

Research Article

The Representation of Women's Emancipation in Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians* : A Liberal Feminist Perspective

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Abstract: This study explored the portrayal of women's emancipation through the character of Goh Peik Lin in Kevin Kwan's novel *Crazy Rich Asians*. The research addressed the issue of limited representation of empowered female characters in contemporary literature and aimed to analyze how Peik Lin embodied women's empowerment within a modern patriarchal context. Using a qualitative descriptive method and liberal feminist theory as the framework, the study examined Peik Lin's independence, confidence, and equality with men, particularly through her education, career, and lifestyle choices. The analysis also highlighted her solidarity with other women, especially her friendship with the protagonist, Rachel Chu. The findings suggested that Peik Lin represented liberal feminist ideals and challenged traditional gender roles in modern fiction. The study concluded that diverse female perspectives in literature were essential for understanding gender dynamics and encouraged further research on women's representation across different cultures and genres.

Keywords: Character Analysis; Crazy Rich Asians; Gender Roles; Liberal Feminism; Women's Emancipation.

1. Introduction

In recent times, women's emancipation remained an important topic that continued to spark discussions, especially regarding the efforts to break gender stereotypes and give women the space to determine their own paths in life. Although significant progress had been made, the reality showed that women in many countries still faced serious challenges—from discrimination in the workplace and unequal access to education to societal pressure to conform to traditional roles and limited rights in decision-making, both at home and in public spaces.

In situations like these, literary works played a crucial role as a platform to voice women's issues and challenge patriarchal norms that had long restricted their freedom (Dadawala, 2018; Sharma, 2023). In modern literature, the theme of women's emancipation had become a major focus, and *Crazy Rich Asians* by Kevin Kwan was no exception. One character who stood out in this regard was Peik Lin, who reflected many key aspects of liberal feminist thought, especially the ideas introduced by John Stuart Mill. His theory emphasized equal rights, personal freedom, and the importance of challenging conventional gender roles that limited women's place in society. This article aimed to explore how the character of Peik Lin embodied the principles of liberal feminism, particularly through her pursuit of independence within the exclusive and often conservative social world she inhabited.

Peik Lin, as one of the key characters, displayed the courage of a woman who was unafraid to challenge gender norms and social expectations. Her attitude aligned with Mill's belief in the importance of women being free to shape their own futures rather than being confined to traditional roles (A. N. Diana & Fidiyanti, 2023). Through the lens of liberal feminism, Peik Lin's character challenged existing norms and showed that emancipation was not limited to political rights, but also included the freedom to pursue personal and professional goals in a society full of barriers (Bailey, 2016).

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Her friendship with Rachel Chu further reflected the spirit of solidarity that was central to liberal feminism. Rachel, who was navigating life in a world filled with class-based expectations, often found support and encouragement from Peik Lin. This relationship illustrated how women's mutual support could contribute to the broader struggle for emancipation, helping them move toward greater freedom and equality (L. Diana, 2022; Priyadharshini et al., 2021).

When viewed from the perspective of women's emancipation, there had been relatively few studies that specifically analyzed this theme in *Crazy Rich Asians*. Most discussions had focused on cultural identity, social class, or the glamorous lifestyle portrayed in the novel. Prior research, such as by Daulay (2021), Panggabean et al. (2021), Dewi & Suryaman (2020), and Rohmawati (2018), tended to center on family conflicts or Asian stereotypes, but rarely addressed how the female characters demonstrated independence, decision-making power, and resistance to patriarchal norms—especially in the context of modern feminism.

This was the main reason why the researcher chose to examine the novel from this angle. *Crazy Rich Asians* offered a clear portrayal of female characters who showed strength and independence in the face of cultural and social pressures. The narrative highlighted their struggles to obtain equal rights and freedoms and emphasized the importance of women supporting one another in pushing for social change. This study, therefore, aimed to contribute a new perspective by analyzing how Peik Lin's role influenced Rachel Chu's development and how it reflected the values of liberal feminism in today's world.

