

“My will has chosen life!”: Revisiting The Piano (1993) through Third-Wave Feminism

“İradem Hayatı Seçti!”: The Piano (1993) Üçüncü Dalga Feminizm Perspektifinden Yeniden Değerlendirmek

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ABSTRACT

The present article offers a theoretically grounded third-wave feminist reading of Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993), arguing that the film anticipates and articulates key principles associated with third-wave feminism, particularly autonomy, embodied subjectivity, sexual self-determination, and the political significance of personal choice. While previous scholarship has examined the work through psychoanalytic, second-wave feminist, and postcolonial frameworks, its resonance with third-wave feminist thought has remained underexplored. Addressing this gap, the study adopts a qualitative, feminist-hermeneutic methodology informed by feminist theory, psychoanalytic critique, and intersectional feminism. The analysis focuses on three interrelated dimensions of agency: Ada's strategic silence, her negotiated sexual autonomy, and her climatic decision to choose life. Rather than interpreting these elements as signs of victimhood or ideological ambivalence, the article reads them as complex negotiations of power within intersecting patriarchal and colonial structures. Particular attention is given to the film's non-verbal semiotic register—Ada's embodied gestures and musical expression—which functions as an alternative mode of signification that destabilizes phallogocentric discourse, and its established signifying systems, and reconfigures not only signification but also cinematic spectatorship. By situating *The Piano* within the conceptual terrain of third-wave feminism, this study re-evaluates Campion's work not merely as a critique of patriarchal authority but as a complex text that foregrounds multiplicity, contradiction, and embodied negotiation and choice as constitutive elements of feminine agency. The article contends that *The Piano* formulates a distinct cinematic language that dismantles reductive binaries of victimhood and resistance. Ultimately, the film articulates a vision of female subjectivity that is fluid, self-determined, and politically resonant, thereby reaffirming the film's continuing relevance within contemporary feminist debates.

Keywords: Third-wave feminism, Jane Campion, *The Piano*, female agency, feminist theory

ÖZ

Bu makale, Jane Campion'ın *The Piano* (1993) filmi kuramsal temellere dayanan üçüncü dalga feminist bir perspektifle ele almakta ve filmin özerklik, bedensel öznellik, cinsel öz-belirlenim ve kişisel tercihin politik anlamı gibi bu yaklaşımın temel ilkelerini görünür kıldığını savunmaktadır. Eser daha önce psikanalitik, ikinci dalga feminist ve postkolonyal çerçevelerle incelenmiş olsa da, üçüncü dalga feminist düşünceyle kurduğu ilişki yeterince araştırılmamıştır. Bu boşluğu gidermeyi amaçlayan çalışma, feminist teori, psikanalitik eleştiri ve kişisimsel feminizmden beslenen nitel bir feminist-hermenötik yöntem benimsemektedir. Analiz, öznenin üç birbiriyle ilişkili boyutuna odaklanmaktadır: Ada'nın stratejik sessizliği, müzakere edilmiş cinsel özerkliği ve doruk noktadaki yaşamı seçme kararı. Bu unsurları mağduriyet göstergeleri olarak değil; kişişen ataerkil ve kolonyal yapılar içinde gerçekleşen karmaşık iktidar müzakereleri olarak yorumlamaktadır. Filmin sözsüz semiyotik düzlemi—Ada'nın bedensel jestleri ve müzikal ifade alanı olarak değerlendirilmekte; böylece hem anlam üretimi hem de sinemasal seyir konumu yeniden yapılandırılmaktadır. Çalışma, *The Piano*'yu yalnızca ataerkil otoritenin eleştirisi olarak değil; çoğulluk, çelişki ve bedensel tercihi kadın özneselliğinin kurucu unsurları olarak öne çıkaran karmaşık bir metin olarak yeniden konumlandırmaktadır. Sonuç olarak film, mağduriyet ve direniş arasındaki indirgemeci ikilikleri aşan, akışkan ve öz-belirleyici bir kadın özneselliği vizyonu sunarak çağdaş feminist tartışmalarındaki güncelliğini sürdürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Üçüncü dalga feminizm, Jane Campion, *The Piano*, kadın özneselliği, feminist teorisi

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Introduction

Jane Campion has long been recognized as a distinctive auteur in contemporary cinema, known for her poetic visual language and sustained feminist engagement with themes of gender, subjectivity, and power. Across her oeuvre—from *An Angel at My Table* (1990) and *The Piano* (1993) to the critically acclaimed series *Top of the Lake* (2013–2017) and her most recent film *The Power of the Dog* (2021)—Campion consistently explores emotional repression, gendered violence, and the issues of negotiation of female subjectivity within patriarchal structures. Her narratives often centre on women who resist, subvert, or endure the socially imposed roles while her aesthetic foregrounds silence, embodiment, and psychological interiority as key sites of both power and resistance.

While *The Piano* brought Campion international acclaim and remains a landmark in feminist cinema, it also serves as a foundational text that anticipates many of the concerns developed in her later work—particularly the tension between silence and voice, the body as a vehicle for meaning, the limitations of language as both expressive and resistant, and a sustained critique of masculine power. Most importantly, Campion's films introduce an alternative gaze of a woman director, unfolding within a distinct mode of female-centric artistic expression—one that continues to shape Campion's cinematic vision. When viewed through this auteurist lens, *The Piano* emerges not as an isolated feminist achievement but as a pivotal moment in Campion's evolving inquiry into female agency and resistance that addresses contemporary feminist concerns on multiple levels.

Set against the rugged landscape of 19th-century New Zealand, *The Piano* tells the story of Ada McGrath (Holly Hunter), a mute Scottish woman who, having voluntarily stopped speaking at the age of six for reasons unknown to herself and the audience, navigates the confines of an arranged marriage while forging her own path toward self-discovery and empowerment. As a single mother, Ada is sent (essentially sold by her father) from Scotland to colonial New Zealand, accompanied by her daughter Flora (Anna Paquin) and her beloved piano, to marry Alistair Stewart (Sam Neill), a wealthy landowner who embodies patriarchal privilege and colonial values. Alistair regards Ada as little more than a piece of property he acquired, reflecting his obsession with colonial ownership and patriarchal control. Being mute, Ada communicates primarily through Flora who interprets her sign language with candor as well as through her music played in the piano. The inanimate object, her piano, thus serves as a surrogate voice, articulating her frustrations, desires, and sexuality—often all at once. Ada's piano plays a crucial role in the narrative, functioning both literally as a medium for self-expression and symbolically as a form of resistance to and empowerment within patriarchal constraints. Alistair's refusal to transport the piano from the beach upon their arrival signifies not only his dismissal of Ada's voice but also the broader patriarchal impulse to silence female expression. However, when a local neighbor Baines (Harvey Keitel) offers to retrieve the piano in exchange for piano lessons and sexual favors, their arrangement evolves into a passionate yet complex adulterous relationship. Baines, an illiterate man who by choice locates himself beyond the colonial order, becomes a catalyst for Ada's reclamation of her voice, her body, and eventually, her agency. It is through him that Ada explores her sexuality and rediscovers her desires, metaphorically *playing* her own body the same way she plays the piano.

In a world that commodifies women by passing them from fathers to husbands, Ada's choices—to remain silent, to articulate herself through a personalized mode of expression, to enter an extramar-

ital sexual relationship, and ultimately to choose life over death—foreground themes of female autonomy that resonate with the core principles of third-wave feminism. Her actions emphasize individual agency and personal choice, sexual self-determination and autonomy, the reclamation of diverse narrative voices, and the multiplicity of women's lived experiences.

