



SNAP TO READ

WOMEN'S AUTONOMY AND SELF- DETERMINATION IN GRETA GERWIG'S LADY BIRD: A LIBERAL FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

Film serves as an important cultural medium that reflects social values, gender roles, and women's struggles for equality. Although contemporary coming-of-age films often portray young women's search for identity and independence, the representation of liberal feminist values in these films remains relatively underexplored in academic discussions. Therefore, this study analyzes Greta Gerwig's film Lady Bird (2017) through the lens of liberal feminism, based on the theoretical framework proposed by Tong and Botts (2024). This study aims to identify the liberal feminist values represented in the film and to examine how Lady Bird portrays a young woman's effort to achieve autonomy and self-development within familial and social expectations. This research applied a qualitative method. The data were collected through repeated observation of the film and note-taking techniques to document significant dialogues and scenes related to liberal feminist values. The data were then categorized and analyzed based on several aspects of liberal feminism, including autonomy and personal choice, economic independence, respect for diverse life choices, and social responsibility and moral agency. The findings show that Lady Bird's desire to determine her own identity, pursue higher education, seek financial support, and negotiate her personal choices with family expectations reflects liberal feminist ideals. The

film also portrays her growing awareness of moral responsibility in her relationships with others. This study contributes to feminist film studies by showing that liberal feminist values in coming-of-age films can be represented not only through explicit political resistance, but also through everyday personal choices, family conflicts, educational aspirations, and moral development. The study also implies that Lady Bird can be read as a text that encourages discussions of women's autonomy, rationality, self-determination, and equal opportunity in contemporary cinema.

Keywords: *Feminist values, Lady Bird, liberal feminism*

INTRODUCTION

Films can be examined as literary and cultural texts that represent human experiences, social values, and ideological conflicts (Bujgoi, 2025). Although films are presented through audiovisual form, they also contain narrative elements commonly analyzed in literary studies, such as plot, characterization, dialogue, conflict, theme, and point of view (Ariani et al., 2025). Therefore, film can be approached as a form of narrative text that reflects the society from which it emerges. Through its story and characters, a film may reveal how social issues such as class, identity, family, education, and gender are represented (Eren & Aktan, 2024). In this sense, the analysis of film in literary studies is important because it allows readers and viewers to understand how meaning is constructed through narrative, character development, and thematic representation (Ali & Aljasir, 2025).

One important approach in literary analysis is feminism (Huiying, 2024). Feminism refers to a social, political, and intellectual movement that advocates women's rights, equality, and liberation from gender-based oppression (Mohajan, 2022). Patriarchal structures often place women in subordinate positions by limiting their choices, controlling their roles, and restricting their access to equal opportunities (Noer, 2016). Therefore, feminism becomes important in questioning and challenging such inequality. In literary criticism, feminism is used to examine how female characters are

represented, how gender roles are constructed, and how women negotiate power, agency, identity, and social expectations (Agung, 2025). Feminist literary criticism also questions whether women are portrayed as passive objects or as active subjects who are able to make decisions and shape their own lives (Aeniaska et al., 2025). Since film also presents narrative, characterization, and dialogue, it can be analyzed through feminist literary criticism to reveal how women's experiences and struggles are represented in the text.

Among various feminist approaches, this study focuses specifically on liberal feminism because it is most relevant to the issues of autonomy, personal choice, education, equal opportunity, and self-development represented in *Lady Bird*. According to Tong and Botts, (2024), liberal feminism emphasizes individual rights, rationality, autonomy, personal freedom, and equal opportunity. It argues that gender equality can be achieved through legal, political, educational, and social reforms that provide women and men with equal access to rights, opportunities, and participation within existing social systems (Dang, 2024; Russell et al., 2024). From this perspective, women should be able to develop their potential, make independent choices, pursue education, and participate equally in society without being restricted by traditional gender expectations (Yashinta & Nurhayati, 2024). In this study, the analysis is directed to four dimensions of liberal feminism: autonomy and personal choice, economic independence, respect for diverse life choices, and social responsibility and moral agency. These dimensions are used to examine how the female protagonist negotiates identity, education, family expectations, and personal responsibility.