In conclusion, through the character of Peik Lin, *Crazy Rich Asians* by Kevin Kwan not only told a story about wealth and status but also delivered a meaningful message about the strength and resilience of women. By examining her character through the lens of liberal feminism, it became clear that the novel reflected a struggle for emancipation that remained highly relevant—both in literature and in the broader socio-cultural reality of modern society (Foley, 2007; Sangeetha et al., 2022).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Liberal Feminism

Achieving equal rights and opportunities for men and women in the fields of politics, law, education, and social life is the main goal of liberal feminism. It had liberal roots and placed a strong emphasis on rational thought, equality before the law, and individual freedom. Tong (2009) stated that liberal feminism emphasized women's liberty and equal involvement in public life with the goal of removing discrimination that impeded women's complete development. One fundamental idea was that women ought to be able to choose their own paths in life without facing prejudice based on their gender.

A key figure in liberal feminism, John Stuart Mill was known for his work *The Subjection of Women* (1869). He maintained that because it deprived women of their fundamental rights, treating them unfairly was analogous to slavery. Mill rejected cultural explanations for inequality and advocated for "perfect equality" between men and women. In his opinion, women ought to have had equal rights in politics, the workplace, education, and property. Additionally, Mill argued that giving women complete autonomy promoted the moral and intellectual advancement of society in addition to benefiting them personally.

2.2. Women Emancipation

For women to have the same rights, freedoms and opportunities as men in areas such as politics, law, employment, social life and education, they must be freed from oppression, discrimination and restrictions. The goal of this process is to give women the freedom to determine their own path in life, develop their full potential, and participate fully in society without facing gender-based barriers. In essence, this process seeks to realize freedom, justice and equality for women in all aspects of life.

According to John Stuart Mill, the emancipation of women is essential not only for the progress of society as a whole, but also for the happiness and personal development of women themselves. He argued that social progress would be hindered if women were constantly excluded from public life and limited in their opportunities. Mill believed that everyone, regardless of gender, should have equal freedom and opportunity to develop their interests and talents (Mill, 1869). In addition, emancipation also meant abolishing all social and legal restrictions that made women dependent on men.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

This study used a qualitative approach to analyze women's emancipation in the novel *Crazy Rich Asians* through the character of Peik Lin. Qualitative research was a method used to understand the meaning, experience, or views of people towards an event or problem (Cresswell, 2017). The qualitative approach was chosen because it provided depth in understanding women's complex values and experiences, as well as the social contexts that influenced them. This approach also allowed researchers to understand more deeply the storyline and how the characters were portrayed, especially since Peik Lin played an important role in demonstrating the principles of liberal feminism explained by John Stuart Mill (Vijay, 2019).

3.2. Data Collection

The data collection method in this study was carried out through two main steps: reading and identifying the novel *Crazy Rich Asians* by Kevin Kwan. In the first step, reading, the researcher conducted an in-depth analysis of the text to capture the main nuances and themes related to women's emancipation and its impact as reflected through the character of Peik Lin and her social relationships within the story. This process helped the researcher gain a deeper understanding of how cultural and social contexts shaped the portrayal of characters and the theme of liberal feminism in the novel.

Following the reading stage, the next step was identification, where the researcher pinpointed important and relevant elements in the novel that illustrated the principles of liberal feminism and how Peik Lin's character interacted with others, especially Rachel Chu. This involved selecting quotes, dialogues, and events that highlighted support among women, which is a key aspect of liberal feminist perspectives. The focus was on analyzing character development and social interactions that contributed to the narrative of emancipation within a complex social environment. Through this method, the study aimed to explore how Peik Lin not only represented individual emancipation but also acted as a catalyst for change in wider social relationships, thereby enriching the understanding of gender dynamics in contemporary society.

3.3. Data Analysis

In this study, the data analysis was carried out through several organized steps. First, the researcher gathered and grouped important quotes and scenes from the novel *Crazy Rich Asians* that related to the theme of women's emancipation. This helped to create a clear framework for the analysis. Next, the researcher carefully reread the novel, paying special attention to moments that highlighted the characters' interactions and the social challenges women faced.

Afterward, the researcher coded the data by identifying key themes such as equality, freedom of choice, and the challenge against social stereotypes. This made it easier to spot patterns and understand the relationships between the characters and the overall message of the story. In the final step, the researcher interpreted these findings to show how Peik Lin's character represented not only individual freedom but also inspired others to stand up for themselves. By connecting these insights with feminist theory, the study demonstrated how the novel reflected the real struggles and aspirations of women in today's society.