Emerging in the early 1990s, third-wave feminism responded to the perceived limitations of second-wave feminism—especially its universalizing tendencies and its inadequate attention to intersectional identities—by embracing inclusivity, intersectionality, and personal agency as well as recognizing woman's diverse realities and the importance of personal choice (Gillis et al., 2007). Its origins are often traced to the 1991 Senate Judiciary Committee hearings, where Anita Hill publicly accused Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment—an event that exposed how sexism and racism mutually reinforced each other (Bhavnani & Collins, 1993). In response, Rebecca Walker coined the term “Third Wave” in her 1992 *Ms.* magazine essay “Becoming the 3rd Wave,” declaring “I am not a postfeminist feminist. I am the Third Wave,” thus signaling a generational shift that illuminated identity and choice within broader socio-cultural systems and insisted on continuing feminist struggle with an intersectional lens (Walker, 1992, p. 87; Snyder, 2008). Central to this development was Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, which demonstrated that women's experiences cannot be understood by isolating gender from other aspects of identity. Crenshaw's intervention was reinforced by broader third-wave commitments to inclusivity, which sought to foreground the ways multiple axes of identity intersect to shape women's lived realities. Aligned with these values was a strong emphasis on sexual freedom and gender equality, embracing a sex-positive politics that respected pluralism and individual choice (Snyder, 2008; Snyder-Hall, 2010). Feminists argued that personal agency and individual choice in matters of sexuality, career, and embodiment are inherently political, provided they are grounded in autonomy and consent (Heywood & Drake, 1997). Sex-positive feminism further challenged second-wave skepticism toward pornography, sex work, and alternative sexual practices, advocating instead for a celebration of sexual diversity and for freedom of choice as explicitly feminist commitments (Tong, 2009, p. 287). This convergence of intersectionality, inclusive identity politics, a robust right to choice framework, and sex-positive individualism marked the distinctive evolution of third-wave feminism—advocating a feminism that not only recognizes intersecting forms of oppressions but also affirms the rights of women to define and express their identities, bodies, and sexualities on their own terms.

Key figures such as bell hooks, Rebecca Walker, Jennifer Baumgardner, and Amy Richards foregrounded personal agency, affect, and embodied subjectivity, offering a feminist praxis that embraced contradictions, ambiguity, and personal narratives. As a pioneering voice in feminist theory, bell hooks—though works such as *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (1981/1982) and *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984/2000)—exposed how mainstream feminism often overlooked compounded oppressions, calling instead for a coalition-based and inclusive feminist politics. Daisy Hernández and Bushra Rehman (2002) extended these commitments in *Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism*, an anthology that amplifies the voices of young women of color. By presenting firsthand accounts of navigating racism, colonialism, homophobia, and cultural stereotyping, the collection underscores the centrality of embodied subjectivity, intersectionality, and a feminist praxis grounded in lived experience.

In their influential manifesto *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism,*

and the Future, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2000) similarly urge young feminists to embrace individual choice and personal narrative. Building on Rebecca Walker's (1995) argument for identities that "accommodate ambiguity" and "multiple positionalities" (pp. xxxiii-xxxiv), Baumgardner and Richards advocate a fluid, inclusive feminism that recognizes diverse experiences across race, class, age, and sexuality. For Baumgardner and Richards, choosing one's path—whether in career, sexuality, or embodiment—is itself a political act, one that embraces ambiguity as intrinsic to feminist identity. Hooks's insistence on confronting intersecting oppressions and Baumgardner and Richards's emphasis on diverse lived experiences together reflect a movement committed to recognizing complexity and difference.

Judith Butler's theorization on gender as performative further deepens this commitment to fluidity, multiplicity, and embodied self-definition. In *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler argues that gender does not precede expression but is constituted through repeated acts, norms, and discourses. Her claim that gender "is real only to the extent that it is performed" illuminates why the third wave embraces ambiguity and personal agency: if identity is not fixed but enacted, then reclaiming the terms of that enactment becomes a vital feminist act (Butler, 1988, p. 527). Butler's framework thus provides the theoretical grounding for the movement's insistence that women's autonomy—whether in self-definition, sexuality, or embodied expression—is inherently political. Collectively, these thinkers affirm a feminism that recognizes complexity and difference while valuing emotional and embodied experience as legitimate forms of knowledge and resistance. By centering narratives rooted in corporeality, affect, and lived experience, they reclaim the personal as political and advance a feminist subjectivity defined not by rigid categories but by fluidity, agency, and self-determination.

In *The Piano*, Ada's character embodies third-wave principles by forging her own path and making choices that assert her desire for autonomy—whether through her initial refusal to speak, her distinctive mode of expression, her engagement in an illicit relationship, or her ultimate decision to reclaim her body, voice, and life. These actions reflect third-wave feminism's emphasis on personal agency, diverse embodied experience, and self-expression. Rather than symbolizing victimhood, Ada's silence becomes a form of self-determination: a strategic refusal of conventional (patriarchal) signifying practices and an act of resistance that reclaims control of her subjectivity. Central to third-wave philosophy is the notion of the body as both a source of meaning and a site of resistance. Ada communicates through her body and her embodied musical practice, enacting forms of expression that transcend verbal language. Campion presents Ada as a complex figure whose refusal to speak and her engagement in an adulterous relationship are framed not as moral failings but as strategic assertions of autonomy. Her relationship with Baines introduces and offers a sex-positive, nuanced portrayal of female desire: initially transactional, it evolves to reflect third-wave feminism's embrace of sexual autonomy and its rejection of rigid dichotomies. Ultimately, Ada's choices—however ambiguous—epitomize third-wave feminism's commitment to personal agency, sexual empowerment, and the reclamation of female voice and desire, even within oppressive systems.

Campion actively subverts phallogocentric cinematic norms that traditionally frame female characters through a male-centric visual economy. Laura Mulvey's seminal 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," critiques these signifying conventions, arguing that mainstream cinema constructs woman as spectacle and object of male desire. As Mulvey famously states, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has

been split between active/ male and passive/ female" (1975, p. 11). This asymmetry is sustained through representational codes in which "woman are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual an erotic impact" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11). Within this symbolic order, the woman's image is denied narrative agency, functioning instead—in Mulvey's words—"as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions" (1975, p. 14). Mulvey's framework became foundational in feminist film theory, exposing the ways in which visual pleasure is often structured around a heterosexual male viewpoint.

However, *The Piano* actively undermines this structure by centering Ada's subjective experience and foregrounding her agency, thereby dismantling the alignment of spectatorship with the heterosexual male gaze. Campion reorients cinematic looking relations by framing Baines as the object of Ada's gaze and desire while close-ups and point-of-views shots visualize her interiority rather than her body as spectacle. The film's visual and auditory strategies—its lingering attention on Ada's embodied gestures, her tactile connection to the piano, and the world rendered through her sensory experience—invite the audience to inhabit her perspective. In this way, *The Piano* transcends the dominant signifying system Mulvey critiques, refusing to reproduce the active/male versus passive/female dichotomy and instead cultivating a feminine gaze that foregrounds interiority, female desire, resistance, and autonomy. This repositioning not only challenges the male gaze but also inscribes a cinematic language attuned to female subjectivity and self-determination.

While the film's colonial context complicates its feminist credentials (as discussed below), a third-wave framework—attentive to intersecting structures of power—opens space for a more layered analysis. Ada's struggle unfolds simultaneously along gendered, economic, and cultural lines, making her resistance a negotiation across multiple axes of domination. Rather than reiterating familiar feminist readings, *The Piano* invites consideration of how muted subjectivity can operate as a site of agency within, and against, overlapping constraints. Through this lens, the film enacts key third-wave concerns—not by reiterating feminist themes already identified in earlier scholarship, but by reconfiguring cinematic form itself. Campion shifts attention to embodied perception, sensory interiority, and a feminine mode of looking and signifying that unsettles dominant representational norms. Crucially, the film *performs* feminist critique through its style: its emphasis on tactile expression, subjective framing, and non-verbal communication constructs a narrative grounded in female epistemology rather than merely depicting female struggle. In this way, *The Piano* aligns with the tenets of third-wave feminism not simply at the level of content but through its distinct storytelling architecture, which foregrounds embodied experiential knowledge and non-hegemonic modes of expression. Campion thus produces a cinematic language that situates Ada—and the film itself—within a feminine signifying practice, offering an alternative to the visual hierarchies critiqued by feminist theorists. As such, Campion's film becomes less a repetition of established feminist analysis and more a formal experimentation that re-imagines how women's stories can be told, asserting autonomy, female desire, and self-expression through its very mode of representation.