Through a liberal feminist lens, narrative texts often portray female characters who seek independence, self-development, and self-determination while negotiating social and familial expectations. One film that illustrates this issue is Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird* (2017). The film is a coming-of-age narrative that focuses on Christine "Lady Bird" McPherson, a teenage girl who struggles to define her identity, pursue her dreams, and gain

independence from her family and social environment. Lady Bird's desire to leave Sacramento, attend college in another city, and construct her own identity reflects her effort to achieve autonomy and self-realization. At the same time, the film also presents conflicts between personal freedom and family expectations, especially through Lady Bird's relationship with her mother. These conflicts make the film relevant to liberal feminist analysis because they show how a young woman negotiates her right to choose, her educational aspirations, and her desire for self-development. Thus, Lady Bird can be examined through the dimensions of liberal feminism mentioned above.

Several previous studies have examined liberal feminism in various literary and cultural texts. Prameswari and Susilowati (2022) analyzed liberal feminism in *Enola Holmes* by focusing on female characters who challenge Victorian gender expectations on women's education, behavior, and political participation. Ilham and Nafisah (2023) examined liberal feminism in *The Crown Season 1* through the character of Queen Elizabeth II, focusing on the values of equal education, liberty, and rights. They found that Queen Elizabeth II reflects these liberal feminist values through her efforts to gain knowledge, make independent decisions, and assert authority in a patriarchal royal environment. Sangeetha et al. (2022) explored liberal feminism in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*, showing how the female protagonist moves from patriarchal domination toward individuality, resistance, and self-liberation. Rajapandi et al. (2022) investigated liberal feminism in Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* by discussing women's empowerment across different generations of Black women. In a more recent study, Priyadharshini and Kumar (2024) analyzed liberal feminism in Namita Gokhale's selected works and emphasized gender inclusivity, equal opportunity, and women's self-identity. These studies show that liberal feminism has been widely applied to different forms of narrative texts, including films, television series, and novels. They particularly examine women's struggles for equality, autonomy, education, rights, and self-realization.

However, the previous studies still leave room for further discussion. Most of them focus on women's struggles in historical, political, royal, postcolonial, or explicitly oppressive contexts. These contexts include Victorian society, monarchy, abusive marriage, Black women's generational experiences, and gender inclusivity in Indian literary works. Although these studies are important, they do not specifically examine liberal feminist values in a modern coming-of-age narrative that centers on an adolescent girl's everyday experiences. In addition, studies on liberal feminism often emphasize women's resistance against visible patriarchal domination, while less attention has been given to how liberal feminist values may appear in personal choices, mother-daughter relationship, and a young woman's desire to define her own future. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the liberal feminist values represented in Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird* (2017), particularly through the main character's pursuit of autonomy and self-development.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the liberal feminist values represented in Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird* (2017) using Tong and Botts' (2024) framework. The analysis focuses on four values of liberal feminism: autonomy and personal choice, economic independence, respect for diverse life choices, and social responsibility and moral agency. By focusing on a contemporary coming-of-age narrative, this study is expected to contribute to feminist literary criticism by showing that liberal feminist values can be represented not only through explicit resistance to patriarchal domination, but also through everyday negotiations of identity, family expectations, education, and personal responsibility.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative method to analyze liberal feminist values represented in Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird* (2017). A qualitative method is appropriate for this study because it focuses on interpreting meanings, themes, and representations found in non-numerical data, particularly in

cultural and narrative texts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Since this research examines feminist values expressed through dialogues, characterization, and character behavior, the qualitative method allowed the researchers to interpret how liberal feminist ideas were represented in the film.

The data source of this study is *Lady Bird* (2017), a film directed by Greta Gerwig. The film was selected because it presents a female-centered narrative that explores identity formation, autonomy, personal ambition, and family expectations. In addition, the film contains representations of liberal feminist values that are relevant to Tong and Botts' (2024) theoretical framework, particularly in relation to women's autonomy, personal choice, education, and self-development.