4. Results and Discussion

Women often lived in injustice because, from birth, they were not given equal opportunities to grow and make their own life choices. Mill (1869) argued that women should have been free to choose their own paths instead of being forced into traditional roles like just being a wife or housewife. He believed that if women were granted equal rights in education, work, and law, they could contribute much more to society. Mill also pointed out that gender inequality didn't only harm women but held back society as a whole, since half of human potential was left unused. He saw freedom, equality, and equal opportunities as essential for both men and women to live fairer and happier lives. In short, women's emancipation was a call for equal treatment, freedom of choice, and breaking free from limiting social stereotypes (Mill, 1869). In this study, the researcher aimed to explore these three aspects through the character of Peik Lin in the novel.

4.1. Peik Lin has Equality

In the novel *Crazy Rich Asians*, Peik Lin was described as Rachel Chu's roommate when they were both studying for their undergraduate degrees at Stanford University in the United States. This was explained in detail when Rachel visited Peik Lin's house and was warmly welcomed by her family in Part 1, Chapter 16.

“Rachel Chu, long time no see! We are so very grateful for all the help you gave Peik Lin back in her uni days. Without you, she would have been gone case at Stanford,” (Kwan, 2013, p. 137)

The fact that Peik Lin attended Stanford showed that she had access to equal higher education, which was an important aspect of women's emancipation according to liberal feminism. Stanford was a prestigious university, and by studying there, Peik Lin had the chance to fully develop her intellectual and social potential. Her well-educated background was also reflected in her independent and confident attitude and actions. Although she came from a wealthy “new money” family in Singapore, she used her education to play an active role and helped Rachel navigate the elite social circles of Singapore. For example, in Part 3, Chapter 3, Peik Lin quickly helped Rachel choose the right clothes and offered moral support so Rachel could fit in within a social environment full of pressure and high expectations.

“First of all, Rachel Chu, you cannot wear a black-and-white dress to a wedding—those are mourning colors. Are you sure you're really Chinese? How could you not know what that? Second, when was the last time I saw you? How often do I get to treat one of my best friends in the whole world? You can't deprive me of this pleasure.” (Kwan, 2013, p. 357)

Peik Lin's support, coming from an equal educational background and extensive life experiences, made Rachel more confident to face challenges, assert her identity, and survive the pressures of Nick's family. In other words, Peik Lin's education and attitude influenced Rachel to make bolder and more independent decisions in navigating her relationships and life in an environment full of expectations and social class differences. Thus, Peik Lin represented the equality of women's education, which was one of the important aspects of women's emancipation according to Mill's liberal feminism — the belief that women had the right to receive the same education as men and could use it to develop themselves and play an active role in society. In his book, Mill emphasized that education was the key for women to develop their potential and choose their life path freely. He stated that the education of women should be as thorough and comprehensive as that of men, so that they might be equally capable of exercising their rights and duties as citizens (Mill, 1869). Supporting Mill's argument, Marry Wollstonecraft (1792), in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, also emphasized that education was crucial to broaden women's horizons and ways of thinking. With education, women no longer followed oppressive social rules blindly. Education helped them escape injustice and made them independent and confident in living their lives. In addition, Yuan et al. (2019) said, “*well-educated females have new values and visions of their own rights and entitlements.*” This showed that good education encouraged women to be aware of their rights and to make informed decisions regarding their lives, including in matters of reproduction and career (Yuan et al., 2019).

4.2. Peik Lin has Freedom of Choice

In Kevin Kwan's *Crazy Rich Asians*, Peik Lin was portrayed as a modern woman who had the freedom to shape the direction of her life, especially in her career. Although she came from a wealthy family, she stayed grounded. She didn't just enjoy her family's wealth but actively took part in managing the family business. She showed that women could contribute meaningfully to work and business without giving up family values. This was illustrated in Part 1, Chapter 16, when Rachel talked with Peik Lin's father, Mr. Goh Wye Mun:

“So all your children work for your company, Mr. Goh ... I mean, Uncle Wye Mun?” Rachel asked. “Yes, yes. This is a true family business.” “.... and Peik Lin is VP in charge of new business. Of course, we also have about six thousand full-time employees between all our offices.” (Kwan, 2013, p. 138)

