

## Reclaiming Agency: Subverting Patriarchy and Reconfiguring Gender in *Enola Holmes* (2020)

Felicia Celine Saputra<sup>1</sup>, Imanuela Kimberly Rumondor<sup>2</sup>

*English Literary Criticism, Boanerges: Makarios Education Journal*

Email: [felicia.celine.saputra@sekolahmakarios.id](mailto:felicia.celine.saputra@sekolahmakarios.id),

[imanuela.kimberly.rumondor@sekolahmakarios.id](mailto:imanuela.kimberly.rumondor@sekolahmakarios.id)

### ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, feminism continues to grapple with persistent challenges, including gender pay gaps, underrepresentation in leadership roles, and ongoing debates over reproductive rights that echo historical struggles for equality. Drawing connections to feminist protests during the Victorian era. Using a qualitative method, this study employed feminist theory, particularly the works of Judith Butler (1990), Betty Friedan (1963), and Charlotte Brontë (1847) to analyze the 2020 film *Enola Holmes*. The film is examined as a cultural text that subverts patriarchal norms and offers a narrative of female empowerment by: **1)** presenting characters, such as Enola and her mother, Eudoria, who reject conventional feminine behavior in favor of self-defense, independence, and intellectual curiosity; **2)** critiquing institutional constraints through the depiction of rigid gender stereotypes enforced by settings like the finishing school; and **3)** illustrating how Enola's defiance of familial and societal expectations empowers her to reclaim agency and reshape her future. This article contributes to ongoing academic discourse on gender representation in media by demonstrating how modern adaptations of historical settings can illuminate contemporary feminist issues and challenge established societal norms regarding gender equality.

**Keywords:** *Feminism, Gender Roles, Patriarchy, Female Empowerment, Enola Holmes*

### INTRODUCTION

The opposite of a proper lady, while young women of the Victorian era were expected to be groomed for domestic pursuits, Enola's mother rebelled against these social norms by teaching her daughter to be trained in self-reliance, intellectual curiosity, and unconventional skills like martial arts and codebreaking. As Judith Butler argues, "*There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results*" (Butler, 1990, p. 25). This modern retelling of the Sherlock Holmes saga presents a new portrayal on feminism and gender roles. Feminism, in general, is a social movement advocating for the equality of sexes, aiming to challenge and dismantle gender-based inequalities and discrimination. It addresses issues such as pay gaps, reproductive rights, and gender stereotypes, with the goal of creating a more equitable society for all genders. This is particularly significant as, despite the show being fictional, it examines and addresses issues related to the gender inequality, discrimination, and social justice women had to go through within the Victorian Era and even through modern times like now, in which it had been portrayed in the film.

Therefore is the importance of literature as a whole, which serves as an insight into the conditions that exist humans today, as well as challenge existing ideologies. Through narratives and characters, literature is able to discuss specific aspects of life that can make readers think or question their beliefs again.

Released in 2020, *Enola Holmes* is a mystery film based on Nancy Springer's novel series. It stars Millie Bobby Brown as Enola Holmes, the teenage sister of Sherlock Holmes. On her 16th birthday, Enola wakes to find her mother disappeared, leaving only cryptic clues. "*Enola Holmes*" is all about Sherlock's spunky younger sister, who's dead-set on tracking down her missing mom. Along the way, she's got to slip out from under the thumb of her controlling brother, Mycroft. With the sharp detective tricks her mother passed down, Enola dives headfirst into a wild adventure across Victorian London. The movie's packed with big names, Sam Claflin plays the stern Mycroft, Henry Cavill steps in as Sherlock, Helena Bonham Carter shines as Enola's mom, and Louis Partridge rounds it out as Lord Tewkesbury. It hit Netflix like a storm, racking up over 76 million household views in just its first four weeks, proving it was a total win both with critics and fans.