Grounding its analysis in third-wave feminism, feminist film theory, and psychoanalytic feminist critique, this article explores how Campion's narrative strategies foreground female subjectivity and challenge male-centric signifying conventions. It engages Lacanian and Kristevan readings alongside bell hooks's theorization of silence as a space of resistance, foregrounding agency, choice, and the third-wave embrace of embodied difference. These the-

oretical frameworks not only illuminate the film's negotiation of gendered power but also position *The Piano* as a text within the broader feminist shifts of the 1990s—both responding to and shaping evolving debates in feminist film theory. The study highlights Campion's portrayal of Ada's struggle for agency and self-expression within patriarchal structures, interpreting her refusal to speak, her music, and her illicit relationship as modes of resistance and self-articulation. Drawing on Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, it considers how Ada's subjective desire and pre-symbolic expression destabilize dominant modes of representation. Additionally, the article discusses Ada's complex relationship with Baines as a site where sexual and economic agencies are re-negotiated, enabling the reclamation of autonomy and subjectivity. Finally, it reads Ada's climactic decision to choose life as a profound act of self-determination that aligns with third-wave feminist principles prioritizing autonomy, embodied agency, and the redefinition of female desire.

Methodologically, this study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in feminist theory. Rather than applying a strictly formalist framework, it employs thematic analysis to investigate how narrative strategies in *The Piano* construct female subjectivity and disrupt patriarchal cinematic conventions. The interpretation is informed by third-wave feminist principles alongside psychoanalytic feminist theory, enabling an examination of how Ada's muteness, modes of expression, and symbolic acts articulate complex negotiations of agency, desire, and embodied identity. This approach allows for a nuanced reading that foregrounds women's diverse embodied experiences and their self-determination.

While the primary focus of this article is on the film's feminist narrative and innovative aesthetic strategies, it is equally necessary to address *The Piano*'s colonial context—particularly its limited engagement with Māori subjectivity. Set in nineteenth-century Aotearoa/New Zealand, the film gestures toward colonial dynamics such as land seizure, racial hierarchy, and economic dependency; yet Māori figures remain largely peripheral. As Leonie Pihama observes, settler-colonial cinema frequently positions Indigenous peoples as “visual appendages to Pākehā narratives rather than autonomous subjects with their own worldviews” (1994, p. 62). *The Piano* seems to reproduce this pattern: despite its radical feminist investment in voice and agency, Māori presence is confined to roles of labor, ritual, or liminality within the settler economy, and their perspectives receive minimal articulation. Maria Margaroni's “Jane Campion's Selling of the Mother/Land: Restaging the Crisis of the Postcolonial Subject” helps illuminate the significance of this representational gap. Reading the film through the lens of postcolonial melancholia, Margaroni argues that the film imagines both Ada and the Māori as figures connected to the materialized landscape whose boundaries are “sacred and thus... virginal,” “clearly delimited and not to be transgressed” (2003, p. 109). Yet even as the film foregrounds Ada's psychic rupture, Māori are depicted as “in passage... at a transitional (indeed, a critical) moment in their history,” already “captured in the aftermath of a violent rupture” that has severed them from their *whenua*, the placenta-like bond to the mother/land (p. 109). Crucially, Margaroni highlights a moment of Māori political clarity often ignored in other critiques: Hira's (Tungia Baker) warning that “Pākehā cunning like wind... Some they say, 'How can Pākehā get our land if we won't sell it?' ... They wrong. Today our enemy he sell some land for heaps of guns. Now, we too buy guns. We must sell our land to fight for our land” (p. 110). This line exposes an Indigenous consciousness of colonial entrapment and resistance that the film gestures toward but does not fully develop. From a postcolonial feminist perspective, such moments underscore the tension be-

tween the film's celebration of female autonomy and its marginalization of Indigenous sovereignty. While Campion's emphasis on Ada's agency and psychic transformation does gesture towards an indirect critique of colonial domination—through its attention to land, language, and embodied autonomy—Margaroni argues that this narrative foregrounds “the daughter's story” while leaving the Māori narrative “still at the beginning” (p. 117). Thus, although *The Piano* uses landscape, silence, and embodied expression to destabilize patriarchal authority, its postcolonial critique remains partial—offering metaphorical affinities between women and colonized subjects that cannot fully substitute for Māori interiority or political agency.

A fuller postcolonial feminist reading of *The Piano* must therefore consider not only its subversion of gender norms but also the ways in which it engages with—or fails to engage with—its colonial context. The film's peripheral treatment of Māori characters compels audiences to confront broader questions about the intersections of race, power, visibility, and gender. Here, third-wave feminist principles offer a productive framework that both critiques and partially contextualizes this representational gap. Since third-wave feminists—shaped by intersectional consciousness—explicitly refuses to presume a universal female experience or to speak on behalf of all women, its methodological emphasis lies in listening rather than speaking over others (Navarro, 2003). Applied to *The Piano*, this approach demands recognition that Campion does not and cannot articulate Māori experiences, even as the film gestures towards their presence. Third-wave concerns regarding misrepresentation and voice appropriation thus encourage audiences to acknowledge Māori visibility as partial, contingent, and shaped by the limits of a settler-colonial cinematic framework rather than to read absence as erasure or to impose interpretative authority where the film offers none. At the same time, third-wave *listening* is not passive; it requires active critique. It legitimizes interrogating how voice, agency, and silence operate within the film, and invites viewers to attend to what remains unspoken or structurally unrepresentable. Within this critical space, the present article argues that *The Piano* endures as a profoundly feminist text—one that foregrounds the power of female agency while simultaneously revealing the constraints of its historical and cultural frame. By analyzing the film's narrative, aesthetic, and symbolic strategies, this study demonstrates how Campion's work contributes to feminist film theory not only by centering female subjectivity, experience, and point of view, but also by inviting audiences into a specifically feminine artistic domain that deliberately unsettles the hegemony of phallogocentric cinematic signification.

Literature Review

A substantial body of scholarship has examined *The Piano*, with critics offering a range of feminist, psychoanalytic, political, and postcolonial interpretations. Among the foundational feminist readings, Feona Attwood and Jaime Bihlmeyer analyze how the film disrupts traditional constructions of femininity. In “Weird Lullaby: Jane Campion's *The Piano*”, Attwood (1998) argues that the film invokes and subverts familiar female archetypes—including the siren, mermaid, Little Red Riding Hood, and Bluebeard's wife—to expose the limitations of binary oppositions such as masculine/feminine and active/passive. She contends that *The Piano* creates a representational space in which women may experience their womanhood without being “marginalised as ‘the feminine’” (p. 85). Similarly, in “The (Un)Speakable Femininity in Mainstream Movies: Jane Campion's *The Piano*”, Bihlmeyer (2005) examines Ada's muteness as subversion of patriarchal expectations surrounding female speech and behavior. She characterizes Ada's silence as a form of “unspeakable” FEMININITY that disrupts

dominant male-centered structures and encourages viewers to reconsider how women's voices might be imagined on screen (pp. 70, 74). Together, Attwood and Bihlmeyer demonstrate the film's feminist potential by showing how *Campion* foregrounds alternative models of female expression and subjectivity.

Carmen Pérez Riu expands this discussion by situating *The Piano* within Gothic feminist traditions. In "Two Gothic Feminist Texts: Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and the Film, *The Piano*, by Jane Campion" (2000), the author examines how Campion's film draws on Gothic conventions to articulate feminist themes and argues that both works destabilize patriarchal structures through their complex portrayals of female protagonists negotiating power within male-dominated environments. Pérez Riu highlights the film's Gothic sensibility—dark landscapes, emotional intensity, themes of transgression and confinement, and a quasi-supernatural atmosphere—as a means of exposing the constraints imposed on women. In *The Piano*, the wild, untamed landscape of colonial New Zealand, alongside themes of obsession, repression, and forbidden love, aligns the film with the Gothic tradition. Ada's silence, in this reading, becomes a central Gothic device that underscores the limits of patriarchal authority. Pérez Riu concludes that Campion, like Brontë, mobilizes Gothic conventions to critique gendered power imbalances.

