

**NOT ALL WOMEN ARE FEMINISTS:
A CRITICAL VIEW ON THE LEAD CHARACTER IN *LADY BIRD* (2017) FILM**

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 2020-01-31

Accepted: 2020-02-24

Published: 2020-03-15

Volume: 4

Issue: 1

DOI:

[https://doi.org/10.33019/lire.v3i](https://doi.org/10.33019/lire.v3i2.56)

[2.56](https://doi.org/10.33019/lire.v3i2.56)

KEYWORDS

*Feminism, feminist identity
development, teen film,
women role model, passive
identity*

ABSTRACT

In the study of film as media, there is a growing tendency on labelling films with female leads and female production crews as feminist films. **Objective:** This study aims to test such claim in the film *Lady Bird* (2017). **Method:** To do so, the study employs Feminist Identity Development Model by Downing and Roush to look at the main lead of the film, along with analyses on the film's narrative and cinematographic aspects. **Findings:** The study finds that the female lead fails to undergo all the five stages of Feminist Identity Development Model. The study further explores that her advancement through the stages is being held back by her dependence to her family and those around her. **Conclusion:** The study, then, suggests some further inquiries on the interrelatedness of age and feminism.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a tendency, mostly in the United States, that some films that produced by women and show strong main female characters are subsequently called feminist films. As for instance, the phenomenon of the rise of superhero films about women currently. It seems reminiscent of a piece and consistently the action films rises some feminists claim that women ought to do these things as well because of equality and also "strong women role models" (Cochrane, 2014). The study about strong women role models has been discussed by Crystal L. Hoyt. Further explained the affirmative response to non-elite female leaders with whom contributors were stronger identified and which strengthened counter-stereotypic assessment. Additionally, negative self perception mediates the relationship between media image and leadership aspirations (Simon & Hoyt, 2012). Currently, strong women's role models also have been widely displayed through popular media, such as advertisements, music video, films, and others. There is a study from Catherine Grant that discussed about women's film authorship that argued that it has not been all supportive with observe the other significant questions on female authorship in its magnificent separation of the film text (Grant, 2001).

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A feminist film theory is generally based on sociological theory and focuses on the function of female characters in film narratives or genres (Smelik, 1998). The goal was to understand film as a cultural practice that represents and reproduces myths and stereotypes about women and femininity. There are some films have tried to incorporate progressive female characters. Films such as *On the Basis of Sex* (2019) directed by a woman named Mimi Leder and *Brave* (2012) directed by Mark Andrews and Brenda Chapman. The growing representation of women in film was part of a feminist movement to show women realistically. Film as a medium has attracted feminists. As for instance, there is a film, *Lady Bird*, released in 2017, which also tells about a young woman and produced by a woman named Greta Gerwig. An article from Normanda had argued that there are some reasons why she considered *Lady Bird* as a feminist film. First, this film was directed by women in Hollywood. Second, there are strong and bold female characters which are *Lady Bird* and her mother who play a dominant role in their respective social circles. Third, it contains youth's criticism that is many jargon of activism being played in this film. Hence, Normanda said *Lady Bird* is a feminist film that is aware to the range of interpersonal relationships in life (Normanda, 2018).

In addition, *Lady Bird* is Greta Gerwig's solo directorial debut. The increasing number of women directors in the film industry is seen as a positive step. It helps to draw attention to feminist issues and put forth an alternative and realistic view of women. Moreover, the amount of female directors working in Hollywood, according to the *Hollywood Reporter*, has been on the decline (Kilday, 2017). These many reasons make many people considered *Lady Bird* may to be a form of feminist film.

Conversely, the patriarchal opposition as depicted in the *On the Basis of Sex* (2019) and *Brave* (2012) films is not reflected in *Lady Bird* film, which is an important factor in feminism concept. This factor adds the idea that all films about women which produced by women are not always themed feminism. People should dig deep into the women characteristics presented by the film. Thus, this film is still questioned about the truth of feminism within brought by the characterization of the main character, Christine. The film relies on its women to tell a story that needs to be told. It tells story between a complicated young woman with her self-discovery,

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and her relationship with her mother. Lady Bird tries to build her own identity and most of people in America believed that her identity is closely related to a feminism concept. The establishing of an identity is an essential duty in the human development (Erikson, 1980). The most important theorist of identity development classified an identity as a practice of defining oneself relation to shared characteristics with the others. Although identity is conceptualized as an adolescent task, the process of shaping an identity is not static. The feminist identity development model is a theoretical model intended to describe the developmental process women go through to receive on the feminist's social identity. This entry explains the model, the various methods in which it has been completed in a research, and presents critiques of the model and its measurement.

