

Liberal Feminist Perspective on Modern Films: A Conceptual Framework

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ABSTRAK

Penerapan feminisme liberal pada analisis film modern dibahas dalam artikel ini. Ide-ide dari para pemikir feminis liberal seperti Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Rosemarie Tong, dan Joyce Trebilcot juga disertakan. Peneliti menggunakan metode penelitian kepustakaan dan pendekatan kerangka kerja konseptual untuk penelitian kualitatif ini untuk memeriksa bagaimana ide-ide Wollstonecraft sering kali selaras dengan tema-tema film abad ke-18 hingga abad ke-20 dan bagaimana para pemikir selanjutnya memperluas konsep feminisme liberal untuk mencakup nilai-nilai yang berhubungan dengan film bertema modern. Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa, sejalan dengan teori yang digunakan oleh peneliti, feminisme liberal Wollstonecraft terkait erat dengan film abad ke-18 hingga ke-20, yang sering kali menggambarkan perjuangan perempuan dalam bidang politik, pendidikan, dan hak pilih, sementara feminisme liberal Mill, Tong, dan Trebilcot selaras dengan film modern yang membahas isu-isu seperti ambisi, pencarian jati diri, kebebasan pribadi, keadilan gender, dan mono-androgini. Dapat disimpulkan bahwa para peneliti dapat mengeksplorasi nilai-nilai feminisme liberal seperti keadilan gender, otonomi, dan kebebasan yang setara dalam menganalisis film-film modern dengan menggunakan ide-ide Mill, Tong, dan Trebilcot.

Kata kunci: feminis, feminisme, feminisme liberal, film modern

ABSTRACT

The application of liberal feminism to modern film analysis is discussed in this article. Ideas from liberal feminist thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill, Rosemarie Tong, and Joyce Trebilcot are incorporated. The researchers used a library research method and conceptual framework approach for this qualitative study to examine how Wollstonecraft's ideas often align with 18th- to 20th-century film themes and how later thinkers broadened liberal feminism concepts to encompass values that relate to modern-themed films. The findings of this research demonstrated that, in line with the theory employed by the researchers, Wollstonecraft's liberal feminism is closely linked to 18th-20th century films, often depicting women's struggles for politics, education, and suffrage, while Mill, Tong, and Trebilcot's liberal feminism aligns with modern films discussing issues like ambition, self-discovery, personal freedom, gender justice, and mono-androgyny. It can be concluded that researchers can explore liberal feminist values like gender justice, autonomy, and equal freedom in analyzing modern films using Mill, Tong, and Trebilcot's ideas.

Keywords: feminist, feminism, liberal feminism, modern film

A. INTRODUCTION

In addition to providing pleasure, films function as tools for the development of stories, the exploration of concepts, and the dissemination of messages. Films are a strong medium for storytelling, communication, and cultural expression, and they are much more than just amusement. Through emotional appeal, film efficiently conveys social issues, and many filmmakers are looking for methods to use their skills to draw attention to their most important social issues (Newton, 2022). It is a powerful tool in shaping and influencing society as

filmmakers use films to communicate with viewers about social issues, ideas, and critiques. As a result, social issues may be included in some films.

Among the various social issues, gender-related conversations or debates frequently serve as a film's central focus nowadays. According to Bussey and Bandura (1999), gender development is a vital issue since it has a significant impact on people's abilities, self-perceptions, sociostructural chances, and career pathways. These elements are highly prescribed by societal gender-typing, which makes them a crucial component of human development. Gender is, therefore, a social issue. It may discuss issues such as gender inequality, representation, violence against women, prejudice against women, and gender-based limitations.

Women have long experienced difficulties and struggled for equality and freedom, with some victories like voting and education. Despite this, they continue to face unjust violence and discrimination, and they need rights like the freedom from discrimination, the right to life, the right to be free from torture, the right to privacy, the right to health care, the right to decent living conditions, the right to safety, and many more (Council of Europe, 2022). The struggle for women's rights gave rise to feminist thought, and the feminist movement was born during the Victorian era to end unjust treatment and achieve gender equality. Liberal feminism, one of the kinds of feminism, emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries, with Mary Wollstonecraft being a pioneer, notably with her pamphlet *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published in 1792, and John Stuart Mill later defended women's civic and legal equality in his 1869 essay *On the Subjection of Women* (Cottais, 2020). New definitions and explanations of liberal feminism emerged as this movement developed. Not only does it advocate for women's suffrage or educational equality, but liberal feminism also encompasses women's efforts to assert their rights to freedom as defined by Humm (2002). It can be concluded that liberal feminism is one kind of feminism that prioritizes freedom, equality of treatment, and individual rights.