Other scholars adopt more skeptical positions regarding the film's emancipatory potential. In "The Limits of Sexual Emancipation: Feminism and Jane Campion's Mythology of Love," Noëlle A. Baker (1999) argues that although the film seeks to challenge male authority and represent a woman's journey toward self-expression, it ultimately re-inscribes patriarchal ideals. She contends that Ada's relationship with Baines—while seemingly liberating—remains beholden to traditional myths of romantic love and dependence. The narrative resolution, Baker maintains, situates Ada's freedom within the framework of a male figure, thereby reflecting the broader limitations of achieving genuine autonomy within dominant cultural narratives. In a similar critique, Diane Long Hoeveler's "Silence, Sex, and Feminism: An Examination of *The Piano*'s Unacknowledged Sources" (1998) argues that while Ada's muteness may appear to reject male discourse, it simultaneously draws on long-standing patriarchal tropes of the "silenced, muted, ignored" woman victimized by repressive patriarchy (p. 110). Hoeveler contends that the film romanticizes coercive sexual dynamics and ultimately reaffirms problematic hierarchies of dominance and submission, limiting its radical feminist ambitions.

Carol Jacobs and Davinia Thornley foreground political dimensions of the film, situating *The Piano* within the nexus of gender, colonialism, and nationalism. Both scholars explore how the film critiques patriarchal and colonial structures, while also noting the limitations of its critique. Jacobs's "Playing Jane Campion's *Piano*: Politically" (1994) contends that the film is not merely a personal narrative of female autonomy but a politically charged exploration of authority embedded in colonial and patriarchal systems. Jacobs reads the interactions between European settlers and the indigenous Māori as illuminating issues of cultural domination and resistance, while also noting the film's inability to fully transcend these structures. Ultimately, the author concludes that *The Piano* engages with political themes in complex and valid but often contradictory ways. Thornley's "Duel or Duet? Gendered Nationalism in *The Piano*" (2000) similarly interrogates the film's navigation of gendered and colonial relations. The author contends that *The Piano* subverts and simultaneously reinforces traditional nationalist narratives. Thornley interprets Ada's silence as a mode of resistance against patriarchal and nationalist discourses, yet criticizes the film's Eurocentric perspective for overshadowing Māori voices. Thornley's metaphor of a "duel or duet" (p. 61)

captures the film's complex interplay of conflict and collaboration between colonizer and colonized, man and woman, and moments of negotiation, collaboration, and shared experience.

Within this colonial framework, Caroline Brown and Reshela DuPuis offer more explicitly postcolonial critiques. Brown's "The Representation of the Indigenous Other in *Daughters of the Dust* and *The Piano*" (2003) compares both films' portrayals of marginalized communities, emphasizing "the construction of these cultural Others" (p. 3). She argues that in *The Piano*, Māori characters are eroticized and marginalized, functioning primarily as background to the white protagonists and ultimately denied narrative voice. DuPuis's "Romanticizing Colonialism: Power and Pleasure in Jane Campion's *The Piano*" (1996) likewise contends that while the film centers a feminist narrative, it aestheticizes colonial power relations. Ada's personal journey dominates the narrative, reducing Māori figures to silent presences that heighten the exotic appeal of the setting. DuPuis concludes that the film's feminist critique is compromised by its limited engagement with colonial oppression and its reductive portrayal of Indigenous characters. Together, Brown and DuPuis highlight the film's failure to fully challenge the power structures it critiques, exposing the limitations of its feminist and anti-colonial ambitions.

In contrast, Barbara Klinger and Peter N. Chumo II focus on the film's aesthetic complexity and symbolic resonance. Klinger's "The Art Film, Affect, and the Female Viewer: *The Piano* Revisited" (2006) argues that the film engages viewers—particularly women—on an affective level through aesthetic strategies that foreground Ada's emotional interiority. By prioritizing affect and subjective experience, Campion expands the scope of feminist film analysis. In "Keys to the Imagination: Jane Campion's *The Piano*" (1997), Chumo examines the symbolic function of the piano itself, reading it as Ada's voice—an instrument through which her unspoken desires and emotional isolation are conveyed. Both scholars view *The Piano* as challenging conventional cinematic representation through its aesthetic and symbolic complexity: Klinger emphasizes its impact on spectatorship, while Chumo highlights its capacity to subvert dominant modes of signification.

Overall, scholarly readings of *The Piano* illustrate both its contributions and its limitations in representing female autonomy and desire. While many critics celebrate its feminist potential and aesthetic innovation, others argue that it remains entangled within traditional gender dynamics and colonial hierarchies. However, as this study contends, such critiques often overlook a crucial dimension underscored by third-wave feminism: the centrality of individual choice—personalized, ambivalent, and embodied—in the formation of female agency. This article therefore re-examines *The Piano* through a third-wave feminist lens, understanding Ada's expressive strategies, her relationship with Baines, and ultimately her decision to live as complex negotiations of power, agency, and consent. By centering Ada's subjectivity as a locus of embodied autonomy—even within the constraints of nineteenth-century patriarchy—the film can be read as articulating a distinctly contemporary feminist vision. In this way, the film not only challenges dominant patriarchal frameworks but also reveals the limitations of earlier feminist critiques that often prioritize structuralism over individuality. Its portrayal of female agency, free will, and embodied emotional complexity therefore invites renewed attention that reaffirms the film's relevance in contemporary feminist discourse. Through this lens, *The Piano* emerges not merely as a critique of gendered power dynamics but as a celebration of third-wave principles emphasizing choice, subjectivity, and the irreducible complexity of women's lived experiences.

Female Silence and Feminine Expression

Campion's film intricately interweaves feminist concerns—resistance to patriarchy, female autonomy, and the multiplicity of women's expressive forms. These themes are embodied most powerfully in the protagonist Ada, whose muteness functions not as a deficiency but as a counter-narrative to the phallogocentric signifying system that ontologically seeks to define, contain, and discipline her identity. In *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, bell hooks (1989/1999) insists that silence must not be understood as absence, but rather as a conscious refusal to participate in oppressive discourse. Silence, for hooks, is a strategic withdrawal from hegemonic systems that attempt to objectify and speak for marginalized subjects. Though withholding speech, the oppressed refuse compliance with dominant structures of meaning and resist being overwritten by structural forces. In "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," hooks (1990) further conceptualizes the margin—and, by extension, forms of silence—as a site not of deprivation but of political, creative, and epistemic possibility. As she writes:

...marginality [is] much more than a site of deprivation; in fact...it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance...a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives. As such, I was not speaking of marginality one wishes to lose...but rather of a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new world (pp. 149-150).

Silence thus becomes an active terrain wherein marginalized individuals reclaim self-positioning, generate alternative modes of meaning, and critique dominant narratives (hooks, 1990). Within this framework, Ada's muteness in *The Piano* emerges as a deliberate, resistant stance—an act that destabilizes patriarchal expectations surrounding female speech and opens a space for reconstitution of agency outside normative linguistic structures. Hooks (1999) indeed emphasizes the restorative and regenerative dimension of silence, suggesting that psychic healing and self-grounding often require the inwardness that silence affords. Before articulating one's voice, one may need the depth and introspection of silence to process the conditions of dominant, reorient the self, and cultivate the grounds for autonomous expression. Through this lens, Ada's silence becomes not a symbol of subjugation but a locus of self-definition, resistance, and embodied expression. It marks the beginning of an alternative feminine signifying practice—one that unfolds through gesture, music, desire, and corporeal presence rather than through the patriarchal language that would constrain her.

From a Lacanian and Kristevan perspective, Ada's silence acquires a deeper psychoanalytic resonance. Lacan's theorization of the Symbolic order—governed by the Law of the Father—understands entry into language as the subject's submission to cultural and social structures regulated by patriarchal authority (Lacan, 1961/2006, pp. 75-81). Ada's refusal to speak therefore signifies not merely an absence of voice but a deliberate rejection of the Symbolic system that seeks to delimit and stabilize her identity. By withholding speech, she resists integration into the discursive structures that would define her according to patriarchal norms. Julia Kristeva extends this psychoanalytic framework through her concept of the *semiotic chora*, a pre-linguistic, maternally inflected domain characterized by chromatic, vocal, and kinetic rhythm—tones, movements, and affects—elements that precede and continually disrupt the stabilizing logic of the Symbolic (Kristeva, 1974/1985, pp. 25-30). The semiotic, she explains, is a mode of signification grounded not in rational structure but in pulsional, bodily energies that "rupture" and "destabilize" the ordered

logic of phallogocentric discourse (p. 26). Crucially, Kristeva links this semiotic space to the maternal body, noting that pre-Oedipal drives "involve semiotic functions and energy discharges that connect and orient the body to the mother", who thus "becomes the ordering principle of the *semiotic chora*" (p. 26, emphasis in original). Ada's expressive mode—her music, gesture, and corporeal presence—aligns her with this semiotic domain. Her piano performance becomes a rhythmic, affective language that exceeds the constraints of speech, while her embodied movement disrupts the coherence and linearity demanded by the Symbolic. In this way, Ada asserts a divergent, embodied agency—one maternally rooted in affect, rhythm, and corporeality—through which she generates meaning beyond the boundaries of patriarchal linguistic structures.

