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Subtle Sexism in Popular Culture: Representations of Gender and Benevolent Sexism

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary popular culture increasingly represents women as independent, professionally successful, intelligent, and capable of making decisions about their own lives. Such representations often suggest progress beyond traditional forms of sexism. Yet greater visibility of female agency does not necessarily mean gender inequality has disappeared. Sexism may appear through less obvious forms of representation in which women are valued, protected, idealized, or praised in ways connected to conventional expectations of femininity. This article examines subtle sexism and benevolent sexism in four contemporary films: Nancy Meyers's *The Intern* (2015), Jon M. Chu's *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* (2019), and Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (2023). The analysis draws primarily on Ambivalent Sexism Theory developed by Peter Glick and Susan Fiske, alongside research on gender stereotypes, media representation, post-feminist media culture, objectification, gender roles, and the cultural reproduction of inequality. The article argues that subtle sexism is important in contemporary popular culture because it often exists alongside narratives of female empowerment. The selected films do not portray women simply as passive or inferior. Instead, gender expectations appear through ideas about emotional responsibility, beauty, family, romance, marriage, caregiving, protection, professional achievement, and socially accepted forms of femininity.

1. Introduction

The representation of women in the media has changed considerably in the last few decades. Modern films often reveal women as workers, leaders, thinkers, business people, and other authoritative figures, whose lives are not completely marked by men (Scharrer, 2013). In earlier media representations, women were usually placed in home, romantic, decorative, or inferior positions (Santonico et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the increasing prevalence of strong female characters does not mean that sexism is no longer present in the media. Gender expectations can still manifest themselves, although in a less obvious way, in terms of views on femininity, relationships, family matters, appearance, emotional responses, and social responsibility (Ward & Grower, 2020). According to Santonico et al. (2023), stereotypes can still exist, despite their less straightforward forms.

The concept of benevolent sexism provides a useful way to examine this tension. Glick and Fiske (1997) distinguish between hostile and benevolent sexism, showing that sexism involves more than openly negative attitudes toward women. Hostile sexism involves negative attitudes toward women who challenge traditional gender roles or male authority. Benevolent sexism,

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in contrast, involves seemingly positive attitudes toward women who fit conventional expectations. Glick and Fiske (1997) identify protective paternalism, complementary gender differentiation, and heterosexual intimacy as important elements of benevolent sexism.

Benevolent sexism matters because it seems positive at first glance. Referring to women as kind, pretty, understanding, or in need of protection does not look problematic. These points become limiting when they are associated with certain beliefs about specific women's behavior or character traits. According to Glick and Fiske (1997), hostile and benevolent sexism work together to sustain traditional gender relations. Thus, the absence of negative beliefs does not mean that sexism is absent, as well.

Recent studies illustrate this argument. According to Hopkins-Doyle et al. (2019), benevolent sexism is perceived as warmer and more positive than hostile sexism. This explains why such attitudes do not tend to get questioned. Images that seem supportive or favorable can still serve the purpose of maintaining common stereotypes about women while being socially acceptable.

This issue also connects to changes in contemporary media culture. Gill (2007) describes post-feminist media culture through ideas such as individualism, choice, empowerment, self-surveillance, and bodily femininity. Women may therefore appear independent and empowered while still being encouraged to monitor their appearance, bodies, relationships, emotions, and personal success. The language of personal choice can exist alongside strong expectations about how women should look and behave.

This article examines these tensions through four films: *The Intern* (2015), *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), *Little Women* (2019), and *Barbie* (2023). The films were selected because they present different relationships between women, work, family, romance, social expectations, and gendered power. They are not treated as identical examples of sexism. Instead, each film provides a different setting for examining how gender expectations operate.

The Intern presents Jules Ostin as a successful entrepreneur whose professional authority challenges traditional ideas about female leadership. At the same time, her story remains connected to expectations surrounding motherhood, marriage, and emotional responsibility. *Crazy Rich Asians* places female identity within family, wealth, cultural belonging, marriage, and social status. *Little Women* explores female ambition and independence through characters who make different choices about work, creativity, marriage, and family. *Barbie* takes a more direct approach to gender inequality and patriarchal expectations, using satire to question conventional gender roles.