The data were collected through observation and note-taking techniques. The film was watched repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding of the plot, character development, conflicts, and thematic context. During the observation process, important dialogues, scenes, and character actions related to liberal feminist values were documented. The collected data were then organized and categorized based on the principles of liberal feminism proposed by Tong and Botts (2024), including autonomy and personal choice, economic independence, respect for diverse life choices, and social responsibility and moral agency.

The data were then analyzed by interpreting selected dialogues, scenes, and character actions in relation to the theoretical concepts of liberal feminism. The analysis focused on how the main character reflects liberal feminist values through her decisions, attitudes, and interactions with other characters. The findings were then presented descriptively to explain how liberal feminism is represented in the film's narrative.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study found that *Lady Bird* (2017) represents several values of liberal feminism as discussed by Tong and Botts (2024). These values are reflected through Christine "Lady Bird" McPherson's actions, dialogues,

and personal decisions throughout the film. The analysis shows that Lady Bird's struggle is not only related to teenage rebellion, but also to her desire to define herself, pursue education, make independent choices, and take responsibility for her actions. Through the main character, the film presents a young woman's process of negotiating autonomy within family, friendship, education, and social expectations.

Autonomy and Personal Choice

In liberal feminism, autonomy and personal choice are central to women's freedom and equality. Tong and Botts (2024) explain that women should be recognized as rational individuals who have the right to make decisions about their own lives. This includes the freedom to choose their education, career, lifestyle, and personal identity. From this perspective, women should not be controlled by restrictive social expectations, patriarchal authority, or other people's assumptions about how they should live. Autonomy is therefore not only about major public choices, such as work and education, but also about the more personal right to define oneself. This idea is in line with Sangeetha et al. (2022), who argue that liberal feminism emphasizes women's self-reliance and rejects anything that prevents women's development. Similarly, Ilham and Nafisah (2023) explain that liberal feminism supports women's freedom to pursue their dreams and opportunities equally. This value is represented in the following dialogue.

Data 1

Lady Bird : "My name is Lady Bird."

Marion : "Well, actually, it's not, and it's ridiculous because your name is Christine."

Lady Bird : "Call me Lady Bird like you said you would."

(Gerwig, 2017, 00:03:05 – 00:03:10)



Figure 1. Marion and Lady Bird argue over her chosen name in the car

The dialogue in data 1 shows Lady Bird's attempt to claim authority over her own identity. Although the issue seems simple because it only concerns a name, the act of renaming herself carries symbolic meaning. By choosing the name "Lady Bird," Christine tries to separate herself from the identity given to her by her parents and create a version of herself that feels more personal and meaningful. Her statement, "*My name is Lady Bird*," is direct and firm, showing that she does not merely ask for approval. Instead, she asserts how she wants to be recognized.

Marion's response shows the opposite position. By saying that Lady Bird's chosen name is "ridiculous" and reminding her that her real name is Christine, Marion rejects her daughter's attempt at self-definition. This rejection can be read as a limitation of Lady Bird's autonomy because Marion insists on defining her daughter based on parental authority and legal identity. In this sense, the conflict is not only between a mother and a daughter, but also between control and self-determination.

The car setting also strengthens this conflict visually. The enclosed space of the car places Lady Bird and Marion in a direct and tense confrontation, suggesting how family authority can become an immediate space where a young woman's personal choice is questioned. Lady Bird's resistance is therefore not only expressed through dialogue, but also through the cinematic situation that frames her struggle for recognition within a

restrictive family space.

Data 2

Father Leviatch : “Okay. Christine?”

Lady Bird : “Lady Bird.”

Father Leviatch : “Is that your given name?”

Lady Bird : “Yes.”

Father Leviatch : “Why is it in quotes?”

Lady Bird : “Well I gave it to myself. It’s given. To me, by me.”

Father Leviatch : “Okay, take it away, Lady Bird.”