Several studies have been conducted to examine liberal feminism in literary works, including films and novels. However, the majority of these studies use objects that are set in the 18th, 19th, or 20th centuries, when women did not have equal rights to education, employment, or voting. As a result, the liberal feminism values that are obtained are typically equal suffrage and equal education for women (Fahmi, 2015; Khadijah, 2022; Suciati, 2022; Sunaryo et al., 2023). The utilization of this theory in modern films is barely explored. The researchers intend that other studies will utilize liberal feminist theory to examine films that are set in the modern day, which typically address a different type of feminist values than those that are set in the 18th, 19th, or 20th centuries. Unlike period films that portray the struggle for suffrage or educational equality, films set in modern times tend to portray some sort of complex and detailed version of gender issues influenced by modern standards such as personal desire or satisfaction, freedom, work ambition, co-parenting, and self-discovery. Thus, the values or concepts of liberal feminism found are different and relevant to modern problems, which is an area that has been less explored in previous studies. This study aims to expand on the understanding of how liberal feminism can be applied to the analysis of modern films.

Based on the background, the purpose of the study is to contextualize and consider how the study of modern film might be explored by liberal feminist theory. Liberal feminist theory, according to this conceptual study, can be utilized as a useful framework for analyzing modern films. Theoretically, this research is anticipated to enhance literary studies and introduce feminism to the readers. Practically, it is anticipated that this research will serve as a useful foundation for future studies on related subjects.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Film as Literature

Film is a collection of sound-assisted moving images with a narrative displayed on a screen in a cinema (Jogezai, 2020). According to Cornish (2023), communications expert Marshall McLuhan predicted that visual media, such as films, may eventually replace written words or leave them outdated. It shows how films demonstrate the modern shift from textual to visual literature. Furthermore, Krystal (2014) claims that literature includes all spoken, expressed, and invented forms of expression in every form, not simply written forms of expression. Literature portrayed as a film contains every aspect of fiction found in textual literature. Since films may be examined and understood similarly to typically written literature, it can be said that films are literary works.

2. Character and Characterization

Character is one of the intrinsic elements of a literary work, and it can be an animal, a human, or an object that manifests and has the power to start events. According to Abrams (1999), characters are the people who are portrayed in a dramatic or narrative work. The reader infers that they have specific moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities based on what they say, how they say it in their dialogues, and what they do in their actions. The author presents and reveals characters through the use of characterization. Boggs and Petrie (2008) categorize eight techniques to know characterization: (1) Characterization through Appearance, (2) Characterization through Dialogue, (3) Characterization through External Action, (4) Characterization through Internal Action, (5) Characterization through the Reaction of Other Characters, (6) Characterization through Contrast: Dramatic Foils, (7) Characterization through Caricature and Leitmotif, and (8) Characterization through Choice of Name.

3. Feminism Theory

Women have long been the victims of patriarchy and targets of discrimination, assault, and sexual objectification in many spheres of society. Strict gender standards and stereotypes were formed throughout the Victorian era, but the earliest indications of a feminist movement emerged in the 1850s, with an emphasis on equality in employment, education, and voting rights (Cossar, 2021). As a result of the oppression that women endured, feminist thinking and the feminist movement sprang up during the Victorian era. According to Beratkhil (2021), feminism encompasses a range of political, intellectual, and social movements that are united by the desire to define, establish, and secure political, economic, personal, and social rights for women. Feminism aims to achieve gender equality in social concerns, politics, the economy, and culture. Tong (2014) claims that women deserve to have the same chances as men to achieve in the public field. The movement is about appreciating the variety of experiences, abilities, and qualities that women possess. Feminist thought is old enough to have a history complete with labels: liberal, radical, Marxist/socialist, psychoanalytic, care-focused, multicultural/global/colonial, ecofeminist, and postmodern/third-wave (Tong, 2014). Each kind of feminism promotes gender equity.

4. Liberal Feminism

One branch of feminism that advocates for women's rights through political and legal reform, valuing individual freedom, democracy, equal opportunities, and rights, is liberal feminism (Evans, 2024). Liberal feminism, originating in the late 19th century, is a part of the first wave of feminism pioneered by Mary Wollstonecraft, and it advocates for women's suffrage and educational equality. John Stuart Mill made the case in his 1869 essay *On the Subjection of Women* that women's social and legal subordination impeded human advancement, highlighting the value of freedom of choice, education, and legal equality. As it evolves, liberal feminism encompasses not only women's suffrage and educational equality but also their efforts to assert their freedom rights, as defined by Humm (2002). According to Humm (1992), liberal feminism advocates seeing women as unique individuals with the same rights as men. Based on Humm's statement, it can be said that liberal feminism highlights the importance of recognizing women as individuals with equal rights and opportunities and also promotes their empowerment and autonomy in various fields.