Thus, the article makes use of benevolent sexism as its key theoretical tool while addressing the matter of subtle sexism as a broader issue relating to representation. In this context, subtle sexism refers to gendered beliefs and practices that lead to perpetuation of traditional values or unequal relations without any open acts/writings of hostility (Swim & Cohen, 1997). However, benevolent sexism is a more specific concept, which stands for positive attitudes toward women that contribute to continuing traditional gender relations (Glick & Fiske, 1997). The reason for this difference is that there are many concepts, such as kindness, romance, motherhood, beauty, caring, etc., not related to sexism. They are considered benevolent sexism only when they relate to women's expectations through dependence, limited roles, and unequal relationships.

The main point made in this article is that the empowerment of women does not automatically imply that sexism is no longer an issue. In this regard, feminist criticism should analyze the conditions behind the expression of female agency such as what characteristics women are praised for, what is expected from them, how relationships with women are depicted and what types of femininity are regarded as positive.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. From Hostile Sexism to Ambivalent Sexism

Conventional discussions of sexism usually concentrate on the explicit discrimination and animosity towards women. These kinds of sexism are important but they do not clarify the complexity of modern times. Glick and Fiske (1997) created the Ambivalent Sexism Theory based on the view that attitudes towards women may include both the positive and the negative aspects. Their model refers to hostile sexism and benevolent sexism as two aspects of sexism.

Hostile sexism is made up of negative perceptions of women who challenge male dominance, compete with men, and defy gender norms. Benevolent sexism is different. It praises women when they follow the traditional gender roles and states that they deserve protection, admiration, and love. Even though those views appear to be positive, they still create a gap between men and women (Glick & Fiske, 1997).

Glick and Fiske (1997) identify three main components of benevolent sexism. The first is protective paternalism, through which men are positioned as protectors and women as those who require protection. The second is complementary gender differentiation, through which women are valued for supposedly feminine qualities that complement supposedly masculine

qualities. The third is heterosexual intimacy, through which women's value becomes connected to heterosexual romantic relationships. These components are relevant to film because they may appear through characterization and relationships without being expressed as direct claims about women's inferiority.

Protective paternalism illustrates the difficulty in observing benevolent sexism. Generally, protection is associated with a good act. Helping people is not always sexist. Problems arise, however, when this action is based on the belief that women are naturally helpless, dependent on others, and incapable of facing difficult situations. The positive connotation of protection can therefore contribute to the existence of unequal relationships without any negative words or acts being used in this context.

Another apparently positive form of representation associated with sexism is complementary gender differentiation. Women may be praised for their natural ability to feel emotions, take care of people, be compassionate, or ethical. These qualities are not negative in and of themselves but become relevant in terms of sexism when they are claimed to be inherent qualities of women and expected from them. A woman who does not have any of these qualities will be considered unfeminine, "cold," or undesirable person in case she does not comply with this stereotype.

Heterosexual intimacy is also important in popular culture because romantic relationships frequently organize narratives about women's lives. Romance itself is not sexist. The issue arises when heterosexual partnership becomes a necessary or superior source of female fulfilment. If a woman's professional success, independence, or personal development becomes meaningful only after she enters a romantic relationship with a man, the narrative might reinforce the idea that heterosexual intimacy is central to legitimate womanhood.

Glick and Fiske's (1997) framework therefore allows feminist analysis to examine representations that are affectionate, protective, admiring, or romantic without treating all positive relationships between women and men as discriminatory. The central question is whether positive treatment is connected to traditional gender hierarchy.