(Gerwig, 2017, 00:12:10–00:12:22)



Figure 2. Father Leviatch auditioning Lady Bird

The scene in Data 2 occurs when Christine auditions for a theater role and submits her name as “Lady Bird.” When Father Leviatch questions whether it is her given name, Lady Bird explains that the name is “given” to her by herself. This explanation clarifies that the name is not accidental or merely playful. It is a conscious personal choice. The phrase “*To me, by me*” strongly emphasizes self-definition because Lady Bird positions herself as both the person who gives the name and the person who receives it. In other words, she claims the right to define who she is.

This moment develops the issue of autonomy more strongly than Data 1 because Lady Bird does not only demand recognition from her mother, but also introduces her chosen identity in a public and institutional setting. The audition space allows her chosen name to move beyond the private conflict of the family and become part of her social identity. This supports Priyadharshini and Kumar's (2024) view that liberal feminism is closely related to women's pursuit of freedom, equality, and self-identity. Lady Bird's chosen name becomes a way for her to assert that her identity should not be limited to what her family or official documents assign to her.

Father Leviatch's response creates an important contrast with Marion's earlier reaction. While Marion rejects the name and calls it ridiculous, Father Leviatch finally accepts it by saying, "*Okay, take it away, Lady Bird.*" His response shows recognition. This recognition matters because autonomy is not only about making a personal choice, but also about whether that choice is acknowledged by others. In this scene, Lady Bird's identity is accepted in a social space outside the family. This suggests that her autonomy becomes more visible when another figure respects the name she has chosen for herself.

From a liberal feminist perspective, Lady Bird's demand to be called by her chosen name reflects her desire to be treated as an individual with the right to make personal choices. Her words in Data 1, "*like you said you would,*" suggest that she expects her choice to be respected, while her statement in Data 2, "*It's given. To me, by me,*" shows that she understands identity as something she can actively construct.

Together, the two scenes show that autonomy in Lady Bird is represented through a gradual movement from rejection to recognition. The first scene shows how her self-definition is challenged within the family, while the second scene shows how the same self-definition gains acceptance in a wider social context. Therefore, Lady Bird's chosen name functions as a symbolic expression of liberal feminist autonomy because it represents her effort to control how she is named, seen, and understood by others.

Economic Independence

Tong and Botts (2024) also emphasize the importance of economic independence in liberal feminism. Economic independence is viewed as one of the main conditions that allows women to gain freedom and equality. Women cannot fully make autonomous decisions if they remain financially dependent on other people or institutions that limit their choices. In liberal feminist thought, access to education and employment is important because both can help women achieve financial stability, social mobility, and personal independence. This idea is supported by Ilham and Nafisah (2023), who state that liberal feminism promotes equal opportunities and freedom between women and men, including women's right to education and the freedom to pursue their dreams. Similarly, Yashinta and Nurhayati (2024) emphasize that education is an important foundation for women's empowerment because it enables women to face challenges and improve their lives. Prameswari and Susilowati (2022) also explain that liberal feminism is concerned with women's civil rights and economic opportunities, showing that equality is not only personal but also connected to access to public and economic life. This value is shown in the following dialogue.

Data 3

Lady Bird : "That's why I'm applying to New York colleges. Do you know if Sarah Lawrence is actually in the city?"

Julie : "Your parents would pay for that?"

Lady Bird : "Scholarships, financial aid, I'll figure it out. My mom thinks I can't get in, but she is sorely mistaken."

(Gerwig, 2017, 00:07:07–00:07:20)



Figure 3. Lady Bird discusses her plan to apply to colleges in New York

The dialogue shows Lady Bird's awareness that education can become a path toward independence. Her desire to apply to colleges in New York reflects her wish to move beyond the limitations of her family and hometown. She does not only want to leave Sacramento physically, but also wants to create a different future for herself. In this context, education becomes a way for Lady Bird to imagine a life that is not fully determined by her family's economic condition. This is relevant to Yashinta and Nurhayati's (2024) argument that education can function as a form of empowerment because it helps women gain access to wider opportunities beyond domestic and social limitations.

