

Novel-to-Film Screenplay Adaptation of Women Talking from A Radical Libertarian Feminism Perspective

Azizah Syadid¹, Winda Setia Sari²

Sastra Inggris, Bahasa dan Seni, Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia

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Corresponding Author

E-mail: azizah130903@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This research analyzes Miriam Toews' *Women Talking* (2018) and Sarah Polley's film adaptation (2022) through the lens of radical libertarian feminism. Using qualitative textual analysis, it explores feminist representations within narration, dialogue, and monologue. Guided by Rosemary Tong's (2009) framework covering androgyny, sex/gender system, sexuality, pornography, lesbianism, and reproduction. The findings from 110 data points reveal that androgyny (41.8%), sex/gender system (34.5%), and reproduction (23.6%) are the most dominant themes. These elements highlight women's resistance to patriarchy, redefinition of gender identity, and questioning of reproductive roles. The study also applies Geoffrey Wagner's (1975) adaptation theory, identifying transposition (74.5%) and commentary (25.5%) as the main approaches used, with no analogy detected. Polley's adaptation maintains the novel's core feminist message while offering interpretive depth, especially in expressing androgyny and gender resistance. Overall, the research contributes to feminist literary and adaptation studies by showing how radical libertarian feminism is sustained and amplified through cinematic transformation.

INTRODUCTION

Adaptation originates from the practice of interpreting and transforming literary works into other creative forms. Approximately 90% of films and television productions are inspired by literature, demonstrating how deeply storytelling in global cinema, particularly in Hollywood, has been shaped by written narratives (Suseno, 2012). Among the most notable forms of adaptation is the transformation of novels into films, where written words are reimagined through visual storytelling. Numerous literary works have been successfully adapted for the screen, such as *Little Women* (Louisa May Alcott, 1868; films: 1933, 1949, 1994, 2019), *Pride and Prejudice* (Jane Austen, 1813; films: 1940, 1995, 2005), *Room* (Emma Donoghue, 2010; film: 2015), *Mafia Queens of Mumbai* (Hussain Zaidi, 2011; film Gangubai Kathiawadi, 2022), and *Women Talking* (Miriam Toews, 2018; film: 2022).

The phenomenon of literary adaptations continues to captivate both filmmakers and audiences. Around 30% of contemporary films are derived from novels, and nearly 80% of best-selling books have been adapted for cinematic production (Corrigan, 1999). These figures indicate a strong correlation between literature and film, suggesting that adaptation studies serve as a vital bridge in understanding how narratives evolve across mediums. Adaptation, however, should not be perceived merely as a process of simplification or reduction. Instead, it is a creative act that reinterprets and enriches the meaning, aesthetic, and cultural value of the original work (Keji et al., 2022).

According to Geoffrey Wagner (1975), adaptation operates through three principal modes: transposition, which maintains close fidelity to the original text; commentary, which offers interpretative expansion or critique; and analogy, which freely transforms the source material. These modes demonstrate that adaptation involves both preservation and transformation, allowing stories to transcend their initial literary boundaries. As a narrative practice, adaptation enables cultural ideas and social discourses to be retold and reimagined across different media

(Keji et al., 2022). In essence, it represents a dialogue between literature and film between the verbal and the visual, where meaning is not merely transferred but recreated.

Miriam Toews' *Women Talking* (2018) exemplifies a novel that lends itself to such transformation. Categorized as historical and feminist fiction, it narrates the story of several generations of Mennonite women particularly those of the Loewen and Friesen families who gather in a secluded colony to discuss their trauma and decide whether to flee or resist after suffering systemic abuse. The novel explores themes of violence, faith, gender, and moral choice, offering a deeply feminist critique of patriarchal power structures. Its critical success led to the 2022 film adaptation directed by Sarah Polley, which won the Academy Award, Critics' Choice Award, and Writers Guild of America Award for Best Adapted Screenplay (Bates, 2023). Like the novel, the film portrays women's struggle for freedom and moral agency within a patriarchal society, linking it strongly to feminist discourse.

Feminism, as defined by Ferree (2006), is an "action-oriented movement aimed at challenging and changing women's subordination to men." It not only addresses social and political inequalities but also interprets the personal and collective experiences of women across diverse contexts (Anderson, 2016). Historically, feminist movements have evolved through several waves. The first wave, associated with liberal feminism, emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, advocating for women's legal and civil rights, particularly the right to vote. The second wave, or women's liberation movement, expanded feminist thought into cultural and ideological domains, questioning gender norms and highlighting systemic inequalities that sustain male dominance. From this movement emerged radical feminism, which exposed the pervasive violence, coercion, and exploitation of women under patriarchal systems.