Consequently, Ada's silence operates on two intertwined levels: as a psychoanalytic refusal of the Symbolic and as a feminist defiance of patriarchal structures. Her refusal to speak echoes hooks's understanding of marginalized subjects who, by withholding speech, assert agency and refuse incorporation into dominant discursive systems. Her silence also mirrors the historical silencing of women in Victorian society, deprived of narrative authority and discursive power. Yet in a film that centers so resolutely on a female subject, Ada's silence—accentuated by her piercing gaze, stillness, and affective presence—paradoxically becomes a potent form of expression. Her muteness resonates more forcefully than speech, especially as the film foregrounds her inner world from the opening narration: "The voice you hear is not my speaking voice—but my mind's voice. I have not spoken since I was six years old. No one knows why—not even me." This inner voice signals a female subjectivity that exceeds the limits of verbal articulation. Within a Lacanian framework, Ada's silence constitutes as a *lack* within the Symbolic, confronting the signifying subject with an absence that resists capture by patriarchal signification. Rather than diminishing her, this lack destabilizes the representational system that seeks to reduce her to objecthood, opening instead the possibility of a signifying practice outside phallogocentric norms. Her body thus becomes her primary expressive medium, a personalized site of meaning that refuses the confinements of the Symbolic. Silence, in this sense, becomes not a negation but a modality of agency: a refusal to speak the Father's language and reclamation of maternally charged embodied expression.

Campion's directorial decisions further reinforce this psychoanalytic feminist reading. The film's visual and narrative style deliberately disrupts dominant male-centric cinematic conventions. Through formal techniques such as evocative cinematography, symbolic *mise-en-scène*, and Michael Nyman's haunting, emotionally charged musical score, Campion constructs an aesthetic rooted in the sensory and affective dimensions of female experience. Ada's subjectivity is elevated through lingering close-ups, textual imagery, and a mode of storytelling that prioritizes affect over exposition, compelling viewers into intimate engagement with her interior world. By withholding conventional narrative cues and refusing to accommodate the male gaze, Campion's storytelling engenders a cinematic space in which female silence becomes expressive rather than void. Formally, the film communicates through visually saturated composition—its stark landscape, tactile details, and symbolic, thought-provoking imagery—and through sounds, where the piano serves both as a diegetic and semiotic extension of Ada's inner voice. The score does not merely accompany the narrative but articulates her emotional register, drawing the audience into her psychic and bodily landscape. Through these aesthetic strategies, *The Piano* offers a distinctly feminine mode of artistic expression—one that resists phallogocentric visual and narrative structures and formulates an

alternative signifying practice grounded in embodiment, affect, and sensory experience.

By subverting traditional narrative patterns and challenging the logic of visual domination, *The Piano* resists mainstream cinema conventions. Campion opens a cinematic space where silence functions as a resonant, affective force, eliciting deeper, intuitive modes of spectatorship engagement. Her reconfiguration of the gaze positions the viewer not as a voyeur of female objectification but as an empathic witness to a woman's emotional and psychological journey. This shift in subject alignment challenges dominant modes of cinematic signification and reclaims narrative space for female voices—including those that remain unspoken or untranslatable within the dominant discourse. Campion's intricate storytelling approach thus emerges as both expansive and introspective: while maintaining narrative coherence and linear structure, she departs from traditional storytelling that is often shaped by the male gaze and its phallogocentric imperatives, crafting a style that foregrounds female agency, perspective, and expressive autonomy. By centering embodied female experience (of the protagonist and the filmmaker alike), the film underscores the philosophical dimensions of personal and artistic choice, signifying not only resistance but also personalized self-definition.

The refusal enacted by both Ada and Campion—to conform to dominant practices, discursive norms, and signifying expectations—function as feminist acts of choice, resistance, and self-determined agency. The film affirms female agency not only in opposition to patriarchal oppression but through the articulation of personalized, embodied modes of expression. This perspective aligns with third-wave feminist principles, which precisely emphasize individual agency, the multiplicity of female experience, and the political dimension of *personal choice within structural constraints*. Ada's and Campion's silence, gaze, and expressive practices all become vehicles of resistance and subjectivity, articulating a fluid, intersectional, and affective form of agency central to third-wave feminist thought. In this sense, *The Piano* endures as a powerful feminist text—challenging patriarchal structures and male-centric cinematic conventions alike while opening new aesthetic and theoretical pathways for understanding female voice, desire, and autonomy. Through its interweaving of psychoanalytic complexity and feminist sensibility, the film affirms the transformative potential of silence and art as legitimate, potent forms of embodied expression and communication. Campion's cinematic vision continues to resonate precisely because it re-imagines the possibilities of female agency and creativity within and beyond constraints of dominant discourse.

Female Autonomy and Sexual Liberation

Ada's relationship with Baines functions as a pivotal axis in *The Piano*, destabilizing traditional gender roles and patriarchal power structures while foregrounding the feminist significance of having a choice. Through the morally complex and emotionally ambiguous dynamic between Ada and her lover, Campion interrogates how the assertion of female sexual autonomy can unsettle established social, economic, and symbolic hierarchies. Although Baines initially appears aligned with colonial and masculine authority, he gradually becomes the catalyst through which Ada reclaims her body, desire, and agency. This transformation aligns the narrative with third-wave feminist commitments to individual self-determination, embodied sexuality, and the validity of personal choice within constraining structures. Such an emphasis on agency resonates with the work of third-wave feminists including Rebecca Walker, bell hooks, Jennifer Baumgardner, and Amy Richards, who foreground the multiplicity of women's lived realities and emphasize that choices surrounding identity, sexuality, de-

sire, and embodiment are inherently political. In this sense, Ada's relationship with Baines—however fraught and ambivalent—becomes a site where her subjectivity and autonomy take shape, illustrating a feminist reclamation of sexual desire as a domain of empowerment rather than subordination.

The symbolic exchange surrounding the piano lies at the heart of this dynamic and can be productively read through feminist economic theory—most notably Gayle Rubin's seminal critique in "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" (1975). Rubin argues that within patriarchal kinship systems, women are traditionally exchanged as objects or commodities circulated between men, their bodies and labor used to consolidate male power (Rubin, 1975, pp. 174–180). In *The Piano*, this logic is evoked through the way Ada and her piano are negotiated, traded, or withheld by the male characters. The piano becomes a metonymic extension of Ada herself—her voice, her artistic expression, her desires, and her autonomy. However, when Ada enters into a negotiation with Baines for the return of the piano in exchange for physical and sexual intimacy, she disrupts this patriarchal economy of exchange. Rather than being the passive object transferred between men, she becomes an agent who redefines the terms of the exchange. Ada's decision to engage in this arrangement constitutes a subversion of the traditional traffic in women: she asserts control over her body, her desire, and the symbolic object through which she expresses subjectivity. In doing so, she reframes the encounter not as patriarchal commodification but as an act of personal agency—one that complicates the dynamics of power while foregrounding the third-wave feminist emphasis on sexual autonomy and self-determined choice.