2.2. Benevolent Sexism as a Positive-Looking Form of Gender Regulation

The positive appearance of benevolent sexism is an important part of how it works. Hopkins-Doyle et al. (2019) found that women may view benevolent sexism as warmer and more positive than hostile sexism, which makes these attitudes less likely to be questioned. This helps explain why representations that praise women's sensitivity, kindness, or need for protection may seem respectful rather than limiting. Still, not every positive representation of women is sexist. Benevolent sexism becomes relevant when praise, protection, or admiration is tied to traditional ideas about how women should behave. In contemporary films, these expectations can exist alongside more progressive representations. A woman might be praised for her career success while still being expected to provide emotional support, maintain a certain appearance, or take greater responsibility for the home and family.

Subtle sexism often becomes visible through the combination of these different expectations. Relationships, family roles, careers, appearance, and emotional behaviour can work together to communicate ideas about what women are supposed to be like. These messages may not appear sexist when viewed separately, but together they can reinforce traditional expectations about femininity.

3. Gender Representation and Contemporary Popular Culture

Media representations shape cultural ideas about gender by repeatedly presenting certain behaviours, identities, and relationships as normal or expected. This does not mean that media directly determines what audiences believe. However, repeated patterns of representation may contribute to the normalization of gender roles and stereotypes (Ward & Grower, 2020). For this reason, gender representation is better understood through recurring patterns than through individual images or characters.

Santoniccolo et al.'s (2023) review highlights the continued presence of gender stereotypes, objectification, and sexualization in media. This suggests that greater diversity in female representation does not necessarily remove older gender expectations. Contemporary media increasingly features women who are professional, ambitious, sexually confident, and independent (Scharer, 2013). At the same time, these identities may exist alongside expectations that women remain attractive, prioritize family, or maintain conventional forms of femininity.

Gill's (2007) concept of postfeminist media culture helps explain this tension. Contemporary media often presents women as independent individuals who have the freedom to choose their identities and lifestyles. Ideas such as personal choice, empowerment, self-surveillance, and bodily femininity place women in the position of active decision-makers. Yet an emphasis on individual choice can make wider social pressures less visible. Expectations surrounding beauty, caregiving, heterosexual relationships, and particular lifestyles may appear to be personal choices even when they reflect established gender norms.

The language of empowerment, therefore, does not necessarily remove gender expectations. Women may still be expected to succeed professionally, maintain fulfilling relationships, become mothers, remain attractive, and manage their emotions, sometimes all at once. This tension appears across the four films examined in this article. Female characters show agency and independence, but their choices are still shaped by expectations about femininity and relationships. The films therefore illustrate how contemporary popular culture can challenge traditional gender roles while also reproducing some of the expectations associated with them.

4. *The Intern*: Female Professionalism and the Expectation of Balance

Nancy Meyers's *The Intern* presents Jules Ostin as a successful entrepreneur whose leadership challenges traditional ideas about female professional authority. She is not portrayed as a passive employee who depends on male approval. Instead, her competence, independence, and responsibility for the company are central to the film's portrayal of women.

At the same time, the film closely connects Jules's professional identity with her roles as a wife and mother. Her struggle to balance work and family reflects a familiar expectation that women should manage both professional and domestic responsibilities while making sure neither suffers. This expectation becomes gendered when women are assumed to carry greater responsibility for maintaining family stability and managing the emotional needs of others.

From the perspective of benevolent sexism, motherhood and caregiving may be presented as natural or essential parts of femininity. Caregiving itself is not inherently negative, but assigning these responsibilities mainly to women can reinforce traditional gender differences (Glick & Fiske, 1997). Jules's professional success therefore does not free her from gendered expectations. Instead, she is expected to combine her role as a business leader with the responsibilities traditionally associated with motherhood and marriage.

Ben's supportive and emotionally attentive personality adds another layer to this representation. His support is not inherently sexist, but his role raises questions about how the film connects female professional success with male emotional support. At the same time, Jules remains a capable and independent leader throughout the film. The narrative does not suggest that women are incapable of holding positions of authority.

The significance of *The Intern* lies in this combination of progress and traditional expectations. Jules holds a position of professional power, yet she remains closely tied to expectations surrounding motherhood, marriage, and emotional care. The film therefore shows how contemporary popular culture can present women as successful and professionally independent while still placing traditional expectations on their personal and family lives.