Julie's question, "*Your parents would pay for that?*" highlights the financial barrier behind Lady Bird's dream. It reminds the audience that personal freedom is often connected to economic resources. Lady Bird wants to make her own choice, but that choice is not entirely free because it depends on money, scholarships, and financial aid. Therefore, the scene shows that autonomy is closely related to economic opportunity. Without financial support, Lady Bird's dream of studying in New York becomes difficult to achieve. In this sense, the film presents economic independence as a condition that affects whether a young woman can realistically pursue her desired future. This supports Prameswari and Susilowati's (2022) view that liberal feminism is closely related to women's opportunities to participate in social and economic life.

However, Lady Bird's response shows determination rather than

surrender. When she says, “*Scholarships, financial aid, I’ll figure it out,*” she shows her willingness to take responsibility for her future. She does not completely depend on her parents’ ability or approval. Instead, she looks for alternative ways to support her education. This reflects the liberal feminist belief that women should have equal access to education and the opportunity to build independent lives. Her statement also reflects the idea of equal opportunity discussed by Ilham and Nafisah (2023), particularly the belief that women should have the freedom to pursue their dreams through education and personal effort.

At the same time, the scene also reveals that Lady Bird has not yet achieved economic independence. She is still a teenager who depends on her family and institutional support. However, her attitude shows an aspiration toward independence. This distinction is important because the film does not present economic independence as something Lady Bird already possesses, but as something she actively pursues. Through her desire for scholarships and financial aid, the film shows how education becomes an important step toward women’s self-development and future autonomy.

Data 4

Marion : “Your dad and I will barely be able to afford in-state tuition.”

Lady Bird : “There are loans, scholarships.”

(Gerwig, 2017, 00:02:12–00:02:17)



Figure 4. Marion discusses the family’s financial limitations in paying for

Lady Bird's college tuition

Data 4 further strengthens the representation of economic independence because it presents Lady Bird's educational aspiration as a financial issue. Marion's statement, "*Your dad and I will barely be able to afford in-state tuition,*" shows that Lady Bird's dream of studying outside Sacramento is limited by her family's economic condition. College is not presented only as a matter of personal preference, but also as a matter of access, affordability, and economic limitation. This means that Lady Bird's freedom to choose her future depends on whether she can find financial support beyond her family's income.

Lady Bird's response, "*There are loans, scholarships,*" shows that she does not simply accept her mother's financial warning as the end of her dream. Instead, she immediately identifies possible alternatives. This response reflects her practical awareness that education requires economic planning. It also shows her effort to move toward economic independence by searching for resources outside parental support. In this sense, Lady Bird does not yet possess economic independence, but she already demonstrates the mindset of someone who wants to build it. This is relevant to Dang's (2024) argument that women's equality is connected to access to opportunities that allow them to develop their potential and participate more fully in public life.

The scene also shows the tension between individual ambition and structural limitation. Lady Bird's desire to attend an out-of-state college is shaped by her dream of self-development, but this dream cannot be separated from tuition fees, loans, and scholarships. Therefore, the film does not romanticize independence as something that can be achieved through willpower alone. Instead, it presents economic independence as a process that requires access to educational and financial institutions. This point is important in liberal feminism because equal opportunity must be supported by real access, not only by personal desire. Pandey (2019) also emphasizes the importance of education and self-reliance in feminist thought, particularly in relation to women's ability to challenge restrictive social structures.

Cinematically, the car setting also strengthens the conflict between limitation and aspiration. The conversation happens in a confined family space, where Marion reminds Lady Bird of the family's financial reality. However, Lady Bird's brief answer shows resistance to being defined by that limitation. Her response is short, but it is direct and solution oriented. She does not argue emotionally; instead, she names concrete financial options. This makes the scene significant because it shows Lady Bird beginning to connect her educational ambition with financial responsibility.