This study uses Feminist Identity Development Model by Downing and Roush (1985) to analyse the film. It is used as steps which should be exceeded by Lady Bird's character to get her feminist identity approved. "Self as feminist" or one that comparatively recent theoretical model straight attends to the composite development of women's recognition with feminism on an individual altitude (Bargad and Hyde, 1991). Downing and Roush (1985) recommend five stages in feminist identity development for women progresses. There are passive acceptance, revelation, embeddedness-emanation, synthesis, and the last one is active commitment.

2. Method

This is a qualitative study taking data from narrative and non-narrative aspects of the Lady Bird film. Data were collected from scenes selected purposively under the following criteria: (1) the scene shows the main character or includes a discussion on the main character; and (2) the scene highlights the relation and interaction of the main character with her significant others. The researchers then described and identified the main character's standing in reference to Downing and Roush's five stages of feminist identity development; whether or not she categorizes as a feminist, and what instances, if any, cause such result.



3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Passive Acceptance

Passive Acceptance describes a condition in which a woman is ignorant of the prejudices against her. She is either unaware of these instances or is in denial of their existence (Downing and Roush, 1985). In another sense, woman does not see much point in questioning wide-ranging expectations that men should be masculine and women must be feminine. Lady Bird passes this stage in the beginning of the film. During the first act, it is clear that Lady Bird accepts her role as the one and only daughter in her family. She lives by framing herself as a typical sweet daughter without questioning the general expectation that women should be always sweet and feminine.

Lady Bird does not care much about why her mother thought that a daughter must behave perfectly calm and feminine. Her mother always tells her that she should follow the rule of life in the small town in which they live in, which she believes would become the place for the perfect future of her daughter. Although Lady Bird begins to question why she should behave the way she is supposed to, and that she does not enjoy following such rules, she still follows the rules and does not actively show resistance. This unawareness starts from Lady Bird's disappointment of the city of Sacramento, which she feels has limited her life choices. Once, she shares her view on her life in Sacramento when Lady Bird and her mother are on their way to their home. She tries to say something that concerns her about her life with her mother. She begins to question what she really wants; that she wants to have more than what the small town offers. Sacramento itself is a California's state capital. A Sacramento native, Amanda Holpuch stated, back in 2002, that people in that town were aware about how boring the town is. Many people have insulted Sacramento by giving the nickname of "Cow Town", presumably because the area around the city is agricultural (Holpuch, 2018).

Lady Bird is interested in pursuing a study in a higher education level that she thinks she could not get in Sacramento. For instance, Marion recurrently censures Lady Bird, deceiving her that her dream of studying on the East Coast is merely unachievable due to her poor work ethic and average school grades. However, Lady Bird passively accepts her and tells her that she does

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sometimes fight for her freedom. However, she is limited by the fact that she is still a teenager, making her to be under the responsibility of her parents. Her mother plays a big role in the development of Lady Bird because she is the one who restricts all Lady Bird's passion to go after her version of life. Thus, it can be concluded that Lady Bird is still a teenage girl who just passively accepts what is given to her by her family on her coming-of-age phase.

3.2. Revelation

The stage of Revelation is marked by traditional roles and the questioning of self. It is characterized by an emergency and series of disagreements, where prejudice is experienced or recognized (Downing and Roush, 1985) (. In this film, Lady Bird is told by her family to go to a catholic school in Sacramento. In connection with that, Lady Bird is required by the school to attend church services. As with most major religious affiliations, the church is a very patriarchal institution.

Patriarchy is defined as a social organization characterized by the supremacy of fathers in clans or families, legal dependence on children, and inheritance inherited in the male line, in which there is a large distribution of power to men. Women are expected to submit unilaterally to men, either in the figure of fathers, husbands, and/or religious leaders. In many churches, men are still given the final word, thus still falls on a patriarchal scale (Easter, 2017). Lady Bird follows the school rules and the religion because she has not been fully aware of the life she lives this far.

Subsequently, Lady Bird tries to do some refusal through her act. Lady Bird shows her contradiction to some things that she feels are not her choice. The most apparent example of such refusals is the rejection of her birth name. There are several scenes that show that Lady Bird wants to be known and acknowledged as “Lady Bird” instead of Christine, her birth name. She does not care about what people around her would judge about her name because she feels proud of it. She begins to push her existence to others around her using the nickname. Once, she says “Call me Lady Bird!” after someone calls her by her birth name, Christine.



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The word 'lady' means a woman who is experienced, gracious, and eloquent. Inherently, a lady is something more than just a woman. The word 'girl', on the other hand, refers to younger woman. A girl becomes a woman when they reach maturity. In the context of US, a person is deemed as legally mature at the age of 18. Thus, all girls will definitely become women, but not all woman could become a lady (Chongtham, 2013). The word 'lady', then, entails a higher, more exclusive position in the social structure of female signifier, making it more preferable to 'woman', moreover 'girl'. By incorporating such name, Lady Bird positions herself above others, yet, interestingly, still under the insignia of a female. Here, the authors argue that Lady Bird only rejects her relative position of being female in an all-female context. Lady Bird, in this stage, does not question and/or rejects her relative position in the larger context of both male and female.