5. *Crazy Rich Asians*: Family, Marriage, Class, and Femininity

Crazy Rich Asians offers a different setting for examining subtle sexism because gender expectations are closely tied to family, wealth, cultural identity, and marriage. Rachel Chu is intelligent, independent, and professionally successful, yet her relationship with Nick places her within a family where her identity is judged according to cultural, social, and gendered expectations. Her achievements do not automatically earn her acceptance. Her family background, cultural identity, social position, and ideas about appropriate femininity remain important throughout the story.

This is especially clear in Eleanor Young, who holds significant authority within her family. Her influence is closely connected to ideas about family loyalty, marriage, sacrifice, and appropriate behaviour for women. The film therefore shows that gender expectations are not always imposed by men. Women may also reinforce these expectations when they see them as necessary for protecting family identity, tradition, and social stability. Ambivalent Sexism Theory helps explain this dynamic because sexist beliefs can operate through wider ideas about how women and men should behave (Glick & Fiske, 1997).

Eleanor's values give women social recognition when they demonstrate commitment to family and relationships. Loyalty, responsibility, and care are not negative qualities in themselves. The problem arises when women are expected to demonstrate these qualities more strongly than men, or when conformity to them becomes a condition for being respected as a woman (Lowe, 2023).

Rachel's conflict with Eleanor shows two different ideas about what it means to be a woman. Rachel values being independent, building a career, and making her own decisions. Eleanor has a different view of womanhood, one that is more focused on family, tradition, sacrifice, and meeting social expectations. The film does not make either view completely simple. Rachel's reaction also shows that being independent does not mean she has to turn her back on her family or the people she loves.

This difference is important when looking at benevolent sexism. Traditional ideas about femininity are not always harmful on their own. The bigger issue is whether women are actually free to choose those roles. Taking care of family, getting married, and putting others before yourself can all be meaningful choices for a woman (Lowe, 2023). They become connected to sexism when women are expected to follow these roles to be accepted by others or to prove that they are good women.

The film shows how these gender expectations often work through ideas about respectability instead of direct hostility toward women. Rachel is questioned because she does not immediately fit Eleanor's idea of what a woman should be like or what it means to belong to the family. These expectations are also connected to class, wealth, and cultural identity. In this way, *Crazy Rich Asians* shows how ideas about gender can become tied to family traditions, cultural values, and romantic relationships.

6. *Little Women*: Female Choice and the Conditions of Independence

Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* presents female choice in a way that feels more complicated than simply deciding whether certain choices are feminist or not. The film follows women who have very different ideas about what they want from life. Some want marriage and a family, while others care more about their careers, creativity, or independence. Instead of saying there is only one right way to live as a woman, the film shows that women can want different things and still have control over their own lives.

Jo March is the character who most strongly pushes back against traditional expectations. She wants to be a writer and create a life for herself instead of letting marriage decide what her future will look like. At the same time, her story shows how hard it was for women to make a living from their own creative work. Writing gives Jo a way to support herself and take her talent seriously. It also gives her a sense of identity outside the roles society expects women to have.

The film also shows how marriage is connected to money and social status. Amy understands that marriage is not only about love. For women at the time, it could also affect their financial security and place in society. Women had fewer ways to support themselves, so marriage could provide both companionship and financial stability. Because of this, the film does not make marriage seem completely oppressive or completely freeing. Meg's choice to get married, for example, does not mean she has given up her independence or stopped being a strong woman. She is making a choice based on what she wants and what matters to her.

This is important because being empowered does not look the same for every woman. Having a career does not automatically make someone feminist, just as choosing marriage or motherhood does not automatically mean a woman is giving up her independence. What matters is whether she has the freedom to make her own choices and whether those choices are respected.

The March sisters show this in different ways. They do not all have to want the same things to have control over their lives. Caring for family, supporting other people, making sacrifices, and wanting a home can all be meaningful choices. The problem starts when women are expected to do these things simply because they are women. Jo's resistance to marriage is important because she wants to decide what her own life will look like. She is not saying marriage is wrong for everyone. She is saying she does not want someone else deciding what her life should be.