Respect for Diverse Life Choices

Another value represented in the film is respect for diverse life choices. In liberal feminism, women should have the freedom to choose their own life paths without being judged or forced to follow one fixed model of womanhood. This principle rejects the idea that there is only one correct way for women to live. Instead, it recognizes that women may choose different forms of education, relationships, family roles, lifestyles, and identities. What matters is that their choices are respected as valid expressions of individual freedom. This idea is supported by Mohajan (2022), who explains that feminism supports women's freedom to make decisions about their lives, including financial independence, life choices, and liberation from oppression. Rajapandi et al. (2022) also emphasize that liberal feminism views women as rational beings who should be allowed to choose their own roles in life and develop their full potential. This value can be seen in the following dialogue.

Data 5

Marion : "I just think it's such a shame that you're spending your last Thanksgiving with a family you've never met instead of us, but I know. I guess you want it that way."

(Gerwig, 2017, 00:25:57–00:26:04)



Figure 5. Marion and Lady Bird discuss Thanksgiving plans in a store

Marion's statement in data 5 shows a conflict between family expectation and individual choice. She is disappointed because Lady Bird chooses to spend Thanksgiving with another family rather than with her own. From Marion's perspective, Thanksgiving should be spent with family, especially because it is Lady Bird's last year before leaving for college. Therefore, Lady Bird's decision is seen not only as a personal preference, but also as a rejection of family tradition and emotional closeness.

However, from a liberal feminist perspective, Lady Bird's decision can be understood as part of her effort to explore her own social world. She wants to experience a different environment and make choices that are not fully shaped by her mother's expectations. This does not necessarily mean that she does not love her family. Rather, it shows her desire to make decisions based on her own feelings, curiosity, and personal development. This reflects the liberal feminist concern with individual freedom because Lady Bird's choice represents her attempt to decide how she wants to spend her time and with whom she wants to build social connections. Rajapandi et al. (2022) argue that liberal feminism supports women's right to choose their roles and develop their potential. In this scene, Lady Bird's choice is small and domestic, but it still reflects her effort to act as an individual whose personal preference deserves recognition.

The phrase "*it's such a shame*" shows that Marion does not simply disagree with Lady Bird's decision; she also places moral judgment on it. By

calling the decision a shame, Marion implies that Lady Bird's choice is wrong or disappointing. This reflects how women's choices can be judged when they do not fit expected roles within the family. Lady Bird is expected to be a grateful and obedient daughter, but she chooses differently. The feminist issue in this scene lies in the emotional pressure attached to choice. Lady Bird is technically free to spend Thanksgiving elsewhere, but her freedom is burdened by guilt, disappointment, and family expectations. This shows that women's choices can be restricted not only by direct prohibition, but also by emotional judgment.

At the same time, Marion's final statement, "*I guess you want it that way,*" partially acknowledges Lady Bird's agency. Marion recognizes that the decision belongs to Lady Bird, even though she does not fully accept it. This creates an ambivalent moment: Lady Bird's choice is recognized, but not truly respected. Therefore, the scene reflects the tension between personal freedom and emotional pressure within family relationships. Through this scene, the film shows that respect for diverse life choices is not always easy to achieve. A woman's freedom to choose may be formally acknowledged, but her choice can still be questioned or criticized. In this context, Lady Bird represents a liberal feminist issue within family life. The film shows how a young woman's attempt to make her own decisions is challenged by traditional expectations and parental disappointment.

Data 6

- Marion : "Your brother, your very smart brother, he can't even find a job."
- Lady Bird : "He and Shelly work. They have jobs."
- Marion : "They bag at the grocery store. That is not a career. And they went to Berkeley."

(Gerwig, 2017, 00:02:16–00:02:24)



Figure 6. Marion's comments on her son's and his girlfriend's job

Data 6 expands the idea of diverse life choices beyond Lady Bird's personal decisions. The dialogue shows Marion's judgment toward Miguel and Shelly's work at a grocery store. Marion believes that their jobs do not count as a proper career, especially because they graduated from Berkeley. Her statement suggests that certain life paths are considered more respectable than others. In this context, Marion evaluates work based on social prestige, educational background, and family expectations.