Radical feminism views patriarchy as the root of women's oppression, encompassing issues such as rape, domestic abuse, sexual harassment, and control over women's reproductive rights (Tong, 2009). Within this framework, two main branches are recognized: radical cultural feminism and radical libertarian feminism. The latter emphasizes women's empowerment through equality, autonomy, and the integration of both masculine and feminine traits from the concept Tong (2009) associates with androgyny, sex/gender system, sexuality, pornography, lesbianism, and reproduction. Radical libertarian feminism, therefore, challenges traditional gender binaries and promotes liberation from restrictive social constructions of womanhood.

Previous studies have explored literary adaptations through various feminist frameworks. For instance, Deng (2023) analyzed *The Joy Luck Club* through postcolonial feminism, while Hassan (2024) examined *The Handmaid's Tale* in its ballet adaptation from a feminist dystopian lens, and Kaushik and Pathak (2021) conducted a critical review of *And Then There Were None* and its film version *Gumnaam*. These studies reveal the growing scholarly interest in how gendered narratives evolve across media. However, few have combined Wagner's (1975) adaptation theory with Tong's (2009) radical libertarian feminist perspective, leaving a gap in understanding how feminist ideologies are maintained or reinterpreted during adaptation.

This study aims to address that gap by analyzing the adaptation of *Women Talking* from novel to screenplay through the integration of Wagner's (1975) adaptation framework and Tong's (2009) radical libertarian feminist theory. It investigates how feminist ideas particularly those concerning androgyny, sex/gender systems, sexuality, pornography, lesbianism, and reproduction are preserved, altered, or reconstructed in the film. For example, both in the novel and the screenplay, Greta's response to Neitje's question about leaving loved ones embodies Tong's (2009) concept of androgyny, as it portrays women's agency in redefining familial and emotional ties beyond patriarchal norms. This moment, adapted through Wagner's transposition mode, demonstrates how the film retains the feminist essence of the novel while rearticulating it through cinematic language.

By analyzing these transformations, the study seeks to reveal how *Women Talking* embodies radical libertarian feminism in its shift from text to screen. It explores whether adaptation serves merely as a translation of feminist discourse or as a creative reimagining that strengthens women's voices. Ultimately, this research contributes to both feminist literary

criticism and adaptation studies by showing how filmic reinterpretation can preserve, challenge, and even amplify the feminist spirit of its literary source.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis method to examine how feminist ideas are represented and transformed in the adaptation of *Women Talking* from novel to film screenplay. Textual analysis is used to interpret the meanings, language, and narrative structures that reveal ideological and feminist dimensions within both texts. By using Rosemarie Tong's (2009) radical libertarian feminism theory, the research identifies six major concepts androgyny, sex/gender system, sexuality, pornography, lesbianism, and reproduction to analyze how women's voices, struggles, and identities are portrayed. This framework helps uncover how the adaptation reflects women's resistance to patriarchy and their pursuit of autonomy and equality.

In addition, Geoffrey Wagner's (1975) adaptation theory transposition, commentary, and analogy is applied to evaluate the process of transformation from text to screen. The data, drawn from the novel and screenplay versions of *Women Talking*, include linguistic features which is narration, dialogue, monologue, and sentence structure. Through this combination of feminist and adaptation theories, the study aims to reveal how radical libertarian feminist perspectives are maintained, modified, or amplified in the film adaptation. This integrated approach highlights how both the novel *Women talking* by Miriam Towe and its film screenplay *Women Talking* by Sarah Polley version sustain feminist discourse and contribute to broader discussions on gender, power, and representation.

FINDINGS

1) The representation Radical Libertarian Feminism in the novel *Women Talking* with 110 data that been found from the novel *Women Talking*

Table 1: The Percentage Represented Radical Libertarian Feminism that Found in Novel *Women Talking*

No	Types of Radical Libertarian Feminism	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Androgyny	46	41.8%
2.	Sex/Gender System	38	34.5%
3.	Sexuality	0	0%
4.	Pornography	0	0%
5.	Lesbianism	0	0%
6.	Reproduction	26	23.6%
Total		110	100%

A. Androgyny (46 Data)

1. Novel *Women Talking* – pages 29

Salome Friesen: *"I'd rather shoot each man in the heart and bury them in a pit than flee, and I'll deal with God's wrath if I have to!"*

In the novel *Women Talking*, the radical libertarian feminism idea of androgyny emerges in the sentence *"I'd rather shoot each man in the heart and bury them in a pit*

than flee, and I'll deal with God's wrath if I have to!". The line shows Salome claiming violent, decisive agency traits traditionally coded as masculine (strength, aggression, direct action).