Jo also does not stop caring about love or her family. She loves the people around her and wants to be there for them. What she wants is the freedom to choose her own future. Her writing gives her something that belongs to her. It allows her to have an identity beyond being a daughter, sister, or potential wife.

Little Women also shows how sexism does not always come from direct rules or restrictions. Sometimes it comes from the expectations people place on women. Women might technically be free to work, write, marry, or have children, while still feeling pressure to choose the options society sees as more acceptable. The film leaves us with an important question: are women truly free to choose their own paths, or do social expectations still influence which choices are seen as acceptable for women?

7. *Barbie*: Satire, Patriarchy, and the Visibility of Gender Ideology

The film *Barbie* by Greta Gerwig uses a stylized universe to analyze the concept of gender inequality, as well as gender roles, which it mocks, criticizes, and reverses. The film portrays gender hierarchy as a cultural phenomenon seen through *Barbie* Land and the real world. *Barbie* Land shifts ordinary gender relations, while Ken's experiences of patriarchal structures in the "real" world demonstrate how power and dominance determine masculinity.

Ken as a character is very important because the notion of gender roles also applies to men. His wish to gain recognition drives him to pursue a male identity based on power, which means that the film criticizes patriarchal gender frameworks for men as well.

The film also complicates the idea of female empowerment through *Barbie* herself. Initially associated with beauty, perfection, femininity, and cultural success, *Barbie* represents an idealized form of womanhood. Her movement toward human experience introduces vulnerability, imperfection, and uncertainty. This connects with Gill's (2007) discussion of postfeminist media culture, particularly the relationship between femininity, self-surveillance, empowerment, and appearance. Although *Barbie* appears empowered because she occupies numerous roles, maintaining such perfection can itself become restrictive.

This is relevant to subtle sexism because idealization may also restrict women. Benevolent sexism can involve placing women within idealized traditional gender categories (Glick & Fiske, 1997). A woman may be celebrated rather than degraded, yet the idealized qualities attached to her can still define the conditions under which she receives social value.

Barbie therefore demonstrates the complexity of positive representation. Its critique extends beyond interpersonal relationships to cultural and institutional assumptions about authority, appearance, and gender roles. At the same time, the film remains part of commercial popular culture built around a globally recognized feminine brand. This tension does not eliminate its feminist critique; rather, it demonstrates the complexity of representing gender equality within commercial popular culture.

8. Subtle Sexism and the Contradiction of Female Empowerment

The four films show that female empowerment and sexism can exist within the same story. A female character does not have to be passive for a film to reinforce traditional gender expectations. Jules in *The Intern* has professional authority, but she is still expected to carry much of the responsibility for motherhood and emotional care. Rachel in *Crazy Rich Asians* is intelligent and independent, yet she is still judged according to family and cultural expectations. Jo in *Little Women* challenges traditional ideas about femininity, but her ambitions remain limited by economic and social pressures. *Barbie* presents female possibility and independence, while also confronting the pressures created by idealized versions of femininity.

These examples show why the idea of the “strong female character” is not enough to determine whether a text is feminist. Being strong describes an individual quality, while sexism operates through wider social expectations and structures. A woman can be confident, successful, and independent while still being expected to take on responsibilities because she is a woman.

This distinction is especially important when looking at postfeminist media culture. Gill (2007) argues that contemporary media often presents women through ideas of choice, independence, and empowerment. Yet when gender expectations are presented as personal choices, the social pressures behind those choices can become harder to see. Motherhood or marriage, for example, is not automatically sexist. The issue arises when cultural narratives suggest that women are naturally responsible for caregiving or that marriage represents the expected goal of adult womanhood. In such cases, personal choices still exist within wider gender expectations.