Picture this: in the Victorian era, a time when women's rights were barely a blip on the radar. Into this world steps *Enola Holmes*, a film that does not just nudge patriarchal norms, it gives them a full-on shove. While plenty of scholars have dissected feminist themes in reworked classics, not many have zoomed in on how this movie flips the script on gender roles. Using symbols, sneaky hidden messages, and a standout protagonist to get the job done is remarkable. By looking at it through the lens of feminist theory by Judith Butler, Betty Friedan, and Charlotte Brontë, the issue in the movie can be found; take on how *Enola Holmes* takes on the stuffy rules of Victorian England and redefines what it means to be a woman in that world. Enola is not an average Victorian gal. She is out there disguising herself as a beautician to crack a case or throwing punches at male attackers like it is no big deal. The male dominance in a strong patriarchal society often limits the space of women; the idea that women belong at home, stitching doilies and pouring tea. That vibe ties right into Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, where she dismantles the myth that domestic life is the only path to happiness for women. Enola's all about independence and adventure, and the film paints her as someone who is not afraid to chase what she wants, no apron strings attached. Then there is Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, which brings another layer to Enola's story. Brontë was all about personal freedom and women standing tall on their own terms, and Enola's cut from that same cloth. Whether she is outsmarting the system or asserting her right to exist outside society's boxes, she is channeling that same spirit of autonomy. It is not just defiance, it's about owning her agency in a world that's constantly trying to clip her wings. By weaving in these feminist ideas, Judith Butler's take on gender as something fluid, Friedan's push against domestic traps, and Brontë's call for freedom, the film does not just tell a story. It challenges the whole setup of Victorian patriarchy and traditional femininity. *Enola Holmes* uses its tricks, symbolism, subtle nods, and a bold lead, to show that women can rewrite the rules, even in a time when the deck was stacked against them.

And additionally, Judith Butler's critiques of fixed gender categories and her argument that gender is socially constructed will inform an exploration of how the film constructs and deconstructs gender identities through its characters and narrative.

In the *Enola Holmes* film, the binary opposition is prevalent throughout the narrative: Society (superior) VS Women (inferior). Mycroft and Lady Basilwether fall under the superior group, where both are enforcers of gender roles and patriarchy often seen in Victorian societies. Whereas Enola and Eudoria stand in the inferior, where they try to challenge and fight against gender stereotypes. The role that society forces onto women has been knowingly happening throughout history, as seen in Charlotte Brontë's work in "Jane Eyre" (1847): "*Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer...*" (Brontë, 1847, p. 96). *Enola Holmes* represents this struggle in the film through their characters in this show of binary opposition.

while previous studies, such as Syahriyani and Novikasandra's (2022) analysis, have examined feminist themes in *Enola Holmes* using semiotic and liberal feminist frameworks, they primarily focus on the film's portrayal of gender roles and character independence. A notable research gap exists in exploring how *Enola Holmes* employs poststructuralist feminist theories, particularly Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, to deconstruct traditional gender norms. Investigating this perspective could provide deeper insights into the film's subversion of patriarchal structures and its contribution to contemporary feminist discourse in media.

In contrast, the current study uses a poststructuralist feminist framework (drawing on Butler's 1990 theory of gender performativity and Friedan's 1963 analysis of patriarchal constraints) to explore *Enola Holmes* (2020) as a modern cinematic reinterpretation of the Sherlock Holmes mythos. This movie not only challenges conventional gender roles but also actively subverts patriarchal structures by foregrounding female empowerment through both narrative and visual strategies. Consequently, while Smith (2018) concludes that many adaptations sustain gendered marginalization, this study will develop a new focus on how *Enola Holmes* reconfigures female agency and disrupts institutional norms, thereby filling a gap in the literature on contemporary feminist media analysis.

This study explores how the movie *Enola Holmes* shows women standing up to the tough rules society dumped on them during the Victorian Era. It explores this idea by looking at a bunch of different things in the film, like how the characters grow and change over time, the words they say to each other, the way the scenes are put together, how the camera moves and captures everything, and even the deeper meanings tucked into symbols throughout the story. The whole point of doing this is to add something new to the big conversation about how gender pops up in movies and TV shows all people watch. Not a

lot of people, especially in academic circles, have really sat down to talk about Enola Holmes in this way, so this study wants to step in and fill that space.

By the time readers get through it, the hope is many will see how the movie paints a picture of patriarchy and those strict gender roles, and maybe even turn them on their head. It also zooms in on how Enola, the main character, pushes back against all of that herself. Instead of just accepting that she's supposed to stay home and fit into the "*good little lady*" mold, she figures out who she wants to be and builds her own life outside of those old expectations. This study keeps its focus tight about the Victorian gender roles and patriarchy as they show up in the movie, and it does not only wander off into other time periods, but the issue remains in today's era. Enola Holmes challenges traditional patriarchal structures by subverting conventional gender roles, critiquing institutional pressures that carry out rigid stereotypes, and showcasing a narrative of female empowerment; demonstrating that when women reclaim agency, they can redefine their identities and reshape societal expectations.