Meanwhile, the word 'bird' is chosen because it carries meaning that it symbolizes goals, aspirations and hopes (Enden, 2010). The chirping of flying birds characterizes happiness, synchronization, joy, love, and stability. Thus, making a nickname as a Bird means that Christine desires to experience spiritual freedom and psychological liberation. Therefore, Christine made a nickname for herself as a "Lady Bird" because she has a very strong desire within herself to choose her own way of life and freedom without being pressured by anyone, including her mother. Put together, the two words that comprise the nickname bring up one possible interpretation: that in order to attain such bird-like freedom, Lady Bird has to become a lady. She first has to obtain a higher position in the hierarchy of females before she is able to break free from the boundaries and limitations imposed by her mother and the town, she lives in.

Lady Bird knows what she wants in her life though it may not in parallel with the expectation of the society, making her a rebel. She figures that her goals are her fate. And that it is up to her to determine such fate. Learning to trust oneself, Downing and Roush argue, is necessary in order for women to begin to process of questioning themselves and their role in society. Furthermore, her former identity as a child of a family, represented by her birth name, is evolving into a newer, more independent identity, Lady Bird. This evolution of identity is a

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characteristic of women being in this second stage; however, further positive self-development depends on the remaining stages.

3.3. Embeddedness-emanation

Women who reach this stage first embed themselves within the feminist culture. After embedding themselves in feminist culture, women can reach emanation. Emanation, as explained by Downing and Roush (1985), occurs when women realize that they (pseudo identities) are as rigid as the identity they assume during Passive Acceptance (Fowler, 2011). In this stage, women are expected to seek affirmation from and connection with other women and their burgeoning identity is affirmed and strengthened. Women must find sisterhood and develop close relationships with other similar women: those who have undergone the second stage.. In the case of Lady Bird, there is no feminist culture in which she can embeds to. Her mother, a female character who is closest to her, does not approve her views and perspectives. Though they spend a lot of time together, there seems to be a psychological barrier between them: one that seems to be there because of age gap. Those who are at her age, do not seem to provide what Lady Bird is seeking. The problem goes both ways, though.

It is not only that women in Lady Bird's surrounding do not have the same feminist culture, but also that Lady Bird herself does not befriend them for such purpose. She develops relationship with her female friends not because they have the same goal in achieving freedom in making decision of life or fight for equality in patriarchal society but only for the sake of popularity. She strives to be viewed as someone of a higher position to be deemed worthy to be identified as a 'lady'. This signifies a fixation on the previous stage, failing her on this third stage. She is struggling to attain a higher identity, but not necessarily more positive. This proves to be a downfall in terms of feminist identity.

Another reason why Lady Bird is failing this stage is her failure in emanation. Emanation is the beginning of the process of forming a more nuanced viewpoint. It is the consequence of adopting a rigid belief system. Knowledge teaches that to achieve positive identity development, women must create strategies that allow them to navigate the realities and negative



consequences of a patriarchal society while maintaining their feminist identity. However, as mentioned before, Lady Bird focuses on the wrong goal. Instead of creating a more positive identity to counter patriarchal beliefs, she projects her disdain to those who hold such beliefs, rendering her identity to become negatively higher than others. She views other women, who are not in agreement with her perspective, as lower. Thus, she attains higher position not by developing positively, but by degrading others.

In relation to the opposite sex, women in this phase interact cautiously with men. However, this is quite crucial in the film. In a supposedly patriarchal society, men are described as the strong and bold figure, but this is not the case with the male characters in the film. Men in this film are not the ideals. They do not fall under the category of what patriarchy would call as men. Some do not have the final say in their family. Others are marginalized because of his sexual orientation. Men or boys, especially those who fall outside the acknowledged gender norms, are also wounded by the patriarchy in ways that are both understandable and more restrained. The storyline in this film considered men can also be victims of patriarchy and repressive gender norms. This is in line with what Singha mentions: that gender discourse has invariably focused on women's issues and has paid almost no attention to issues of masculinity and experiences of men as gender categories (2018). Many amongst us might still argue that men have, throughout history, occupied the position of oppressor while women have been oppressed, and thus women need more attention in the discourses of gender.

From one perspective, men seem to be advantaged by the process which ascribes traits like bravery, valour, strength, etc. as an association of masculinity as such traits provide men with a higher position in the gender hierarchy and thus access to power. However, from another perspective, the association of masculinity with such traits also becomes a source of pressure for men to comply with such set standards to be considered masculine. Thus, the argument that patriarchal structures and ideologies are oppressive only for women stands invalid, as men too suffer from a patriarchal notion of gender relations.

