



Barbie and Reviving Ophelia: An Analysis on Subverting Patriarchal Structures

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ABSTRACT:

The study here brings into focus the movie Barbie and how it has successfully brought to limelight if not demolished the existing patriarchal structures and has targeted the deep-rooted gender biases that it brought forth. As per previous academic analyses, the study here intends to prove how the toy brand, Barbie as well as the movie has played a major role in shaping male and female identities. One is right in saying that the patriarchal system is entrenched but how much? The movie, Barbie proves to be a yardstick. The movie's narrative is based on Mary Pipher's 'Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls' (1994). Serving as a framework, the film fuses ideas from the theoretical framework to a bold work of art. The expose that 'Reviving Ophelia' was serves fodder to deconstruct the structures that had been deemed normal till now. The societal pressure on young girls is toxic and the movie is a sharp criticism of the same. Barbie and Ken are central characters in the movie. Yet, at the same time, the focus of the study moves from Barbie to Ken. Through Ken, a sharp satire is unleashed on hegemonic masculinity. Their portrayal in the movie opens the discourse to critical analyses in uncovering uncomfortable yet essential debates around gender roles and societal accountability. Though Barbie became a commercial success, it puts forth a strong argument against patriarchy and the generation of individuals it inflicted- both men and women.

KEYWORDS: Patriarchy, Feminism, Hegemony, Toxic Masculinity, Body shaming, society, accountability



INTRODUCTION

In Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*, dollhood and womanhood have coalesced into creating a feminist fable that allows multiple dimensions and perspectives to its viewers. In trying to strike a reconciliation between Barbieland and the real world, Gerwig dabbles in subverting stereotypes that the (in)famous doll had set in motion when launched on March 9, 1959, ironically a day after International Women's Day. Mattel's unreal fashion icon was named after Ruth Handler's daughter Barbara. Inspired by the German adult doll, Bild Lilli, a doll with breasts and the rest, received scathing criticisms from all sections, especially physicians and psychologists. Thus, 'Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls' written in 1994 by Mary Pipher which explores the societal pressures on American adolescent girls became one of the inspirations of Gerwig while crafting the film. Pipher has stated that self-esteem issues faced by teenagers have been neglected in our pursuit of issues centered around adult women in the feminist movement. Teenage girls have lesser coping skills in comparison to adult women. Hence, they are more prone to sexism and violence meted out to them.

Earlier, previous scholarships were in and around Barbie. Now in the unreal almost surreal Barbieland, the spotlight is on Ken for scholarship inquiry. Based on the broad framework of *Reviving Ophelia*, the study of Barbie in the post-feminist media is groundbreaking in shifting the lens from the female character to the male. The analyses are invigorating in deconstructing the ideals of hegemony. The symbols of patriarchal society have been upended in the humorous exaggeration of stereotypes tied to male identity. The way Ken has been portrayed in the movie is in itself a sharp biting attack on toxic ideals and its role in damaging the identities of men and throwing them into the rigidity of gender roles. Though the movie has capitalized on the post-feminist debate surrounding gender roles, it does urge the viewers to interrogate into such biases.

THEMES IN BARBIE AND REVIVING OPHELIA

Why Barbie became a worldwide phenomenon? Isn't it a masterful fusion of commercial success and cultural critique and inquiry? Not only it serves as a powerful re-evaluation of our society en masse but also reveals underlying tensions. Even the corporates are built upon milking feminist ideals for their own lucrative ends. To take our study further, let's unravel the thematic ties between *Reviving Ophelia* and the movie *Barbie*. Zeroing in on societal norms and oppression, even the matriarchal utopia- Barbieland disseminates systemic biases that one can be anything and nothing is impossible!



1. Analysis of Hegemonic Masculinity:

In analyzing masculinity, the shift from Barbie to Ken is not just masterful but novel. This shift is a departure from previous Barbie-centric scholarship. The pivot to Ken throws patriarchy into disarray. The reason is through Ken the viewers are able to see through the problematic patterns that have hitherto been functioning and running the real-world almost throwing it into the cusp of crisis. How a male is seen with respect to female and vice versa?

Ken, an appendage to Barbie in the Barbieland enjoys patriarchy in the real world where men are in charge. Barbie is chased, suppressed and objectified. Her confrontation with Sasha, a gothy teen much like Wednesday Adams is rather hard-hitting: " You have been making women feel bad about themselves since you were invented," " You set the feminist movement back 50 years, you fascist!" Instead of creating a utopia, Barbie unknowingly had been sowing seeds of a dystopic world. Taking a dive into many controversies: consumerism, gender roles and others, the movie sets the tone straight that real life is significantly much more difficult in real than living in plastic.

2. A Take on Societal Pressure and Mental Health

The razor-sharp criticism on how patriarchy chokes has been dissected incisively in the movie. The male and female identities have borne a profound effect owing to the deep-rooted dominance. Why masculinity has to be performative? And unless performed why masculinity is considered weak? It hasn't had a damaging toll on women but also on the mental well-being of men as well. The movie is groundbreaking. It's rigorous in its exposure of multiple damaging dimensions. Wasn't the tyranny of gender mandate devastating that it drove Pipher to unmask its pressure on young girls and their ordeals? The declining mental health of adolescent girls in fulfilling the gender mandate or rather squeezing themselves into has become a part of wider discourse analyses. The entrapment has afflicted men and women alike. She advocates for the revival of identities freed from the shackles of gender expectations and societal norms.

