetic phone notification prompts Stereotypical Barbie to look at her phone. She laughs and engages with the phone while Ken looks at her, overtly annoyed that her attention has shifted away from him. He asks who she is texting and then grabs her phone. Once he sees that she is texting another Ken, he laughs but then immediately yells angrily. That is, he initially tries to conceal his jealousy and crumbling self-esteem but finds that he can't. Even though Stereotypical Barbie and Ken are not technically in a relationship, Ken still believes that he has a right to her. Continuing their plan, each of the Barbies makes her way over to a different Ken and pretends to like him. This upsets the Kens, who clearly dislike that their ideal Barbie is now actively desiring another. While the Kens mope, an extradiegetic voiceover



says, “We play on their egos and petty jealousies to turn them against each other. While they’re fighting, we take back Barbieland.” The Barbies know that turning their submission into active indulgence of their own desires (staged or not) would disrupt the assumptions of the men and destabilize the system men believe they control. In fact, the Kens go to war with each other the next day.

The song—Matchbox 20’s “Push”—also does vital work in this sequence. Both the lyrics and the way the Kens perform it ooze with machismo. The song is about a man taking control over a woman, as in the lyrics “I want to push you down” or “I want to take you for granted.” This seems to celebrate the control the Kens believe they have taken over Barbieland and, in turn, the Barbies, who have allowed them to do so. The newly patriarchal Kendom is the exact type of society that Gayle Rubin describes in her essay. The lyrics can also, however, be interpreted to be about a woman who is emotionally abusive in a relationship—an interpretation that sheds light on how the song has become Stereotypical Ken’s personal anthem. Throughout the film, he feels he is not enough (or Kenough, I should say) for Stereotypical Barbie and is emotionally wounded by her disinterest. Through this interpretive ambiguity, the audience can acknowledge that Ken’s despair comes from a misogynist reading of gender dynamics. What he learns from the real-world men he observes during his travels there is that he “deserves” to have any woman he yearns for (as if they are gifts). In either interpretation, the Barbies are put in an unfair position. They are either forced to be passive or they are blamed when their desires don’t match those of their male counterparts.

As a whole, the sequence represents systems that imagine women as gifts to be acquired and desired instead of people who can actively desire. At first, Stereotypical Ken tries to impress Barbie and grab her attention. As the system and power dynamics change, Ken expects Barbie to love and submit to him. It is interesting how the film portrays the concept with non-human objects that serve as a representation of humans and their values. Even as dolls, the Kens uphold what they have learned from the real world to replicate gender roles that seem natural and normal. The Kens are akin to children who learn from experience to become part of the prevailing system by imitating the behavior of those around them. This is usually how kinship systems work; they create traditions and norms that young people are expected to learn and follow. But a one-way system of desire can be very confining. Especially today, men are negatively influenced by social media, in such forms as alpha-male podcasts, dating advice clips from pick-up artists, and online crash courses that tell them how to be “ideal” or “successful” men while unjustifiably diminishing women in the process. Still, the film challenges that pattern by showing what it might be like to disrupt and revise such a system. Revising the “exchange of women” pattern calls out inequitable expectations and faulty constructs. It also raises an important question: should societies be run by a sex/gender system? According to *Barbie* and Gayle Rubin, problems arise from organizing social hierarchies based on sex or gender, whether it be male- or female-dominated. Rubin’s essay

suggests that women's attempts to work against the patriarchy and the female exchange system will ultimately fail. At the end of *Barbie*, however, the viewers see the rare instance take place. The Barbies disrupt and change the system. It's a happy ending, but it's important to note that this victory takes place in the imagined world. It reminds us that the real world is still organized around problematic social constructs. While we are often complicit in perpetuating misogynist gender constructions, we are also responsible for tearing them down. 🧡

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