3.4. Synthesis

Women admit the positive aspects of being female in this stage. They have developed a self-concept that is balanced and tends to evaluate people on the base of such concept. This stage represents women who have assessed other women without devaluing men. They are in the stage of synthesising gender attributes and integrating them into their own positive and realistic identities. They no longer turn against the male culture or use dominant stereotypes to evaluate men, but they recognize and respond to experiences of expression. that can limit them to choose their decision in life. In terms of this film, Lady Bird does not show such trait. She, again, only arrives at a point in which she creates a higher identity. She does this by putting herself above others and at the same time putting others under herself. This act of sustaining hierarchy is clearly in contrast with what is being asked in the fourth stage. Lady Bird does represent what is requested by the stage at all.

In terms of movement, Lady Bird also fails to enact one. Though it is true that she does fight and struggle for her goals, yet those goals are entirely for her own sake as an individual, not by any means in relation to her being a woman. This can be clearly seen from the scene in which Lady Bird receives a letter from her dream college. No one in her family knows that she enrolled to that college. That is why Lady Bird chose to open the letter inside her bedroom. In this regard, it means that Lady Bird still does not present an open movement. Such discreet movement will be too far fetched from acceptance—the next step that highlights acknowledgement by her surroundings of such movement. The acceptance is the pinnacle of this Synthesis stages. With these two reasoning, it is hard for Lady Bird to be approved as a synthesis woman.

3.5. Active Commitment

The final stage is the Active Commitment. This stage depicts women who have committed to actively bringing about social change. Active Commitment involves lifelong dedication to social change, trying to end women's oppression. It involves the consolidation of feminist aims at creating a non-sexist world. It is pretty much the same with the synthesis' stage, but active commitment further represents the optimal levels of feminist identity development. This stage

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is represented by the attainment of a positive self-image, the willingness to engage in sex-role transcendence, and the commitment to meaningful action in working toward a non-sexist world. Since Lady Bird had difficulties passing stage 3, Embeddedness-Emanation and stage 4, Synthesis, she shows a sort of inconsistency towards the choices she made. It is when Lady Bird gradually shows an attitude that is in contrary to her rebel attitude in the past that wish for a freedom in making decision of her life. She somehow begins to realize that she essentially misses her old life after she successfully moves to New York. This scene also contradicts with her earlier self. In stage 2, Lady Bird is depicted as being bored with what her parents have set for her, including her religion. However, in the end, Lady Bird somehow misses the religion her parents chose for her. Since she manages to move to a bigger city, she has never gone to church anymore. That being said, she actually misses going to church. Furthermore, Lady Bird, who used to feel proud of the name she created for her, is then embarrassed to say it in front of strangers. Intentionally, Lady Bird says that she begins to accept the name given by her parents based on the religion her parents have. So, instead of developing into the identity that she dreams of, Lady Bird withdraws to her old self: the young Christine from Sacramento.

The monologue in the end of the film serves also as a highlight for such withdrawal, if not failure, of Lady Bird in maintaining her commitment to the choice she was desired to; the so called 'freedom'. The phone conversation starts with "It's me, Christine" and it is clarified with "It's the name you gave me." That is when Lady Bird returns to her old life before she commences her rebel attitude in stage 2. It is in contrast to what is requested in the Active Commitment stage. In this stage, women should represent the optimal levels of feminist identity development. This stage represents the attainment of positive self-image, the willingness to engage in sex-role transcendence, and the commitment to action in working toward a non-sexist world—characteristics that cannot be found in Lady Bird. From the stage of Embeddedness-Emanation, Synthesis, until Active Commitment, Lady Bird, interestingly, does not succeed to prove her positive feminist identity. In fact, at the end of this film, where women are obliged to have a commitment to themselves and society in order to gain a freedom to speak, Lady Bird

actually walks away from her commitment because she feels that her old life is the one she enjoys more.

4. Conclusion

Lady Bird only succeeds through the first two stages, Passive Acceptance and Revelation, then fails through the last three stages: The Embeddedness-Emanation, Synthesis, and Active Commitment. The first two stages are the stages which successfully passed by Lady Bird as a character who is unaware of her position and who is ignorant of the prejudice against her. However, when entering the third stage, she fails to develop good relations with fellow women, especially women who experience discrimination or feel injustice in the presence of patriarchy. After failing through the third stage, Lady Bird is unable to get through the fourth and fifth stages. In the absence of the inter-woman relationship that is required at stage three, there is no social change or action to meaningful action in working toward a non-sexist world. For the reason that Lady Bird only passed the first two stages, the writers argue that Lady Bird is an example of a passive identity, as she focuses only on her self-improvement as a teenager instead of evolving into a positive feminist identity.



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