At the same time, her invocation of God's wrath and willingness evokes feminine values of care and responsibility. This integration reflects in Betty Friedan - The Second Stage that women should balance both masculine and feminine roles (Betty Friedan, 1981). It also explains androgyny, such a fusion allows women to develop fully as human beings, combining diverse traits according to their needs (Tong, 2009).

B. Sex/Gender System (38 Data)

1. Novel Women Talking - pages 40

(Ona) tosses off a few ideas: Women will be allowed to think. Girls will be taught to read and write. The schoolhouse must display a map of the world so that we can begin to understand our place in it.

The sex/gender system in radical libertarian feminism, highlights how cultural structures restrict women's intellectual and social growth (Tong, 2009). Ona's dialogue *"Women will be allowed to think. Girls will be taught to read and write. The schoolhouse must display a map of the world so that we can begin to understand our place in it"*.

Kate Millett - *Sexual Politics* to argue that gender roles are actually imposed through institutions; one of them is education (Millett, 1970). Similarly, in Gayle Rubin - *The Traffic in Women* explains that society converts biological sex into social rules and expectations (Rubin, 1975). Her dialogue embodies the radical libertarian feminism demand to dismantle the sex/gender system.

C. Reproduction (26 Data)

1. Novel Women Talking - Pages 20

Ona said – *"we women are asking ourselves what our priority is, and what is right to protect our children or to enter the kingdom of heaven?"*

The type of reproduction in radical libertarian feminism emphasizes women's right to control their own reproductive choices rather than being confined by patriarchal expectations (Tong, 2009). This was reflected when Ona said in her dialogue, *"what our priority is, and what is right to protect our children or to enter the kingdom of heaven?"* showing the dilemma between motherhood and religious obligation.

Within this context, Ann Oakley in *Motherhood* argues that the role of a mother is not an "innate instinct" but a social and cultural construction shaped by patriarchy (Oakley, 1974). This highlights how reproduction must be redefined beyond patriarchal norms, granting women autonomy in choosing their own paths.

2) The Adaptation of Film's Screenplay was Analyzed With 110 Data, Representing the Radical Libertarian Feminism Ideas Found in the Novel Women Talking

Table 2: The Percentage of Adaptation from Novel to Film Screenplay Women Talking

Radical Libertarian Feminism Rosemarie Tong (2009)		Geoffrey Wagner's (1975) Adaptation Theory					
Feminist Representat ion	Total Data	Transpositio n	(%)	Commentar y	(%)	Analog y	%

Androgyny	46 (41.8%)	32	29.1%	14	12.7 %	0	0%
Sex/Gender System	38 (34.5%)	29	26.4%	9	8.2%	0	0%
Reproduction	26 (23.6%)	21	19.1%	5	4.5%	0	0%
Total	110 (100%)	82	74.5%	28	25.5 %	0	0%

A. Androgyny – Commentary (14 Data)

1. Novel Women Talking - pages 29

Salome Friesen acts as though she hasn't heard Mejal: *"Fleeing! I'd rather stand my ground and shoot each man in the heart and bury them in a pit than flee, and I'll deal with God's wrath if I have to!"*

2. Film Screenplay Women Talking - Pages 16

Salome: *"I'd rather stand my ground and shoot each man in the heart and bury them in a pit than flee. And I'll deal with God's wrath if I have to!"*

The novel (p.29) and screenplay (p.16) crystallize Salome's resolve in the line *"shoot each man in the heart and bury them in a pit than flee, and I'll deal with God's wrath if I have to!"*, a phrase rendered almost verbatim on screen. This close but tightened rendering exemplifies critical adaptation (Klein & Parker, 1981): the adaptor preserves the source's meaning while streamlining delivery for dramatic effect. Aligned with Wagner's (1975) commentary mode, the screenplay does more than transpose; it interprets and amplifies Salome's agency and moral extremity. Thus, the film functions as a critical reading of the novel, heightening urgency and foregrounding radical resistance.

B. Sex/Gender System – Transposition (29 Data)

1. Novel Women Talking - pages 40

She (Ona) tosses off a few ideas: Men and women will make all decisions for the colony collectively. Women will be allowed to think. Girls will be taught to read and write. The schoolhouse must display a map of the world so that we can begin to understand our place in it.

2. Film Screenplay Women Talking – pages 23

Ona: Men and women will make all decisions for the colony collectively. Women will be allowed to think. Girls will be taught to read and write. The schoolhouse must display a map of the world so that we can begin to understand our place in it.