Hopkins-Doyle et al. (2019) also help explain why benevolent sexism can be difficult to recognize and challenge. Unlike hostile sexism, benevolent sexism is often presented in a positive or caring way, which can make its underlying assumptions less obvious. The four films show this in different ways. In *The Intern*, caregiving becomes important because of how unequally it is distributed. In *Crazy Rich Asians*, family loyalty is connected to expectations about appropriate behaviour for women. In *Little Women*, marriage is influenced by economic and social pressures. In *Barbie*, beauty and femininity are presented as sources of empowerment while also creating pressure to meet unrealistic standards.

A feminist analysis does not therefore need to reject qualities such as care, family loyalty, marriage, or beauty. Instead, it asks who is expected to embody these qualities, why they are valued, and whether similar expectations are placed on male characters.

9. Femininity, Care, and Emotional Labour

One recurring pattern across the four films is the connection between femininity and care. Women are frequently expected to manage relationships, recognize emotional needs, maintain family harmony, and support others. These activities are valuable forms of human interaction, but their gendered distribution may reproduce inequality. The cultural association between women and care is particularly relevant to benevolent sexism because complementary gender differentiation depends partly on the idea that women possess qualities making them especially suited to particular relational roles (Glick & Fiske, 1997). Women may therefore be praised for being caring while simultaneously being expected to provide care.

The distinction between valuing care and expecting women to provide care is important. Care itself is not the problem. The issue arises when care becomes an obligation attached to femininity. If women are expected to sacrifice their ambitions, time, or emotional well-being for others because they are women, a supposedly positive quality becomes a mechanism of gender regulation. *The Intern* demonstrates this through Jules's relationship between professional and domestic responsibility. Her professional authority does not remove the expectation that she should remain responsible for her family. The emotional burden of balancing these roles becomes part of her personal struggle.

Little Women offers a historical version of the same issue. Family responsibility is central to the March household, and women are frequently associated with emotional care and sacrifice. Yet the film allows its female characters to question whether such responsibilities should determine their entire lives. *Crazy Rich Asians* connects care with family loyalty and cultural continuity. Women's ability to maintain relationships becomes part of their social value. Again, this is not inherently negative, but the expectation that women should carry responsibility for family harmony has gendered implications.

Barbie approaches the issue differently by questioning broader cultural assumptions surrounding gender roles. Its satire shows that qualities associated with femininity and masculinity are not simply natural facts. They are also socially organized expectations.

These examples show why subtle sexism often operates through ordinary behaviour rather than extraordinary discrimination. Gendered expectations may appear in who is expected to remember, care, sacrifice, support, forgive, compromise, or maintain relationships. Because these activities are socially valued, their unequal distribution may remain difficult to notice.

10. Beauty, Femininity, and the Ideal Woman

Another important dimension of contemporary gender representation is the relationship between femininity and appearance. Media representations frequently place greater attention on women's bodies and appearance than on men's. Research on gender representation identifies continuing patterns of objectification and sexualization, showing that women's bodies remain important sites of cultural evaluation (Santonniccolo et al., 2023).

The issue, though, extends beyond sexualization. Contemporary media may also present appearance as a form of empowerment. Women are encouraged to choose their appearance, invest in themselves, and treat beauty as a form of self-expression. Gill (2007) identifies self-surveillance and bodily femininity as important features of post-feminist media culture.

This creates another contradiction. When appearance is presented as personal choice, criticism of beauty expectations may appear unnecessary. Yet cultural pressure to remain attractive may continue even when expressed through the language of choice. *Barbie* provides the clearest example because *Barbie's* cultural identity is closely connected to an idealized image of femininity. She is attractive, stylish, successful, and apparently capable of occupying multiple roles. Yet the film eventually questions the burden of maintaining such an ideal.

The significance of *Barbie's* transformation therefore extends beyond becoming "real." The film challenges the assumption that female value depends on perfection. Her recognition of uncertainty and imperfection disrupts the idea that women must embody a complete and flawless form of femininity.

The other films approach appearance less directly, but the social evaluation of women remains important. Rachel in *Crazy Rich Asians* is evaluated within a status-conscious environment, while the women in *Little Women* negotiate expectations concerning feminine respectability. Jules in *The Intern* works within an environment closely connected to fashion and presentation.