Ada's use of her body and the piano as personalized modes of communication signals a powerful assertion of female autonomy and agency. Her decision to enter into a relationship with Baines—though marked by moral ambiguity—functions as a metaphor for her broader journey toward empowerment and self-discovery. What initially appears coercive gradually transforms into an encounter in which Ada actively performs her sexuality and exercises choice. Baines, in turn, becomes a facilitator of Ada's liberation—not only sexually but also economically. Their bargain enables her to reclaim her voice (through the piano) and her body (through her own sexual expression), aligning with third-wave feminist principles that privilege the lived realities of women's choices over externally imposed moral frameworks (Walker, 1995; Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). Baines's evolving role—from a figure positioned within colonial and masculine power to a partner who listens, recognizes Ada's desires, and honors her autonomy—subverts the Victorian gender hierarchies that sought to silence women and regulate their bodies. His recognition of Ada's subjectivity and his willingness to withdraw when she asserts boundaries create a space in which she can experience *jouissance* in the Lacanian sense: a mode of pleasure that exceeds the regulated homeostatic limits of the pleasure principle and transgresses the boundaries of phallic desire (Lacan, 1992, pp. 184–188, 202–207). By exploring her body, desires, and identity on her own terms, Ada accesses a form of chromatic, rhythmic, and kinetic *jouissance*—an embodied, affective expression of agency that exceeds the Symbolic.

The economic transaction between Ada and Baines—where she offers both her piano performances and her body in exchange for the gradual return of the piano—further underscores Ada's autonomy and agency. Through this arrangement, she not only challenges the patriarchal order that presumes authority over women's bodies but also constructs an alternative economy grounded in her own choices and desires. In a society intent on silencing, regulating, and possessing her body while suppressing her sexuality, Ada's calculated decision to leverage her body becomes an

act of radical self-expression. Rather than functioning as an object circulating between men, Ada reclaims her position as an active subject who determines the terms of her own exchange. In doing so, she disrupts the patriarchal structure theorized by Rubin, in which men control the circulation and value of women's bodies, and instead creates a personal, embodied economy that operates outside patriarchal logics of possession and commodification. By this inversion, Ada becomes an active subject who uses her body to assert her will.

By reclaiming her piano—and, symbolically, her identity—Ada asserts ownership over her body, sexuality, and expressive capacities. Her choice to pursue an adulterous relationship with Baines constitutes direct resistance to the moral, legal, and emotional constraints imposed by her husband and by the broader Victorian social order. Her sexual autonomy thus becomes a deliberate act of defiance against the forces that seek to discipline, dominate, and define her. In enacting this autonomy, Ada embodies key tenets of third-wave feminism: the prioritization of individual agency, the validation of complex and diverse female experiences, and the insistence that personal choices carry political meaning. The film ultimately underscores that Ada's decisions—her refusal to speak, her engagement with Baines, and her reclamation of the piano—form interrelated expressions of self-definition. By asserting her right to choose the forms of her expression, the boundaries of her body, and even the trajectory of her life and death, Ada enacts a third-wave feminist ethics of agency.

The Choice to Live: Agency and Rebirth

Ada's decision to choose life over death in the climactic moments of *The Piano* constitutes a profound assertion of female agency, signaling the film's alignment with third-wave feminist ideals. This moment marks a crucial shift in Ada's trajectory—from repression and silence toward self-affirmation and rebirth. By analyzing the symbolism of the underwater scene, it becomes clear how Ada's choice subverts the tragic destinies traditionally imposed upon women in patriarchal narratives and how it marks her re-entry into the Symbolic on her own terms.

The film reaches its emotional and symbolic apex after Alisdair, enraged by Ada's defiance and her relationship with Baines, takes an axe first to her piano—an emblem of her autonomy—and then to Ada herself, severing her finger. This act of violence is saturated with symbolic meaning: the cutting of Ada's finger represents a brutal attempt to punish her transgression, disable her expressive capacity, and reassert patriarchal control. Campion intensifies the scene's affective charge through torrential rain, lingering close-ups of Ada's anguish, the image of her severed finger, and Flora's screams, all underscored by the film's haunting score. Symbolically, the amputation may be read as a Freudian castration—an effort to discipline the woman who refuses to conform and to re-establish male dominance by attacking her means of expression.

Following this assault, Alisdair relinquishes his claim over Ada, allowing her and Flora to leave with Baines. This sets the stage for the film's climactic scene: during the voyage toward a new life, Ada commands that her piano—the object through which she has articulated desire, resistance, and identity—be thrown overboard. In a startling gesture, she slips her foot into the rope attached to the instrument and allows herself to descend with it into the sea. Her deliberate sinking signifies a return to what Lacan describes as the Real: a pre-linguistic, pre-symbolic space beyond the constraints of law, culture, and patriarchal signification. Rendered in dreamlike slow motion and accompanied by a serene musical motif, Ada's descent evokes a movement back toward the primordial and maternal—a realm outside the Symbolic that suspends social and linguistic boundaries.

Yet her subsequent decision not to die but to free herself from the rope and rise to the surface transforms the scene from an act of surrender into a radical affirmation of self-determination. As Ada swims upward, we once again hear her inner voice—the voice that opened the film—now contemplative and resolute, declaring: "What a death! What a chance! What a surprise! My will has chosen life!" This articulation confirms her desire to re-enter the Symbolic as a subject rather than an object of patriarchal control. Her refusal to accept death, a common fate for women who challenge social norms, marks a decisive break from the tragic narrative conventions of patriarchal storytelling. This moment also echoes Kristeva's distinction between the *semiotic* and the Symbolic. Ada's descent enacts a temporary return to the semiotic—a maternal, rhythmic, affective space outside linguistic order—while her ascent signifies a renewed engagement with the Symbolic. Crucially, she re-enters the Symbolic not as a passive participant but as a self-determined subject, choosing the terms of her integration.

Ada's choice to live subverts the longstanding literary and cinematic trope in which transgressive women are punished through narrative closure, reinforcing patriarchal moral order. Instead, Campion refuses this logic: Ada survives. She chooses life, asserting her right to self-definition and rejecting the victim narrative. This affirmation resonates strongly with the principles of third-wave feminism emphasizing agency and the political importance of personal choice (Heywood & Drake, 1997). Ada's decision to live, create, and eventually to speak reflects her reclamation of identity through transformation. Her willingness to speak again at the end of the film symbolizes a deliberate, self-authored re-engagement with the Symbolic and highlights the importance of personal choice. Ada reclaims her narrative, choosing how and when to express herself. Her rebirth therefore marks a critical turning point not only in the film's narrative but also in feminist cinema as she willingly chooses to integrate herself into the Symbolic, nonetheless, empowered with a renewed sense of agency.

The film's conclusion—depicting Ada in a new environment, learning to speak while continuing to play and teach music—further reinforces her commitment to self-expression and renewal. Campion challenges the expectation of tragic closure, offering instead a feminist re-envisioning of survival, growth, and rebirth. The final scenes present a vision of womanhood marked by resilience, complexity, and autonomy—a rejection of victimhood in favor of creative self-fashioning.

In this way, *The Piano* offers a powerful feminist reworking of traditional narratives that confine women to silence or death. Ada's symbolic rebirth, achieved through her conscious and defiant choice to live, stands as a radical affirmation of third-wave feminist values: agency, multiplicity, choice, and the refusal to be defined by external structures. By foregrounding Ada's decision, the film articulates a vision of feminine subjectivity grounded in transformation and self-possessed survival.

The Feminine Gaze and Signification

The Piano stands as a landmark in feminist filmmaking, offering a radical departure from the male-centric visual and narrative conventions that have long structured cinematic discourse. Through its integrated use of visual, sonic, and narrative strategies, Campion constructs a distinctly feminine mode of storytelling—one that resists objectification, privileges interiority, and aligns with third-wave feminist principles of subjectivity, multiplicity, and agency (Heywood & Drake, 1997).

From its first moments, the film subverts the scopic regime of the male gaze by granting viewers access to Ada's inner monologue.

This narrative device bypasses the typical structures of objectifying spectatorship that render women passive spectacles. Instead, Campion situates the audience within Ada's subjective experience: the viewer does not look at Ada, but *with* her. Her voice-over—private, reflective, and authoritative—immediately establishes a relationship between viewer and protagonist grounded in intimacy rather than voyeurism.