C. METHOD

The library research method is used in this qualitative study. To conduct library research, researchers must locate and arrange different sources that offer factual data or expert or personal viewpoints regarding a research subject (George, 2008). To illustrate how liberal feminism can be applied as a theory for modern film analysis, the researchers employed a conceptual framework approach for this qualitative study. When existing theories are not enough or unsuitable for developing a research structure, a conceptual framework is required (Adom et al., 2018). To develop the justification for the research, conceptualizing research entails defining words, outlining the assumptions and limitations of the relevant works cited, and describing the hypotheses and propositions of prior studies. The conceptual framework facilitates the development of theories and combines disparate ideas. It enabled the researchers to determine and formulate viewpoints regarding the subject matter under investigation, highlighting the significance of the research issue, the researchers' presumptions, and the research methodology. The sources of data were gathered from the literature in the form of documents, scripts, similar prior research findings, journals, or related books. To gather data, the researchers mapped sources or literature, read and classify, name and identify concepts, develop them, integrate and synthesize them into a conceptual framework, and then wrote the framework down for easier comprehension (Jabareen, 2009). According to George (2008), selecting a general topic, imagining a solution to the problem, brainstorming, creating a research plan, matching reference devices, searching databases, identifying and collecting sources, assessing sources in light of the research question, and creating statements based on insights are the stages in analyzing data.

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings and discussion on the application of liberal feminist theory to film analysis, highlighting how both period and contemporary films reflect values of equality, freedom, autonomy, and gender justice through the perspectives of Wollstonecraft, Mill, Tong, and Trebilcot

The findings regarding the application of liberal feminist theory to the analysis of contemporary films are presented in this part. According to this conceptual study, liberal feminism remains useful as a theoretical framework and relevant when it comes to analyzing modern film, specifically its focus on freedom, individual liberty, equal rights, and the pursuit of gender equality. Through the use of liberal feminism, researchers can investigate how films depict women's attempts to balance their autonomy, social norms, and structural inequalities. A more thorough analysis of character growth, narrative decisions, and issues related to feminism in modern works can be achieved through the application of liberal feminism. Understanding the many schools of thought or feminist principles is crucial when studying the applicability of liberal feminism to film analysis.

1. Mary Wollstonecraft's Liberal Feminism in Analysing Period Films

Liberal feminism is included in the first wave of feminism, which, according to Goldstein (1982), focused on equal formal opportunities and legal and political rights. The goals of liberal feminism include obtaining more formal employment and education, as well as the ability to vote and run for public office. Women in the Victorian era had few opportunities outside the home and hearth, especially those from the upper and middle classes. With the first wave of feminism starting in the 1980s, Victorian feminism became a political movement. This movement concentrated on social and political reforms and was associated with the women's rights and suffrage movements.

One of the pioneers in the fight for women's equality, Mary Wollstonecraft sought to give "self-respecting women of integrity" a haven in the contemporary world. She demands a change in "female manners" to keep up with societal, political, and economic advancements. Additionally, she advocates for women's education (Berathki, 2021). She aimed to wipe out the disparity in education between women and men. A variety of social and political requests can be found in *The Vindication*, ranging from thorough descriptions of necessary curriculum modifications to recommendations that women should be granted both civil and political rights as well as elected representatives. It encourages women to expand their interests to include politics and global issues (Tomaselli, 2008). Based on Mary Wollstonecraft's *Advocacy of the Rights of Women*, Beratkhi (2021) states that the first wave's objectives and concerns were equal political rights for women, equal educational and employment opportunities, and the right to possess property. Wollstonecraft's liberal feminist advocacy centered on women's equal rights in politics, the workplace, and education, demonstrating how her beliefs were influenced by the circumstances of her era.