## **METHOD**

Having the data collected, the study used a qualitative method to explain and describe the critical issue found in the particular scenes in the movie. The film *Enola Holmes* (2020) was examined through the lens of feminist theory, specific aspects that relate to relevant feminist ideas were the primary focus. Besides, how the movie portrays and challenges traditional gender roles were discussed; specifically, using the feminist theories by Betty Friedan, her critique of "*The Feminine Mystique*" which challenges the patriarchal notion that women should limit themselves to domestic roles; Judith Butler's theory of *gender performativity*, which views gender as a social construct rather than an innate quality; and Charlotte Brontë's "*Jane Eyre*" which emphasizes on freedom that can help with Enola's independence shown in the movie. The analysis zoomed in on film elements that demonstrate Enola's defiance of patriarchal gender expectations. This included studying her actions, dialogue with key characters (*e.g., her brothers, mother*), her clothing, and use of disguises. Particular emphasis was placed on scenes where Enola exhibits traditionally "*masculine*" behavior like self-defense, standing up against Mycroft's expectations, and her relationship with her mother. Moreover, cinematographic choices like shot compositions and lighting will be analyzed to uncover implicit messages about the characters' philosophies. However, this analysis is limited in that by solely focusing on patriarchy, gender roles, and women's empowerment, intersecting identities and other power structures that operate in the film will also be acknowledged.

## **DISCUSSION**

Gender roles and stereotypes have been prominently depicted since the start of "*Enola Holmes*". This can be seen for the first time when Enola says that her mother, Eudoria, is not like any other. Instead



of teaching her elegant manners, hobbies like stitching, and ladylike attitudes, in which it is deemed absolutely necessary for every woman in the Victorian era, she instead teaches her self defense, sports, and telling her to do what she wants and what is comfortable for her. As shown in this scene; captured through a mirror in a medium long shot of a flashback with a younger Enola and Eudoria, along with the gold lighting often representing their happiness. *"Mother said we were free to do anything at Ferndell. And be anyone."*



Further analyzing the implications of this dialogue, it becomes evident that Eudoria challenges the conventional gender roles and patriarchal expectations of Victorian society. Eudoria's refusal to conform to societal expectations of femininity and her encouragement of Enola to pursue her own interests and desires undermines the patriarchal structures of the Victorian era. In this context, Eudoria's unconventional approach to raising Enola disrupts the normative performance of gender roles, in which it highlights the constructed nature of gender identity and challenges the control of patriarchy.

Followed by that, gender roles are further shown as the story progresses. On one particular scene: Through cutscenes of various activities the students go through in the finishing school that Enola is sent to, the headmistress, Miss Harrison, narrates all through it. One of her dialogues include, *"Act, think,*



*be as we tell you; and you'll become acceptable wives and responsible mothers."* As it is known, the stereotypical role of women is to be the gentle-mannered, obedient wife, and mother who barely has any strong opinions nor involves herself in politics. Enola is the opposite of that, as she pays no mind to the possibilities of marriage or motherhood - instead focusing on changing the world for the better through politics, just like how Eudoria is. And so she struggles to blend with the other students in the finishing school, all who are very proper, expected to be one way and in which they apply and conform to. Not only that, it is shown that the girls there are barely allowed to show any emotion nor anything about themselves. In a way, it dehumanizes them and reduces them to mere vessels for societal expectations. Betty Friedan's saying that *"The mystique keeps women in ignorance of their humanity"* (Friedan, 1963, p. 8) rings true in this context, as the girls are taught to suppress their true selves in favor of becoming 'proper' wives and mothers. By stifling their emotions and aspirations, the finishing school effectively erases their autonomy and perpetuates the patriarchal structure that dictates women's roles in society.

In this scene depicted through a medium close-up shot, Enola and Miss Harrison engage in interaction following Mycroft's invitation for Enola to their home for etiquette lessons and enrollment in

the finishing school. Here, the servants are seen measuring her body dimensions - waist, hips, chest - while Miss Harrison continuously criticizes her appearance. But all through it, Enola says that her appearance is just fine. Aside from the clear gender stereotypes applied here, Judith Butler's theory can be applied here, *"Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory sesame that congeal overtime to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being"* (Butler, 1993, p. 65). Enola's embodiment of Butler's concept of "repeated acts" suggests that gender



is performative, subject to individual interpretation and resistance. Enola, as someone who is raised by an unconventional mother, one who does not conform to society's gender structures, barely focuses on her propriety nor appearance, only doing what is most comfortable to her. Conversely, characters like Miss Harris conform rigorously to these stereotypes, having been socialized by their upbringing and environment to do so. The scene serves as a microcosm of societal dynamics, wherein women are constantly scrutinized and policed based on their adherence to traditional feminine ideals. Enola's refusal to conform to these standards not only challenges Miss Harrison's authority but also disrupts the patriarchal power structures that seek to control and refine women within restrictive roles.