Lady Bird's response, "*He and Shelly work. They have jobs,*" offers a different perspective. She does not describe their work as failure. Instead, she recognizes it as employment. Although her response is simple, it challenges Marion's narrow understanding of success. Lady Bird's statement suggests that work should not be dismissed only because it does not fit a conventional idea of a successful career. This is relevant to Priyadharshini and Kumar's (2024) view that liberal feminism is connected to gender inclusivity and the recognition of different social roles, including women and men as workers, family members, and individuals with varied life experiences.

From the perspective of respect for diverse life choices, the scene shows that liberal feminist values are not limited to defending women's choices only when those choices appear ambitious or socially impressive. They also involve respecting choices that may seem ordinary, modest, or different from dominant expectations. Shelly's position is important here

because Marion's judgment includes her as well as Miguel. By dismissing their grocery store work, Marion indirectly devalues a life path that does not match the expected result of elite education. This reveals how social expectations can limit the recognition of people's choices, including women's choices in work and lifestyle.

The dialogue also shows the difference between judgment and recognition. Marion judges Miguel and Shelly through the language of failure, while Lady Bird responds through the language of fact and recognition. Marion says that working at the grocery store "is not a career," but Lady Bird insists that they "work" and "have jobs." This contrast is important because liberal feminism values individual freedom and equal respect. A life choice does not need to follow one dominant model of success in order to be valid. This is in line with Mohajan's (2022) explanation that feminism supports freedom in making life choices and seeks to remove social restrictions that limit people's dignity and equality.

Cinematically, this conversation takes place during a car scene, which creates a confined space for disagreement between Marion and Lady Bird. Marion's voice carries authority because she frames Miguel and Shelly's situation as a warning for Lady Bird's future. However, Lady Bird's response shows that she does not fully accept her mother's judgment. She recognizes that there are different ways to live and work, even when those choices are not highly valued by others.

Thus, Data 6 strengthens the discussion of respect for diverse life choices by showing that the film questions narrow definitions of success, career, and respectability. Through Lady Bird's response, the film presents a more inclusive view of life choices. Miguel and Shelly's jobs may not fit Marion's idea of achievement, but they still represent valid forms of work and independence. In this way, the scene supports the liberal feminist idea that individuals should not be reduced to traditional expectations of success, family duty, or social status.

Social Responsibility and Moral Agency

Liberal feminism also emphasizes women's capacity for rational thought, ethical decision-making, and responsibility (Tong & Botts, 2024). Liberal feminism rejects the idea that women are less capable of making moral decisions than men. Instead, it views women as full moral agents who are able to think, choose, act, and take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. In this sense, freedom is not separated from responsibility. Women should have the right to make decisions, but they are also capable of reflecting on those decisions and correcting their mistakes. This idea is relevant to Huiying's (2024) argument that feminist films increasingly portray women's growth, self-consciousness, and struggle to express their own voices. This value is reflected in the following data.

Data 7

Kyle : "Do you guys want to ditch prom and just go to Mike's instead?"

Jenna : "Yeah, I hate dances."

Jonah : "Yes."

Lady Bird : "Yeah, okay. No prom."

"Crash Into Me" comes on the radio.

Kyle : "I hate this song."

Lady Bird : "I love it. I actually want to go to prom."

Kyle : "Um, okay? I mean I don't really wanna do that."

Lady Bird : "Can you take me to my friend, Julie's house, please?"

Kyle : "Sure."

Jenna : "Who's Julie?"

Lady Bird : "She's my best friend."

(Gerwig, 2017, 01:09:39–01:10:27)



Figure 7. Lady Bird on her way to prom

The dialogue in Data 7 represents Lady Bird's moral agency because she changes her decision after recognizing what she truly wants and what she needs to repair. At first, she agrees to follow Kyle, Jenna, and Jonah's plan to skip prom. Her initial agreement suggests that she is still influenced by the group and tries to fit into their social circle. This is important because Lady Bird often wants to be accepted by people whom she considers cooler, wealthier, or more interesting than her own close friends and family. In this scene, however, she begins to question whether this social acceptance is worth sacrificing her own feelings and her friendship with Julie.