When it comes to film analysis, Wollstonecraft's liberal feminism has the highest correlation with historical or period films that are set in the 18th to 20th century, as these works frequently depict women's fights for education, suffrage, social inclusion, and basic dignity under strict patriarchal systems. Thus far, liberal feminism has been extensively employed to examine literary works that take place during a time when women fought for the right to vote and equal access to education. The following are examples of studies that use liberal feminist theory to analyze films that are set in the 18th to 20th centuries, when women did not have equal rights to education, employment, or voting. The first study is a study by Fahmi (2015) entitled "An Analysis of Liberal Feminism Through Main Character Roles of Aung San Suu Kyi in *The Lady Film*," where the object is set in the 90s. The study reveals Aung San Suu Kyi's struggle to be a

leader who actively participates in political parties. Next up is Khadijah's 2020 study, "The Liberal Feminism Through Female Characters in *Bridgerton* Film Series," which examines a film about the romance and daily lives of the British in the 18th century. The results show that there are three values of liberal feminism found in the film, namely equal education, equal liberty, and equal rights (Khadijah, 2022). The third study is "Liberal Feminism Values Reflected in *Enola Holmes* Film" by Suciati (2022). The setting of the *Enola Holmes* film is Victorian London during Queen Victoria's reign, notably in 1884, when women were still denied the right to vote and an education. The findings of this research showed that three liberal feminist values are reflected by Enola's and Eudoria's characteristics in the film, namely equal education, equal liberty, and suffrage. The last example is a study titled "The Portrayal of Liberal Feminism in the Main Character's Roles in *Difret* Film," which examined Meaza's personality as well as the film's representation of liberal feminist ideals (Sunaryo et al., 2023). The setting of time for this film is the 20th century, and the results of this study demonstrate three ideals of liberal feminism that were depicted in the film, namely suffrage, equal liberty, and equal education. This demonstrates that it is accurate to say that films from the 18th to 20th centuries that are seen through the lens of liberal feminism typically obtain ideals like political, educational, and voting equality, which aligns with Wollstonecraft's advocacy.

2. Mill, Tong, and Trebilcots' Liberal Feminism in Analysing Modern Films

Following Mary Wollstonecraft, several liberal feminist theorists have developed new perspectives or concepts that can be used to analyze films that address contemporary themes, including freedom, independence, self-discovery, gender justice, and mono-androgyny. Mill et al. (1984) introduced a concept of equal liberty, which promotes the idea that women deserve to live in a society with equal rights, freedoms, and opportunities as men. Trebilcot (1977) addressed the significance of individual identity and self-definition. She believed that women need to be allowed to identify themselves independently of patriarchal expectations. Mill et al. (1984) argue that recognizing women as independent and logical people is not only ethically correct but also necessary for a just and equal society. This indicates that equal freedom for women was crucial for society's moral and intellectual advancement, in addition to being an issue of justice. In *The Subjection of Women*, Mill claimed that women's independence and personal development were limited by their social and legal subordination. Tong (2014) also states that liberal feminism stresses the freedom that women can obtain rather than talking about women who can do anything. She argues that the main goal of liberal feminism is to build a society with equality that values freedom for personal growth and development so that people can become better versions of themselves. As stated by Tong (2014), the main goal of liberal feminism is to build a society with equality that values freedom for personal growth and development. In line with modern issues of individual aspiration and self-discovery that modern films usually address, this highlights the value of equality, individual liberty, and self-determination, enabling individuals to follow their own directions free from social limitations.

Strict gender standards and stereotypes were formed throughout the Victorian era, and Tong (2014) claims that the misconception that women are less cognitively and physically capable than men is the source of this discrimination. Due to these prejudices, society, in particular men, tends to treat women unfairly at work, in forums, and in academic settings. Stated differently, this notion restricts and hinders women's ability to enter and succeed in the public sphere. Tong

(2014) added that women deserve to have the same chances as men to achieve in the public field. By rejecting the patriarchal culture's conditioning of male superiority, the idea aims to place subordinate women on an equal footing with men. Mill et al. (1984) also assert that laws and social structures that uphold gender inequality must be dropped to achieve true justice. McClain and Hacker (2022) assert that liberal feminism opposes unfair gender-based limitations that stem from presumptions about the appropriate fields and roles of men and women. This highlights that liberal feminists intend to advocate for equal rights and free women from discrimination based on their gender. They also wish to defy the social norm that dictates women should prioritize raising their families (Mill et al., 1984).