Ken's vulnerability in his confession, "I don't know who I am without you" can be interpreted from multiple angles. It is not only an assault on iron-clad masculine ideals but brings into perspective theories like hybrid masculinity where manhood is weaved into femininity. Until now, man had been smothered of authentic self-expression. This post-feminist media production of male existential crisis in Ken has brought about a role reversal which until now had been a female domain. Barbie's detachment to Ken's vulnerability was patriarchy's detachment to women's needs and desires. Ken's hunger of validation was once epitomized as woman's turmoil. Not only that, women through their vulnerability served male egos and inflated the same.



3. A Look into Identity and Existential Crisis

Trouble in Paradise starts when Barbie is haunted by thoughts of death and anxiety. Sadness is multiplied owing to the epic falls-flat feet and cellulite! A satire of no lesser degree than Alexander Pope's 'The Rape of the Lock'. In an attempt to awaken her grace and smile, Barbie must visit the real world.

The way Barbie and Ken grapple with identity crisis in their journeys from Barbie-land to the Real World is exactly what Pipher wants to convey through her work. The adolescent girls carrying the weight of societal dictates. The film runs parallel to Pipher's message. Barbie in the real world is onto authentic self-discovery. The suffocating roles of genders were dealt blithely but are now taken seriously by Barbie. Her awakened self to oppression has decided to take full control of the unfairness. With determination, she calls upon change in governance. This radical change in Barbieland propels to iron out deep differences and erase flaws. She appears fearless caring less of the outcome and finally climbs down from her tinsel town seen through rose-tinted glasses. She advocates for an egalitarian society which is equitable and fair to all. She's no longer a Mattel doll but questions the outdated notions of gender in the powerful corporate house. Ken in the real world enjoys instant power. The supremacy that he had been hankering for in the Barbie world. But this euphoria of sweet tasting power is short lived. He soon realizes that skills and resources are beyond the gender divide and is necessary for all. The journey from the idyllic land to the real is a scathing indictment on the rigidities of society through Barbie and Ken.

DISCUSSION

More than 60 years later since its origin, the live-action-packed feature film reprises Mattel's most famous creation in the bespoke candy-coloured land. Margot Robbie along with Ryan Gosling as Barbie and Ken navigate the roller coaster ride from the pink haven and out. All thanks to Barbie for solving the problems of feminism and equal rights from the Barbie land- where dolls can be anything and achieve everything. They seem to have successfully rendered this potpourri of success for women in the real world thereby making them more emancipated and empowered. Why did the idyllic utopia die its natural death? Why was it undermined?

Trouble in Paradise starts when Barbie is haunted by thoughts of death and anxiety. Sadness is multiplied owing to the epic falls-flat feet and cellulite! A satire of no lesser degree than Alexander Pope's 'The Rape of the Lock'. In an attempt to awaken her grace and smile, Barbie must visit the real world. This is the start of self-realization. The turning point of the story is marked by existential crisis. The storyline has been triggered forward in the depiction of Barbie's encounter with the 'Real World'. The real is dying under the weight of unattainable standards. She questions feminism. She questions the feminism of Barbie land and the hollowness of it. Not everything is candy-colored, isn't? Is empowerment really achievable in the profit-driven market that capitalizes



on selling unachievable illusions. What follows is a complex unravelling of the myth of perfect doll? Barbie realizes that the ideals of her own world are shallow and crushing when pitted against the trials of the real world. The idealized persona is nothing but objectification of women thriving on patriarchal dominance. Ken in the real world is impressed by patriarchy and on his return to Barbie-land convinces other Kens to brainwash other barbies into submission. Barbie fails to rewire other barbies into independence but with the help of Gloria reprograms barbie.

The illusion of perfection had led to the commodification of women. The demise of Barbie ushers in Barbara. It is symbolic of the death of shallow flawlessness. Barbara is human and such shift has sparked debate in the post-feminist media regarding the concept female empowerment. Can empowerment only be achieved in objectification and perfection? What about the rawness of human life? This has not only led Barbie to reassess her own model of feminism and empowerment but also sparks debate on the feminism that is not intersectional. Women lives are rich and not monolithic. The perfect dolls can't unify varied women's experiences into one. One is compelled to look beyond the surface level. After all, what's authentic empowerment? What is life beyond being fashion dolls? Barbie supports Ken in discovering his autonomous identity while she meets Ruth to discover her own. She decides to become human again thus marking her permanent return to the real world while overthrowing the façade of previous existence.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the film attempts to deconstruct the very notion of an "ideal" femininity, suggesting that true empowerment stems from an authentic engagement with one's own identity rather than adherence to prescribed societal roles. The public reception of Barbie is controversial and paradoxical like the doll itself. One set of audience accuses Barbie of scaring young girls by always looking perfect. She can be anything and achieve everything, which has further complicated the idea of success and failure, much like the American dream. Another set of audience revels in nostalgia. Celebrating the idea of 'blissfully unaware' dollhood, cinephiles laud the cultural icon for good, bad and worse.

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Peer Reviewed Journal, ISSN 2581-7795

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