CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

Gender representation in media, especially films, is becoming increasingly relevant. The film industry currently raises many gender issues for women to show gender stereotypes. Gender representation in cinema has a significant impact on society because women in films tend to be depicted as weak and helpless creatures (Hasson, 2023). Female characters in films are often reduced to objects or limited characters. Film is a mass media that is widely and quickly consumed, so it can be a means to show gender issues in women. Films often reflect existing social and cultural norms, which can strengthen and break gender stereotypes in the social system. In addition, films also function as a medium to spread culture. (Alsaraireh et al., 2020). Gender representation in films can raise awareness of gender issues and inequality to help audiences understand the realities faced in social life. The audience comes from various circles and all ages, so they can be influenced based on what they see on the screen. The media can influence society's perspective on existing gender role expectations. (Cunial, 2021).

Gender representation in films influences audience perceptions of gender roles and identities. Films as a medium can shape social and cultural views, including views on women. By understanding gender representation, films can shape mindsets about gender roles in society. Understanding movie representations allows viewers to see the social roles assigned to men and women (Montasseri et al., 2020). This is important for critical analysis of film content because representation in the media can influence people's attitudes and behaviours towards

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gender and create unrealistic expectations about the role of women in everyday life. Films are educational tools for feminist issues (Wei, 2024). Therefore, the *Mask Girl* series was created to analyse how female characters are represented. Many countries, including South Korea, produce films depicting women's struggles with social and cultural challenges. The South Korean film industry often raises the theme of women's issues by objectifying women for the benefit of men in a patriarchal system.

In recent years, the South Korean entertainment industry has attracted public attention due to the quality of its production and the themes it raises. The Korean drama industry has recently focused on the issues of feminism and women's empowerment. The drama "Mask Girl," released in 2023, is one example of a gripping drama because it depicts the development of gender representation in Korean series. In this drama, female characters are very prominent. Not only as the main character, the female character in this drama is also a complex individual with a deep story and motivation. This drama presents a narrative about the journey of women who struggle against stereotypes that make women's bodies a privilege. This drama also highlights the impact of objectification, which leads to self-objectification in women. Men feel dominant, so they consider women to be weak and helpless creatures, and they always look at women physically without seeing them as living beings who have feelings and abilities.

In South Korea, gender inequality is increasing along with physical and digital crimes against women, as East Asia Forum reported. According to the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report, South Korea ranks low on the global gender equality index. Women's representation in South Korea has been described

as complicated. Gender inequality and patriarchy in Korea are significant problems. In South Korea, men tend to dominate over women because women are often perceived as weak and powerless. This is due to the influence of traditional Confucianism, which emphasizes values such as ethics, morality, and social relationships. Confucianism has a profound cultural influence on Korean society, particularly in terms of gender norms, women's roles, and family structure. Traditionally, Korean women in South Korea are groomed from a young age to fulfil the role of a dedicated wife and mother. Confucianism is considered an enemy of feminism because it is the source of the patriarchal society structure that has long confined women to the domestic sphere (Jimin, 2024). This reinforces the misogynistic and violent behavior towards women that is rooted in the gender conflict that occurs in Korean society. In South Korea, there are still many women who do not recognize acts of violence in relationships as serious offences (Kim et al., 2019). The number of sexual violence crimes in South Korea has steadily increased since 2005 (Heo et al., 2022)

Violence such as domestic assault, sexual harassment, rape, and even murder of women is prevalent in South Korea. In 2020, South Korea was shocked by the Nth Room case, which was a sexual crime case on social media. There were approximately 74 victims, including 16 minors who were forced to upload explicit images to the chat group. The perpetrators acted by providing photos of the women closest to them to make them objects. These photos will later be used as material to create fake videos using AI (Artificial Intelligence) technology, which produces deepfake sex videos that appear as if the women in the uploaded photos did it. Reported directly from CNN, Cho Joo-bin, who is the owner of the chat room on

the Telegram application, was sentenced on 15 counts of producing and distributing illegal sexual visual materials, forced sexual violence, rape, sexual harassment, blackmail, recording acts of sexual violence, coercion, invasion of privacy, and fraud.