In this passage, Peik Lin was described as the Vice President responsible for new business development within the family company. This showed she wasn't just a figurehead

because of her family background but held real responsibility and played a crucial role in growing the business. Her position reflected her independence and authority in managing this part of the company. Compared to her siblings, Peik Lin's success in business earned her the deep trust of her family, especially her father. Mr. Goh said she was his smartest and most ambitious child—the one who resembled him the most. This meant she didn't just fulfill her official role but also took initiative and showed vision that her family recognized. Furthermore, Peik Lin's father fully supported her career and ambitions. He offered to help her explore wider opportunities, including a visit to Dr. Gu, likely related to business development or strategic partnerships. This showed that her family didn't limit her aspirations but encouraged her freedom to grow professionally. This idea was reinforced in Part 2, Chapter 15:

"With his children all grown up now, it was time for the next generation to keep conquering new territory." "..., so the focus now was on Peik Lin. Out of his three children, Peik Lin took after him the most. She was his smartest, most ambitious, and—dare he admit it—most attractive child. She was the one he felt confident would surpass all of them and make a truly brilliant match, linking the Gohs with one of Singapore's blue-blooded families. He could sense from the way his daughter spoke that she was onto something, and he was determined to help her dig deeper. "I think it's time we paid a visit to Dr. Gu," he said to his daughter." (Kwan, 2013, p. 298)

The statement above showed that Peik Lin had the freedom to choose and pursue her own career within the family company, holding important positions and responsibilities. She was not just a "follow-the-line child" but a professional whose intelligence and ambition were recognized and fully supported by her family to grow and make meaningful contributions. This reflected the values of women's emancipation and career freedom, which aligned with the principles of liberal feminism as explained by John Stuart Mill. According to Mill, women should have the same freedom as men to choose their careers and develop their potential. In *The Subjection of Women* (1869), Mill argued:

"The principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on one side, nor disability on the other." (Mill, 1869, p. 3)

This statement emphasized that women should be free from discrimination and have equal rights to decide their own paths in life, including their choice of jobs and careers. This freedom allowed women like Peik Lin to become economically and socially independent. Besides Mill, other liberal feminists also stressed the importance of women's right to choose a career as part of their emancipation. For example, Simon De Beauvoir (1949), in her book *The Second Sex*, argued that women should have the freedom to define their own identities and roles in society, including in the workplace.

As a woman who had the freedom to choose her career and played an active part in the family business, Peik Lin served as a real-life example to Rachel of how women could be independent and empowered, even in a highly patriarchal and socially demanding setting. Peik Lin's independence and self-confidence helped Rachel to become more confident in dealing with Nick's conservative and demanding family, especially his mother, Eleanor Young. According to research that examined the ideological meaning of liberal feminism in the film *Crazy Rich Asians*, Peik Lin's character demonstrated the value of women's empowerment, focusing not only on individual freedom but also on women's solidarity in supporting each other when facing social challenges (Ramadhan, 2022). Therefore, Peik Lin's freedom and active role in her career and life had a positive influence on Rachel. This helped Rachel become more confident, stay true to herself, and dare to shape her own life, even when facing complex social and cultural pressures.

4.3. Peik Lin Opposes Social Stereotypes

Peik Lin appeared as a woman who was brave, confident, and not easily swayed by social stereotypes. In an environment that still upheld conservative values and unwritten rules about the "ideal woman," she stood out as someone different—open, outspoken, and living life on her own terms. This was shown in *Crazy Rich Asians*, Part 1, Chapter 16:

“With her broad nose, round face, and slightly squinty eyes, she was not a natural-born raving beauty, but she was one of those girls who really knew how to make the most out of what she had. And what she had was a voluptuous body and the confidence to pull off bold fashion choices. Today she was wearing a very short white shift dress that hinted at her curves and a pair of strappy gold gladiator sandals. Her long black hair was pulled into a tight, high ponytail and a pair of gold-rimmed sunglasses were clamped on her forehead like a headband. On her earlobes were three-carat diamond solitaire studs, and on her wrist a chunky gold-and-diamond watch. She finished off the look with a gold mesh tote bag, flung casually on her shoulder. She looked like she was ready for the beach club in Saint-Tropez.” (Kwan, 2013, p. 128-129)

Peik Lin was described wearing daring clothes, like the short white dress that showed off her figure, along with bold accessories such as gold sandals, diamond earrings, and a luxury watch. Her fashion choices showed she was confident and unafraid to express herself, breaking away from the stereotype of Asian women being modest and reserved. Physically, Peik Lin was described as having a wide nose, a round face, and slightly slanted eyes—features that didn’t fit the typical beauty standards often celebrated in popular culture. Yet, she knew how to present herself in the best way and felt confident with what she had. This attitude reflected a positive rejection of the idea that women must conform to certain beauty ideals. With a relaxed and modern style, like someone ready for a vacation in Saint-Tropez, Peik Lin embodied a lifestyle that was free and not restricted by conservative social rules. She lived life on her own terms, refusing to submit to rigid expectations about how women should dress or behave. Another example that showed Peik Lin’s boldness in challenging social stereotypes appeared in Part 3, Chapter 18:

“Peik Lin walked down the stairs carrying a Bottega Veneta tote. Behind her were two Indonesian maids bearing a pair of Goyard suitcases and a carry-on valise.