Here, Enola has not seen her brothers, Mycroft and Sherlock Holmes, for a long time. Sherlock is a famous detective, scholar, alchemist, great violinist, sharpshooter, expert swordsman & club fighter, and a genius. Mycroft said to Enola, *"Ew, Look at yourself, what a mess you are."* *"Where is your hat and gloves?"* *"We didn't ask you to come, we asked for a horse-drawn carriage."*



This scene is also supported by quotes from Betty Friedan, *"The problem with women's liberation is that they want to liberate women from things like vacuuming. But if everything is equal outside, should we not also have equal opportunities to vacuum?"* (Friedan, 1976, p. 45). From Betty Friedan, Mycroft's disapproval of Enola attire at the train station reflects his adherence to traditional gender norms, believing that women should dress elegantly with hats and gloves. Mycroft's comments about the hats and gloves being associated with ladies of the time underscored his discomfort with Enola's unconventional presentation.

When Sherlock and Mycroft arrive home, they check Enola's nanny's private room. Mycroft finds a book called *"feminism."* Then Mycroft thinks that Enola's nanny might be crazy or forget to remember.

Sherlock asks Enola, "Enola you have a nanny don't you?" "Tell us whether she taught you properly and well," "And is she educated?" Then Enola answered, "She taught me." "She taught me to read all the books in the library." "Enola learned it all on my own accord, to learn,". Mycroft and Sherlock Holmes, who think that women should be educated and learn manners in order to grow up to be educated and elegant women. Sherlock Holmes asks Enola about the education she has learned and got from her mother before. A critique that supports this scene is "The most disliked women in America are those who are most independent, who are most themselves, who are most successful in their own terms. .... by being denied the very sense of belonging and acceptance they sought when they gave up the old feminine role." (Friedan, 1976, p. 68). Betty Friedan highlights the societal challenge faced by women who strive for independence and self fulfillment.



In this scene is Gender Roles, because Enola has started her mission to meet her mother, but she is confused about where to start her mission to earn a living from her mother who left her. Then Enola has the idea to take the train which is only for men, because his two older brothers go to take the



train, because she has no other way, he refuses to use the local train, so Enola has a different route. Here she dresses like a man, so she can ride the train. Then finally Enola is able to enter the train. Enola has to pretend to be a man so that she can ride this train. She is free to wear the clothes regardless of gender, while women generally have to wear elegant and beautiful dresses. It expresses her character of masculinity. "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will" (Brontë, 1847, p. 96). This assertion of her autonomy marks Enola's refusal to be constrained by gender roles affirming her identity as a fearless and self-reliant individual on a quest for personal agency and freedom.

Enola enters a clothing store to change her clothes, which is usually menswear, into a beautiful dress. But when Enola is choosing what dress to wear, the clerk from the shop comes to Enola and says to Enola, "What are little boys doing in this shop, and why would a little boy like you want that?" but Enola ignores the woman, and instead says that she needs a whalebone corset. the woman replies again, "You don't need that, this is a respectable shop." The woman looks down on Enola at the time, because of

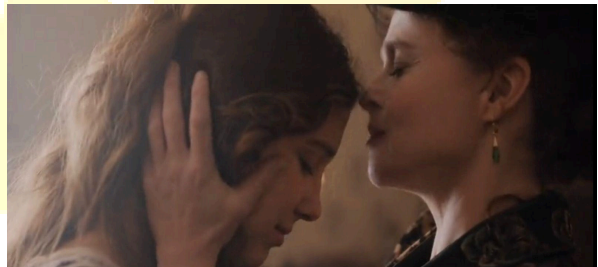


Enola's unconvincing appearance, but after Enola spends some of her money, the woman finally gives Enola what she wants. Enola explains here that corsets are a sign of oppression for those who are forced to wear them, but for Enola wearing a corset is not something she is forced to do. Enola deliberately wears the corset so that Enola is not easily recognized and can save money from her mother before her mother leaves her. In this scene, while Enola is in the changing room, she looks like her older brother, Mycroft, who keeps