These representations show that appearance does not operate separately from gender power. Women may achieve professional success, but their social value may still depend partly on how successfully they embody culturally recognizable femininity.

11. Marriage and Heterosexual Intimacy

Marriage and romantic relationships are important when looking at subtle sexism because Glick and Fiske (1997) include heterosexual intimacy as one part of benevolent sexism. This does not mean heterosexual relationships are sexist by nature. Instead, the concept draws attention to situations where a woman's value becomes closely tied to her role as a partner.

Romance is also a major part of many popular films, and women's stories are sometimes presented as incomplete without a romantic relationship. *Crazy Rich Asians* shows this tension through Rachel's relationship with Nick. Although Rachel is academically and professionally successful, her relationship places her within the expectations of Nick's family. *Little Women* presents a more varied picture by showing different attitudes toward marriage. Jo questions the idea that marriage is necessary for fulfilment, while Meg chooses marriage and finds meaning in family life.

This difference is important because feminist analysis needs to distinguish between personal choice and social pressure. Marriage is not inherently oppressive, and choosing marriage does not make a woman less independent. The issue arises when marriage is treated as the expected or natural goal for every woman. Benevolent sexism helps explain how romantic relationships may be idealized through traditional ideas of women as partners and men as protectors or providers (Glick & Fiske, 1997).

The main question, then, is not whether women have romantic relationships. It is whether romance becomes a condition for being seen as fulfilled, successful, or socially valued, and whether it limits the ways women are allowed to define themselves.

12. The Intersection of Gender, Class, and Culture

Gender does not operate independently from class and cultural identity. Women's representation is shaped by economic circumstances, family structures, cultural expectations, and social status. This is particularly visible in *Crazy Rich Asians*, where gender is closely connected to wealth and cultural belonging.

Rachel's conflict is not only about being a woman. It also concerns whether she belongs within a wealthy and culturally specific family. Her position demonstrates how gender expectations may become intertwined with class and cultural identity.

Little Women similarly demonstrates the material dimension of gender. The sisters' choices are influenced by economic limitations and the restricted opportunities available to women. Marriage therefore carries economic significance beyond romance.

The Intern presents another relationship between class and gender. Jules's professional success gives her considerable economic and institutional authority, but professional achievement does not remove gendered expectations concerning family.

Barbie presents these issues symbolically by examining gender as a broader cultural structure. Its exaggerated world allows the film to show how gender roles organize access to authority and recognition.

A feminist analysis therefore needs to avoid treating all women as though they experience sexism in the same way. Gender interacts with social position. The expectations placed on a wealthy woman may differ from those placed on a woman with limited economic resources. Cultural expectations may also shape femininity differently across social contexts.

The films therefore demonstrate that subtle sexism is not a single universal experience. Its forms depend on the social context in which femininity is represented.

13. Discussion: What Makes Sexism "Subtle"?

The analysis of the four films shows that subtle sexism does not always appear through openly sexist language or obvious discrimination. It can also appear through everyday expectations and positive portrayals. Women may be expected to be caring, praised for putting others first, protected because they are seen as vulnerable, judged by their appearance, or encouraged to prioritize family and romantic relationships.

These expectations become more important when they are presented as natural rather than socially created. Ideas about women being more caring, emotional, family-oriented, or vulnerable can seem harmless, but they still reflect traditional ideas about gender. Glick and Fiske's (1997) theory of benevolent sexism helps explain how positive attitudes toward women can exist alongside traditional gender roles. In this sense, treating women positively does not necessarily challenge gender inequality. It can also help maintain familiar gender expectations by making them seem normal or desirable.

Hopkins-Doyle et al.'s (2019) research strengthens this argument by showing that benevolent sexism may be perceived as warm, making people less likely to challenge it. This is particularly important for popular culture because audiences often develop emotional connections with characters and relationships. A protective or romantic interaction may therefore appear emotionally positive even when it reinforces conventional gender assumptions.