“You do realize that we’re going to be there for one night? You look like you’ve packed enough for a monthlong safari,” Rachel said incredulously.

“Oh please, a girl’s gotta have options,” Peik Lin said, tossing her hair comically.” (Kwan, 2013, p. 499)

Peik Lin was portrayed as a relaxed and confident woman. She arrived carrying a luxurious Bottega Veneta bag, accompanied by two assistants carrying her suitcases, without any shame or attempt to hide her lavish lifestyle. This open attitude challenged the common belief that women should appear modest and blend in. When Rachel commented on how much Peik Lin had packed for just one night, Peik Lin casually joked, *“Oh please, a girl’s gotta have options,”* tossing her hair dramatically. This joke not only made people laugh but also served as a subtle rejection of social norms that tried to limit women’s behavior. It showed that Peik Lin felt free to live and enjoy life on her own terms, including how she presented herself and the lifestyle she chose. She believed women deserved many choices and didn’t have to live by rules set by others. With her cheerful, confident, and humorous attitude, Peik Lin broke the stereotype that women should be passive, modest, and always follow the rules. She proved that women could be independent, express themselves freely, and enjoy life without guilt. Mill (1869), in his book, emphasized the importance of women’s freedom to develop themselves and voice their opinions, but he also argued that this freedom needed to be balanced with responsibility and social awareness. Mill stated:

"Liberty consists in doing what one desires, provided it does not harm others; and the exercise of liberty must be regulated by the principle of not causing injury to others." (Mill, 1869)

This meant women should be free to express themselves and not always be bound by restrictive social rules. However, this freedom had to be used wisely and adapted to the situation. Alongside Mill, modern feminist thinkers like Susan Moller Okin, in her book *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (1989), also explained that women needed freedom of expression but, living in a challenging society, they also had to be mature and responsible, especially when facing serious issues (Okin, 1989). It was important to note that although Peik Lin used humor and a relaxed attitude, she still showed maturity and awareness when dealing with

problems. She didn't act recklessly or ignore serious matters but used humor as a way to communicate and ease social tensions while maintaining her freedom to express herself.

Peik Lin served as a real example for Rachel on how to live life freely and confidently. With her easygoing attitude and fearlessness in expressing herself, Peik Lin showed that women could live their lives on their own terms without always having to follow strict social rules. This inspired Rachel to be braver in being herself, especially when facing pressure from Nick's family and the luxurious world of Singapore. Moreover, Peik Lin's lighthearted and approachable nature helped Rachel overcome the cultural and societal pressures that had been weighing on her. Rachel gradually gained the ability to express her thoughts, maintain her confidence rooted in her education and independence, and find the courage to make decisions about her life and relationships. Peik Lin consistently offered genuine support by giving advice and helping Rachel adjust to her new environment. With this support, Rachel felt stronger and less alone. She also learned from Peik Lin that women had the right to make their own choices about their careers, lifestyles, and romantic relationships. Because of this freedom, Rachel was ultimately encouraged to make decisions based on her own judgment rather than external expectations.

5. Conclusions and Suggestion

Through the character of Peik Lin in *Crazy Rich Asians*, we can see how the novel reflects important ideas of women's emancipation, especially from a liberal feminist perspective. Peik Lin represents a modern woman who has access to education, freedom to choose her own career, and the courage to challenge traditional gender roles. Her supportive relationship with Rachel Chu also highlights the importance of solidarity among women in facing social pressure.

This study added a new perspective to discussions of the novel, which are often focused on class and culture, by emphasizing the theme of women's emancipation. However, it is important to note that this research focused on just one character. Future studies could explore other female characters in the novel or compare how women's emancipation is portrayed in similar works across different cultures. This could deepen our understanding of how literature can reflect and challenge gender norms in today's society.

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