Campion's cinematography extends this disruption of patriarchal vision. Rather than fragmenting the female body into fetishized parts, the camera lingers on the expressive totality of Ada's presence—her face, posture, hands, movements. Her steady, often confrontational gaze becomes a silent mode of agency, challenging viewers to recognize her subjectivity and refusing the passive role traditionally assigned to female characters. In this reversal of visual power, Campion crafts what can be understood as a *feminine gaze*: a mode of looking that foregrounds relationality, embodiment, and affect over domination and spectacle.

The film's visual aesthetic adds further depth to this signifying economy. By using subjective camera perspectives and emphasizing tactile imagery—hands on piano keys, fabric against skin, the weight of mud, the texture of the natural world—Campion foregrounds embodied experience. Ada's muteness becomes a site of expressive richness rather than lack, signaling an alternative communicative register grounded in gesture, rhythm, and affect. Silence is reclaimed as a semiotic mode with its own grammar and force, resonating with feminist and psychoanalytic critiques of phallogentric language.

Lighting and spatial composition reinforce these thematic oppositions. Scenes involving Alisdair are confined, dim, and tonally rigid, embodying the sterility of patriarchal control. Moments of intimacy or artistic expression—especially those involving Baines—are rendered in soft, natural light, evoking sensory liberation and emotional openness. Through these visual contrasts, Campion constructs a feminist grammar that differentiates the spaces of repression from those where agency and desire are articulated.

The film's muted color palette, dominated by grays and earthen tones, reflects both the colonial landscape and the restrictive structures surrounding Ada. Yet subtle transitions toward warmer hues during scenes of intimacy or creativity symbolize her evolving subjectivity. The piano's placement across liminal spaces—shorelines, clearings, thresholds—positions it as a mobile signifier of autonomy, crossing and re-crossing boundaries that echo Ada's own negotiations with patriarchal and colonial power.

Campion's *mise-en-scène* frequently frames Ada through apertures—doorways, windows—or isolates her within vast landscapes. These compositions visualize her confinement while simultaneously hinting at her refusal to be contained. The piano's physical movement across the landscape parallels Ada's shifting relationship to power structures and her gradual assertion of mobility and agency.

Sound design further amplifies this feminine signifying system. Ada's music dominates the auditory landscape, functioning as an extension of her inner voice. The piano score does not merely accompany the narrative; it *is* narrative, articulating emotional states, tensions, and desires that spoken language cannot express. Through sound, Campion challenges the primacy of the visual, offering a counter-discourse that privileges affective intensity and emotional resonance over dialogue. Music becomes a language of embodiment and resistance.

Narratively, too, Campion resists patriarchal conventions. While the relationships with Alisdair and Baines shape the plot, the film

never loses sight of Ada's subjectivity. She is neither idealized nor pathologized; instead, she emerges as a complex figure defying feminine stereotypes—the fallen woman, the damsel in distress, the angel of the house, the tragic muse. Her autonomy remains central. This refusal to impose a singular narrative of femininity echoes third-wave feminism's embrace of fluid identities and non-conformity (Heywood & Drake, 1997). The film's pacing—deliberate, contemplative, and rhythmically attuned—further rejects classical Hollywood's action-driven, cause-and-effect progression-like, narrative logic. Campion lingers in moments of stillness and emotional ambiguity, allowing interior states to shape narrative progression. This structure aligns with feminist critiques of male-dominated storytelling, which often marginalizes affect, interiority, and relationality.

The natural environment of colonial New Zealand becomes an extension of Ada's interior landscape. Rugged, untamed, and resistant to containment, the environment mirrors Ada's refusal of domestication and the expected norms of Victorian femininity. Nature in *The Piano* is neither passive nor decorative; it is dynamic, agentic, and symbolically aligned with feminine autonomy and emotional intensity.

Finally, Campion re-imagines heterosexual intimacy through feminist ethics. Alisdair embodies possessive, colonial-patriarchal violence, whereas Baines gradually transforms into a figure who listens, respects, and adapts to Ada's boundaries. Their evolving dynamic destabilizes traditional romantic tropes, offering a model of relationality grounded in consent, recognition, and mutual subjecthood. This shift reframes intimacy as collaboration, attunement, and respect for female agency.

In sum, *The Piano* constructs a cinematic language rooted in feminine expression, embodied subjectivity, and alternative modes of signification. Through its cinematography, soundscape, narrative structure, and symbolic landscape, the film articulates a powerful feminist critique of patriarchal representation while proposing new cinematic possibilities grounded in third-wave values: self-definition, multiplicity, and the refusal of binary constraints. Campion does not simply tell a story *about* a woman; she invites the viewer to see, hear, and feel *with* her—establishing a gaze that is irreducibly feminine, aesthetically innovative, and politically profound.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Jane Campion's *The Piano* remains a seminal work in feminist film theory, offering a rich terrain for examining female agency, autonomy, and representation. This study has demonstrated how Campion constructs a distinctly feminine cinematic gaze that challenges traditional, male-centric narrative and visual conventions. By centering Ada's choices—her modes of expression, her relationship with Baines, and her climactic decision to affirm life—the film articulates a vision of female empowerment deeply aligned with third-wave feminist principles. Collectively, these elements reveal a film that not only critiques dominant cinematic structures but also proposes an alternative feminist model of autonomy that is embodied, affective, and introspective.

Rather than reproducing a binary opposition between victimhood and resistance, *The Piano* embraces the ambiguity and complexity inherent in female agency. Ada is both the subject of desire and a desiring subject; her silence and sexuality are not markers of passivity but methods of self-articulation within oppressive structures. Her autonomy emerges not from rejecting social norms wholesale, but from navigating them according to her own embodied and emotional logic. Campion's aesthetic and narra-

tive strategies—particularly her emphasis on interiority, sensory experience, and non-verbal communication—craft a feminine cinematic language that challenges linear, patriarchal modes of storytelling and prompts viewers to reconsider how women are represented on screen. In this regard, *The Piano* remains acutely relevant to contemporary feminist debates surrounding gender, power, spectatorship, and representation.

A central contribution of this study is the reinterpretation of *The Piano* through a third-wave feminist lens that foregrounds ambiguity, multiplicity, and personal choice over prescriptive ideological coherence or linear empowerment narratives. Whereas earlier feminist critiques often read Ada's sexual relationship with Baines as troubling or irreconcilable with feminist ideals, this article reframes their relationship as a site of negotiated agency, desire, and self-determination. This perspective reflects third-wave feminism's embrace of subjective experience, sexual autonomy, and the diversity of women's lived realities. Within this framework, Ada's choices—to reclaim her voice, to assert control over her body, and ultimately to choose life—constitute acts of defiance and self-definition that embody third-wave feminist values.

This study also underscores the film's formal innovations, arguing that Campion's subversion of the male gaze, her commitment to subjective cinematography, and her reliance on non-verbal modes of expression create a cinematic language that privileges female embodiment and emotional complexity over fixed patriarchal structures. By analyzing how the film's aesthetic and narrative forms mirror Ada's interior world, this research contributes to ongoing debates about feminist storytelling and the capacity of form itself to articulate female subjectivity outside dominant visual regimes. Future scholarship might build on this foundation by investigating how contemporary women filmmakers similarly deploy the feminine gaze to reshape cinematic language and how their work engages with third-wave and emerging fourth-wave concerns—intersectionality, inclusivity, and the representation of diverse and non-normative femininities.

Additionally, this study has framed *The Piano* within its postcolonial context, highlighting the need for more intersectional approaches that consider gender alongside colonial power. While the film centers a white female protagonist, its historical and geographical setting invites further research into how settler colonialism, Māori representation, and feminist narratives intersect—and at times conflict—in the structure and aesthetics of the film.

Ultimately, this article argues that *The Piano* stands as a landmark in feminist cinema not because it adheres to a singular feminist doctrine, but because it embraces the complexities, contradictions, and affective dimensions of women's experiences. Although some critics see the film as failing to meet certain ideological criteria, a third-wave feminist reading reveals a more nuanced and inclusive interpretation—one that values individual choice, emotional authenticity, and multiplicity. Campion's film thus encourages audiences to rethink what feminist cinema can be, illustrating that empowerment is not a fixed destination but an ongoing, deeply personal process. As feminist film theory continues to evolve—incorporating intersectionality, queer theory, and fourth-wave concerns—*The Piano* remains a vital reference point precisely because it refuses simplification. Through its commitment to introspective, resistant, and embodied female subjectivity, Campion's work invites us to re-imagine the boundaries and possibilities of feminist cinematic expression.