This distinction also explains why the four films should not simply be classified as sexist texts. Each contains meaningful challenges to traditional gender expectations. *The Intern* recognizes female professional authority. *Crazy Rich Asians* presents a woman who refuses to surrender her autonomy to gain social acceptance. *Little Women* allows women to pursue different forms of fulfilment. *Barbie* directly exposes patriarchal gender structures. The feminist significance of these films therefore lies partly in their contradictions. They do not simply reproduce traditional gender roles. They also negotiate and question them.

This negotiation reflects a broader change in popular culture. Contemporary media often exists within a cultural environment where explicit sexism is less socially acceptable, while gender expectations continue in modified forms. Gill's (2007) account of post-feminist media culture is useful because she identifies the coexistence of empowerment discourse and continuing gender regulation.

A strong female character should therefore lead to deeper feminist analysis. Instead of asking only whether a character is "strong," it is useful to ask what makes her valuable and what expectations she is expected to meet. Does she face responsibilities that men are not expected to carry? Is her appearance connected to her worth? Is she expected to care for others, accept protection, or find fulfilment through heterosexual relationships?

These questions help move feminist analysis beyond simply deciding whether a female character is represented positively or negatively. They allow us to examine the expectations surrounding female strength and whether a character is truly given freedom to define her own identity.

14. Conclusion

The article shows that female empowerment and benevolent sexism can exist within the same representation. Across *The Intern*, *Crazy Rich Asians*, *Little Women*, and *Barbie*, sexism is rarely shown through direct hostility toward women. Instead, it often appears through expectations that seem positive or socially acceptable, such as caring for others, protecting women, valuing

family loyalty, emphasizing beauty, and expecting women to take emotional responsibility. These qualities are not inherently sexist. The issue arises when they are treated as natural or expected parts of being a woman rather than as individual choices. As Glick and Fiske (1997) explain, benevolent sexism can reinforce traditional gender relations through attitudes that appear positive.

In *The Intern*, Jules's professional success challenges traditional ideas about women in leadership. At the same time, her role as a mother and wife remains closely tied to expectations about family and emotional responsibility. The film therefore presents a woman who has achieved professional independence but still faces pressures associated with traditional family roles. Her success does not remove those expectations.

Crazy Rich Asians presents these ideas through family, marriage, femininity, and cultural belonging. Rachel is independent and professionally successful, but her relationship with Nick places her within a family structure where she is judged according to particular expectations about womanhood and family. Eleanor also shows how women can participate in maintaining traditional gender expectations. Her views are closely connected to family loyalty, cultural identity, and social acceptance. This suggests that gender expectations are not always imposed by men. Women may also uphold them when they see these expectations as important to family and cultural values.

Little Women offers a more complicated view of female choice. Jo rejects the idea that marriage should determine a woman's future, while other characters find meaning in marriage, family, and domestic life. The film does not present these choices as simply right or wrong. Instead, it raises a more important question about whether women are free to choose different ways of living. Marriage, motherhood, and family are not inherently oppressive. They become restrictive when women are expected to choose them simply because they are women.

Barbie makes these issues more obvious through satire. The film explores expectations surrounding beauty, femininity, perfection, and gender roles. *Barbie*'s experience shows how an ideal of femininity can appear empowering while also creating pressure to meet certain expectations. The film therefore questions the idea that celebrating women automatically leads to gender equality.

Taken together, the four films show that benevolent sexism can exist even when women have agency and independence. A woman can be successful, intelligent, or powerful and still face expectations about her appearance, relationships, family, or role as a caregiver. For this reason, simply describing a character as a "strong female character" does not tell us whether the film challenges sexism. A more useful question is whether women are given real freedom to decide who they want to be and how they want to live without being judged by narrow ideas about femininity.

Examining subtle sexism alongside benevolent sexism also makes these contradictions easier to see. Films can question traditional gender roles while still reinforcing certain expectations through ideas about caring for others, protecting women, or presenting femininity as something ideal. These ideas might seem positive, but they can still influence how women are expected to behave.

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