Another concept of liberal feminism, mono-androgyny, was introduced by Trebilcot. Trebilcot asserts that every human must possess both male and feminine qualities "side by side" (1977). It also says, to put it simply, a person who is both feminine and masculine in social role and psychological characteristics. Bem's Sex Role Inventory measured masculinity and femininity separately using gender-stereotypical attributes, such as masculine traits with competitive and domineering, and feminine traits with affectionate and kind (Kachel et al., 2016). Mono-androgyny views the ideal personality as one in which the feminine and masculine can coexist side by side. The idea supports the notion that a person's gender should not influence their social or psychological consequences (Tong, 2014). This concept, introduced by Trebilcot, aims to give women equal opportunities and chances to perform jobs traditionally performed by men by elevating both the feminine and masculine sides of society. Mono-androgyny may be used to emphasize the value of characteristics and attributes, regardless of whether they are conventionally viewed as feminine or masculine in liberal feminism. This demonstrates that liberal feminism must question the idea of gender itself in addition to pursuing equal rights in traditional gender roles.

Mill, Tong, and Trebilcot promoted mono-androgyny, gender justice, and equal freedom, integrating to build a society in which women have equal access to opportunities as men advocating for equal rights and freeing women from discrimination based on their gender. The liberal feminist viewpoint of Mill, Tong, and Trebilcots encourages women to challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes and advances the notion that a person's gender should not impact their social or psychological outcomes to attain self-discovery, independence, and social freedom. These liberal feminist viewpoints offer a framework for examining films that highlight the journeys of women. Both liberal feminist theory by Mill, Tong, and Trebilcot and modern film storylines revolve around themes like overcoming social expectations, following personal ambition, and the quest for self-identity. Researchers may consider how contemporary films portray women's challenges and accomplishments in reaching personal independence and fulfillment by putting these theories to use.

Contemporary works typically explore gender equality in varied ways. In the past, feminism was employed to promote equal access to education and the opportunity to vote. Nowadays, feminism is used to challenge gender norms, promote diverse representation, acknowledge intersecting identities, eliminate objectification of women, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and gender inequality, and eradicate structural prejudices that have prevented women's perspectives from being heard (Neziri, 2023). Therefore, films that are set in the present day typically discuss issues such as mono-androgyny, autonomy, freedom, gender inequality, independent women, and challenging established gender roles. Contemporary films tend to challenge traditional roles and expectations, demonstrating strength, independence, and agency.

A prominent example is the 2023 *Barbie* film, which encourages women to comprehend the depth and diversity of culture and to identify with their bodies to feel the strength and appeal of women (Ariska, 2024). A further instance is the 2021 film, *Promising Young Woman*, which addresses topics including feminism, gender equality, and rape culture. As seen by the film's portrayal of sexual crime and other aspects of daily life, people continue to overlook the social injustices brought about by gender stereotypes (Retnovika & Kurniawan, 2022). The film *The Hunger Games* also challenges gender norms by having a strong, resourceful, and assertive protagonist. Then the film *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* also defies traditional female stereotypes, embodying a complex and morally ambiguous character (Neziri, 2023). These examples show that films set in modern times tend to portray some sort of complex and detailed version of gender issues influenced by modern standards such as personal desire or satisfaction, freedom, ambition, and self-discovery. These films highlight the difficulties of societal constraints on freedom, equality, and self-discovery, aligning with liberal feminist concepts like Mill, Tong, and Trebilcot. Issues like mono-androgyny, autonomy, freedom, gender disparity, and autonomous women are frequently addressed in modern films. Thus, by applying Mill, Tong, and Trebilcot's liberal feminism ideas to contemporary films, researchers can gain fresh insights.

D. CONCLUSION

After analyzing the study's findings, the researchers concluded that despite its widespread use in film studies, liberal feminism is frequently linked to period films or films with the 18th to 20th century as the time setting in which gender-based oppression is evident and legally established. As a result, politics, suffrage, and education are central to the liberal feminist values that emerge from this sort of study. This has led to liberal feminism being underutilized in modern film analysis, where gender and equality concerns are more nuanced and ingrained in the emotional, professional, and personal areas. The dynamic character of film necessitates theoretical instruments that are as flexible. Despite being undervalued in current film studies, liberal feminism provides an intriguing conceptual framework to explore how gender and feminism are portrayed in modern settings. Therefore, it is important to consider applying liberal feminist theory to modern film narratives. The study's findings thus show that researchers can examine and engage with liberal feminist values like gender justice, autonomy, and equal freedom while analyzing today's themed films using later liberal feminism thinkers like Mill, Tong, and Trebilcot. As a result, it creates new opportunities to find liberal feminist ideas within modern-themed films, which include mono-androgyny, gender justice, and equal freedom. In order to better comprehend gender issues in today's society as they are portrayed in modern films, researchers are urged to further incorporate liberal feminism into their analysis.

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