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Structured Abstract

Bu makale, *The Piano* (1993) filmi kuramsal temellere dayanan üçüncü dalga feminist bir perspektifle ele almakta ve Jane Campion'ın eserinin özellikle özerklik, bedensel öznellik, cinsel öz-belirlenim ve kişisel tercihin politik anlamı gibi üçüncü dalga feminizmin temel meselelerini önelediğini ve görünür kıldığını savunmaktadır. Film daha önce psikanalitik, ikinci dalga feminist ve postkolonyal çerçeveler üzerinden kapsamlı biçimde incelenmiş olsa da, üçüncü dalga feminist düşünceyle kurduğu kuramsal ve kavramsal yakınlık görece sınırlı biçimde tartışılmıştır. Bu çalışma, filmi üçüncü dalga feminizmin çoğulluk, çelişki, akışkan kimlik ve bedensel deneyim vurgusunu merkeze alan yaklaşımı içinde konumlandırarak, *The Piano*'yu yalnızca ataerkil otoritenin eleştirisi olarak değil; karmaşık, müzakereci ve çok katmanlı bir kadın özneselliği temsili olarak yeniden değerlendirilmektedir.

Makale, feminist teorisi, psikanalitik eleştiri ve kesişimsel feminizmden beslenen nitel bir feminist-hermenötik yöntem benimsemektedir. Film, ideolojik olarak tekil bir mesaj ileten kapalı bir anlatı olarak değil; anlamın görsel kompozisyon, mekânsal düzenleme, işitsel yapı ve bedensel performans aracılığıyla katmanlı biçimde üretildiği bir metinsel alan olarak ele alınmaktadır. Söylem ile sessizlik, görünürlük ile bedensellik, iktidar ile arzu, sahiplik ile özneleşme arasındaki gerilimler analizin merkezini oluşturmaktadır. Çalışmanın temel argümanı üç birbirine ilişkili özneleşme boyutu üzerinden yapılandırılmaktadır: Ada'nın stratejik sessizliği, müzakere edilmiş cinsel özerkliği ve doruk noktadaki yaşamı seçme kararı. Bu üç boyut, kadın özneselliğinin sabit değil, süreçsel ve dönüşebilir bir yapı olarak ele alınmasına olanak tanımaktadır.

İlk olarak, Ada'nın konuşmaması yoksunluk ya da eksiklik olarak değil, bilinçli ve stratejik bir direniş biçimi olarak yeniden yorumlanmaktadır. Fallosentrik düzenlerde konuşma, geleneksel olarak rasyonalite, otorite ve öznellik ile ilişkilendirilirken; sessizlik çoğunlukla edilgenlik ve bastırılmışlık göstergesi olarak kodlanır. Ancak üçüncü dalga feminizmin ikilikleri aşan ve muğlaklığı üretken bir alan olarak gören yaklaşımı, Ada'nın sessizliğini alternatif bir özneleşme kipine dönüştürür. Onun konuşmayı reddetmesi—ya da konuşmaması—kadınlardan beklenen şeffaflık ve itaatkârlık normlarını sekteye uğratar. *The Piano*'da sessizlik bir boşluk değil, yoğun bir anlam alanıdır; bedensel jestler, bakışlar ve müzik başat gösterge sistemine dönüşür. Ada'nın piyanoyla kurduğu ilişki, söze dayalı fallosentrik anlam rejimine alternatif bir ifade biçimi üretir. Bu bağlamda sessizlik, yalnızca bir geri çekilme değil, ataerkil ve kolonyal yapılar içinde konumlanmış bir öznenin stratejik konum alışıdır. Ada, konuşarak sisteme entegre olmak yerine, konuşmama üzerinden sistemin anlam üretim mekanizmalarını istikrarsızlaştırır.

İkinci olarak makale, Ada ile Baines arasındaki cinsel ilişkiyi basit bir sömürü ya da romantik kurtuluş anlatısı olarak değil, müzakere edilen bir iktidar alanı olarak incelemektedir. Piyano pazarlığı sahneleri, kadın bedeninin metalaştırılması bağlamında sıklıkla eleştirilmiştir. Ancak bu çalışma, söz konusu ambivalansı inkâr etmeden, üçüncü dalga feminist bir okumanın daha karmaşık bir güç dinamiğini görünür kıldığını savunmaktadır. Üçüncü dalga feminizm, eylemliliği yalnızca ideal özgürlük koşullarında değil, sınırlı ve çelişkili bağlamlarda da düşünür; kusurlu, riskli ya da çelişkili tercihler de politik anlam taşır. Ada'nın cinsel öz-belirlenimi ani bir güçlenme anlatısından ziyade, aşamalı bir dönüşüm süreci içinde şekillenir. Arzu, başlangıçta mülkiyet ilişkileri ve erkek bakışı tarafından çerçevelense de zamanla öznenin yeniden konumlanmasına imkân verir. Ada, bedeninin yalnızca değişim nesnesi olmadığını, aynı zamanda arzunun kurucu öznesi olabileceğini gösterir. Böylece erotik alan, edilgenliğin değil, bedensel yazarlığın ve yeniden tanımlanan öznel sınırların mekânına dönüşür.

Üçüncü olarak makale, filmin doruk noktasında Ada'nın piyanoyu bırakıp yaşamı seçmesini, üçüncü dalga özerkliğin radikal bir ifadesi olarak yorumlamaktadır. Film boyunca piyano, kimlik, arzu ve sanatsal ifade için metonimik bir işleve sahiptir. Ada'nın başlangıçta kendisini piyano ile birlikte suya bırakması, romantize edilmiş bir kendini yok etme jesti olarak okunabilir. Ancak son anda kararını değiştirerek yaşamı seçmesi, estetikleştirilmiş bir fedakârlıktan bedensel bir geleceğe yönelişi temsil eder. Bu tercih, ne ahlaki bir arınma ne de ideolojik bir zafer olarak çerçevelenir; aksine, kimliğin akışkanlığını ve kararın değiştirilebilirliğini vurgular. Üçüncü dalga feminizmin özneyi tekil bir direniş figürü olarak değil, sürekli müzakere eden ve dönüşen bir yapı olarak kavrayan yaklaşımı burada somutlaşır. Ada'nın özneselliği tek bir kahramanca eylemle değil, kararını değiştirme cesaretiyle belirginleşir.

Çalışmanın önemli katkılarından biri, filmin sözsüz semiyotik düzlemine yaptığı vurgudur. Ada'nın bedensel jestleri, piyanoyla kurduğu dokunsal ilişki ve müzikal ifadesi, fallosentrik söyleme alternatif bir anlam üretim sistemi oluşturur. Film, diyalogdan ziyade atmosferi, dokuyu ve ses tasarımı öne çıkararak geleneksel anlatı merkezli seyir rejimini dönüştürür. İzleyici yalnızca olay örgüsünü takip eden rasyonel bir konumda değil, duyuşsal ve duygulanımsal bir etkileşim içinde yer alır. Böylece biçimsel tercihler ile feminist politika arasında güçlü bir paralellik kurulur; doğrusal anlatının kırılması ve bedensel deneyimin merkezileştirilmesi, üçüncü dalga feminizmin evrenselci iddialara direnen, konumlanmış ve parçalı perspektifleri benimseyen yaklaşımıyla örtüşür.

Sonuç olarak makale, *The Piano*'nun mağduriyet ve direniş arasındaki indirgemeci ikilikleri aşan bir kadın özneselliği vizyonu sunduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Campion'ın filmi, ütopyacı bir feminist çözüm sunmak yerine, çelişkiyi, ambivalansı ve bedensel tercihi öznellik oluşumunun kurucu unsurları olarak ön plana çıkarır. Film, akışkan, öz-belirleyici ve iktidar yapıları içinde sürekli müzakere hâlinde olan bir kadın özneselliğini sinemasal düzeyde ifade ederek, çağdaş feminist tartışmalar bağlamındaki politik güncelliğini sürdürmektedir.