The song "Crash Into Me" becomes an important cinematic element in this scene. When the song plays on the radio, Lady Bird's emotional response changes the direction of the scene. Kyle rejects the song, but Lady Bird openly says that she loves it and wants to go to prom. This moment marks a shift from conformity to self-recognition. She stops pretending to agree with the group and begins to express her own desire honestly. Her decision is not aggressive, but it is firm. She does not force Kyle to go to prom, but she also refuses to remain silent only to maintain her place in the group.

Lady Bird's request to be taken to Julie's house is also significant. Instead of continuing with people who do not understand her feelings, she chooses to return to someone who genuinely matters to her. When Jenna asks, "Who's Julie?" Lady Bird answers, "She's my best friend." This answer shows her awareness of the friendship she has neglected. Earlier in the film, Lady

Bird distances herself from Julie because she wants to be closer to Jenna and to enter a more popular social group. Therefore, her decision in this scene is not only about attending prom. It is also about acknowledging her mistake and choosing to repair a relationship that she has damaged.

From the perspective of moral agency, Lady Bird's action shows emotional maturity. She is able to evaluate her previous behavior and make a more responsible decision. This reflects the liberal feminist idea that women are capable of ethical reflection and responsible action. Lady Bird is not portrayed as a passive young woman who simply follows others. Instead, she becomes someone who can recognize her own desire, reconsider her social choices, and act based on a clearer moral understanding. This supports Agung's (2025) argument that feminist agency may appear through principled decisions and moral consistency, rather than only through direct resistance.

The car setting also strengthens the meaning of this decision. The car becomes a space where Lady Bird moves away from social performance and returns to emotional honesty. At the beginning of the scene, she is physically inside the group, but emotionally disconnected from her own desire. By asking Kyle to take her to Julie's house, she redirects both the car and her own social position. This visual movement suggests that her agency is not only expressed through words, but also through her decision to leave one social space and return to a more sincere relationship.

This scene also shows that autonomy does not always mean choosing against others. In this case, Lady Bird's autonomy leads her back to responsibility. She chooses prom not because it is socially impressive, but because it represents honesty, friendship, and emotional sincerity. Her agency is therefore both personal and relational. She makes a choice for herself, but that choice also involves care for Julie. Through this moment, Lady Bird presents a young woman's freedom as something connected to moral growth, self-awareness, and responsibility toward others.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that *Lady Bird* (2017) represents liberal feminist values as conceptualized by Tong and Botts (2024). Through the character of Christine “Lady Bird” McPherson, the film portrays a young woman’s process of developing self-awareness and independence while negotiating familial authority, social pressure, and economic limitations. The findings indicate that liberal feminist principles, including autonomy and personal choice, economic independence, respect for diverse life choices, and social responsibility and moral agency, are reflected in *Lady Bird*’s actions, dialogues, and personal decisions. The analysis further shows that feminist struggles in the film are not presented through radical resistance, but through everyday conflicts, personal negotiations, and the character’s effort to gain control over her own life. *Lady Bird*’s desire to pursue higher education, her attempt to define her own identity, and her moral development throughout the narrative highlight the liberal feminist emphasis on individual freedom, self-determination, and equal opportunity.

However, this study has several limitations. It focuses only on one film and analyzes selected dialogue excerpts and scenes that are most relevant to the four dimensions of liberal feminism. As a result, the findings do not represent all possible feminist meanings in *Lady Bird*. Future studies may compare *Lady Bird* with other coming-of-age films or apply different feminist perspectives, such as radical feminism, intersectional feminism, or postfeminism. They may also examine audience reception to understand how viewers interpret the film’s representation of female agency. Such studies would provide broader insight into how contemporary cinema represents women’s autonomy and identity.

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