telling Enola to study and go to school because Enola is a girl. After she leaves the shop, he asks the woman who has underestimated her to take Enola to the best inn at that time. The woman finally took Enola. On the street, Enola became the center of people's attention because the dress she is wearing looks extraordinary and makes Enola look very elegant. When they arrive at the hotel, they are surprised to find that the room is dirty and dusty, with a very small mattress, unlike the accommodation their older brother is staying at. It can be concluded that women are not highly regarded. "*The only way for a woman, as for a man, to find herself, to know herself as a person, is by creative work of her own*" (Friedan, 1976, p. 90). Friedan's words cut to the heart of the feminist argument for women's self-actualization through meaningful work and personal achievement. This quote suggests that true self-discovery and identity formation occur not through adherence to prescribed societal roles, but through individual creative expression and accomplishment. In the context of "Enola Holmes," this idea manifests in the protagonist's rejection of traditional finishing school education in favor of detective work and adventure. Friedan's perspective points out the movie's underlying message that women's fulfillment and self-knowledge come not from fitting into predestined fate, but from pursuing their own passions and talents. This quote contextualizes Enola's choices within broader feminist thought, connecting her fictional journey to real-world struggles for women's autonomy and self-determination.

Enola finally meets her mother in Enola's private room. Enola is shocked when she enters the room and sees her mother's figure in her room, she cries and approaches her mother. Her mother apologizes to her for leaving Enola just like that. Her mother explains that she left not because she does not love Enola, but instead it is for Enola's good that she



will be safe. The mother continued, saying, "*We have to fight them and we also have the right to speak out, so that we can be heard.*" The mother has heard the news about Enola changing the reform law, the



mother is proud of Enola who has grown into a brave and great girl. They have to separate again temporarily due to circumstances.

In the end Enola says, *“To become Holmes, you have to find your own way, like my brothers, my mother, and me. But now I understand that being alone doesn't mean being lonely. My mother doesn't want that either, she wants me to find my freedom, my future, my purpose. My future is in my hands and not in other people's hands and the future is also in our hands.”* It means that women also have the right and freedom to determine their own future just like men.

## CONCLUSION

The film “Enola Holmes” presents a fascinating narrative where the character of Enola challenges societal norms regarding, emphasizing themes of empowerment, autonomy, and resistance to patriarchy in the Victorian Era. Enola is portrayed as a young woman boldly defies the pressures of her time by rejecting the conventional femininity in a self-assured and independent manner. Raised with unconventional teachings by her mother, Eudoria, Enola is equipped with skills typically associated with men. Enola’s education not only sets her apart from societal norms but positions her as a symbol of feminist resistance against oppressive gender structures prevalent in Victorian society. As studied through the feminist theories by Judith Butler, Betty Friedan, and Charlotte Brontë, the narrative of this film explores the performative nature of gender and how individuals can challenge and redefine gender identities. Enola’s insistence of defining herself on her own terms, despite societal expectations, in line with Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity and reflects Betty Friedan’s critique of the *“feminine mystique.”*

Apart from that, the film “Enola Holmes” critiques patriarchal values through Enola's interactions with her brother, Mycroft Holmes. His attempts to control and confine Enola within traditional gender roles are met with her steadfast defiance, highlighting the tension between societal expectations and individual agency. The film's potential for intersectional analysis is significant, as it touches on broader issues of race, class, and privilege intersecting with gender dynamics, though these aspects could be further developed. Overall, *“Enola Holmes”* emerges not only as a captivating adventure but also as a significant cultural artifact contributing to discussions on gender representation and feminist resistance in the media. By challenging stereotypes and advocating for female empowerment, the film prompts audiences to reconsider and oppose prevailing norms regarding gender roles, paving the way for more inclusive and equitable representations in society.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brontë, C. (1847). *Jane Eyre*. Smith, Elder & Co.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex"*. Routledge.
- Friedan, B. (1963). *The feminine mystique*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Friedan, B. (1976). *It changed my life: Writings on the women's movement*. Random House.
- Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S. (1979). *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press.
- Gissing, G. (1893). *The odd women*. London: Lawrence & Bullen, 16 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden, W.C.
- Heilmann, A., & Llewellyn, M. (2004). *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hooks, b. (2000). *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Pluto Press.
- Landrine, H., Russo, N. F. (2009) *Handbook of Diversity in Feminist Psychology*. New York, Springer Publishing Company.
- Lauzen, M. M. (2021). *It's a Man's (Celluloid) World: Portrayals of Female Characters in the Top Grossing Films of 2020*. Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film.
- Showalter, E. (1977). *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton University Press.
- Showalter, E. (1991). *Feminist criticism in the wilderness*. Routledge.
- Solnit, Rebecca. *Men Explain Things to Me*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014. Print.
- Syahriyani, A., & Novikasandra, M. K. (2022). Feminism in Enola Holmes film: A semiotic lens. *Elite Journal*, 9(2), 217–226.
- Tong, R. (2009). *Feminist thought: A more comprehensive introduction (2nd ed.)*. Westview Press.