In adaptation theory, Michael Klein & Gillian Parker (1981) describe *literal adaptation* as a form in which the source text is transferred into film with close fidelity. This is evident in *Women Talking*, where Ona's vision for collective decision-making and education in the novel (p. 40) is reproduced almost verbatim in the film screenplay (p. 23). Such direct transfer reflects Geoffrey Wagner's (1975) mode of transposition, in which the novel's content is carried over with minimal alteration. By maintaining the integrity of Ona's words, the adaptation preserves the radical feminist demand for equality and education. This moment demonstrates how *literal adaptation* and *transposition* overlap to sustain the novel's ideological force on screen.

C. Reproduction – Transposition (21 Data)

1. Novel Women Talking - Pages 20

Ona said – “*Is it accurate to say that at this moment we women are asking ourselves what our priority is, and what is right to protect our children or to enter the kingdom of heaven?*”

2. Film Screenplay Women Talking - Pages 13

Ona: “*Are we asking ourselves what our priority is? To protect our children or to enter the kingdom of heaven?*”

In adaptation studies, Michael Klein & Gillian Parker (1981) explain that *literal adaptation* occurs when the film remains very close to the original text. This can be seen in *Women Talking*, where Ona’s question in the novel (p. 20) about whether their priority is protecting children or entering the kingdom of heaven is reproduced with only slight condensation in the film screenplay (p. 13). Such minimal changes align with Geoffrey Wagner’s (1975) transposition mode, which directly transfers the source material into film with high fidelity. The preservation of Ona’s words emphasizes the central moral dilemma, showing how both theories highlight faithful adaptation that retains the novel’s thematic essence.

The analysis of *Women Talking* using Tong’s (2009) radical libertarian feminism and Wagner’s (1975) adaptation theory reveals two main focuses: feminist representation and adaptation process. The feminist representation shows three dominant themes androgyny, sex/gender system, and reproduction identified from 110 data findings. Androgyny appears most frequently (41.8%), followed by sex/gender system (34.5%) and reproduction (23.6%). The dominance of androgyny reflects how characters like Ona and Salome challenge patriarchal expectations and asserted women’s equality, aligning with Friedan’s (1981) view that women must balance both masculine and feminine traits to achieve liberation.

The theme of the sex/gender system emphasizes women’s struggle against structural oppression rooted in patriarchal control. With 38 data (34.5%), women in Molotschna confront social and religious norms that silence their voices and legitimize male dominance. This aligns with Millett’s (1970) and Rubin’s (1975) arguments that gender roles are socially constructed rather than natural. Meanwhile, reproduction with 26 data (23.6%) represents motherhood as a burden imposed by male authority. This finding supports Oakley’s (1974) claim that reproduction is controlled by patriarchal institutions, and Tong’s (2009) idea that women must have freedom over reproductive decisions and bodily autonomy.

The adaptation analysis shows that the film version of *Women Talking* relies heavily on Wagner’s (1975) transposition (74.5%) compared to commentary (25.4%) and no analogy. This indicates that the film remains faithful to the novel while adding limited reinterpretations to strengthen feminist messages. Using Klein and Parker’s (1981) concept of critical adaptation, the screenplay combines literal and critical adaptation maintaining the story’s essence while enhancing its visual and emotional impact. Overall, the adaptation succeeds in translating Toews’s radical feminist ideas into a powerful cinematic expression that preserves both ideological depth and artistic integrity.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study concludes that Miriam Toews’s *Women Talking* strongly reflects the principles of radical libertarian feminism as proposed by Tong (2009). From 110 analyzed data, three dominant aspects were identified: androgyny (41.8%), sex/gender system (34.5%), and reproduction (23.6%). The characters Ona and Salome represent androgyny through their defiance of patriarchal norms and advocacy for women’s equality. The sex/gender system reveals how women are silenced within male-dominated structures, while reproduction highlights the struggles of forced motherhood caused by abuse. These findings position *Women Talking* as a radical feminist narrative that challenges patriarchal control and emphasizes women’s collective empowerment. In its adaptation, Sarah Polley’s screenplay maintained the novel’s feminist core

through a dominant use of transposition (74.5%) and selective commentary (25.5%), proving that the film effectively preserves and enhances Toews's critique of patriarchy.

Based on these results, future researchers are encouraged to explore other feminist literary and film adaptations using similar theoretical frameworks. For literature and film students, this study offers an example of how Tong's (2009) and Wagner's (1975) theories can be applied to analyze gender representation and adaptation processes. Additionally, for the English Department, these findings may serve as valuable material for courses in feminist criticism, adaptation studies, and film analysis, promoting a deeper understanding of feminist perspectives in both literary and cinematic works.

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