In September 2022, South Korea was shocked by the death of a female employee at a Seoul subway station. The woman was allegedly beaten to death in the toilet by her male co-worker, who had been stalking and threatening her for three years. In addition to real life, crimes against gender are also found in digital form. Digital sex crimes have become a serious problem in South Korea, where women are secretly recorded and then the videos are distributed without their permission. From these cases, women are the primary victims of crimes committed by men who use women as tools for their interests. Women are used as sexual objects without any sense of humanity.

The drama *Mask Girl* presents an interesting phenomenon in the representation of female characters objectified by the patriarchal system, making male characters dominant in this drama. Female characters who struggle to find their identity amidst demands to meet unrealistic beauty standards. In this narrative, men often appear as dominant actors who exploit women's insecurities for their interests, creating complex power dynamics. In this drama, women usually become victims of sexual objectification by men. Through the lens of Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics, we can see how meaning is produced and represented, where the main female character becomes a symbol of the struggle against objectification and gender stereotypes. Women in films are often limited by stereotypes and patriarchal norms that are attached. Women are usually relegated to passive roles, which act as vessels for

male desire (EL FELLAK & ENNAM, 2024). The objectification theory proposed by Fredrickson & Roberts (1997) explains how female protagonists and other women are often viewed as objects, leading to profound psychological experiences related to body image and self-acceptance. It invites the audience to reflect on the impact of social pressure that requires women to always appear perfect while highlighting their efforts to fight these expectations.

In the Korean drama *Mask Girl,* the objectification theory proposed by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) is evident in depicting female characters trapped in social pressure and expectations of beauty. This drama highlights how the main female character is surrounded by an environment that views her as an object, and appearance is the only thing that matters most. Women in this story are treated as tools to fulfill male fantasies and desires, which creates detrimental power. The main female character struggles to fight gender stereotypes that place her in a weak and helpless position, so that she is often trapped in situations that threaten her safety. This drama illustrates how the pressure to always appear perfect can lead to objectification, which causes women to feel trapped by feelings of dissatisfaction with themselves, shame, and even fear.

The study conducted by (Balraj et al., 2021) examined objectification in horror films. This study focuses on how the media portrays women's bodies in a sexualized manner. Horror films often present female characters as visual objects that are only viewed and valued based on their physical appearance, thus creating harmful stereotypes for them. This study shows that female characters in horror films are often shown in situations that satisfy the male gaze, where their bodies are objectified before experiencing violence. This study highlights the importance

of understanding the impact of gendered representations on women's mental health and well-being.

Previous studies discussed the influence of film representation on women's body image. A study conducted by Daha (2020) investigated the objectification of women in television advertisements and its impact on adolescents' mental health, using an objectification approach. This study highlights that advertising content on television often depicts women as sexual objects, which hurts women themselves and their body image. The results of this study show that women who are affected by television advertising content featuring ideal beauty standards tend to experience body shame and are affected by beauty standards that require having an ideal body. This study emphasizes the importance of understanding the impact of objectification in the media and the need to understand the impact of objectification in the media.

If the previous studies examined the relationship between media representations that objectify women and their impact, the study conducted by (Galdi & Guizzo, 2021) developed a framework called Media-Induced Sexual Harassment, which explains how media that sexually objectify women can increase sexual harassment. This study highlights how media that present women as sexual objects can influence viewers to commit acts of harassment because they are perceived as usual. In addition, objectifying women can also lead to decreased empathy for victims and changes in gender norms. This study provides important insights into how the media shapes people's attitudes and behaviors towards sexual harassment.

In a study conducted by (Y. Hu & Gu, 2023), they investigated the relationship between TV drama consumption and the impact of objectification on women, internalization of beauty ideals, and body surveillance for viewers, especially women. Their study found that watching women's TV dramas was related to increased body surveillance. At the same time, the relationship with self-objectification was indirect and mediated by the internalization of beauty ideals. The researchers found that viewers, especially female viewers, tend to internalize beauty standards determined by the media, which can affect how they see themselves. This study highlights the importance of understanding the impact of media consumption on body perception and gender norms, as well as how women's representation in the media can affect psychology and gender equality in society.

The study conducted by (Study et al., 2020) Examined the young male audience's acceptance of the objectification of women and the passivity of women portrayed in the movie "Kabir Singh". This study shows that the movie "Kabir Singh" contains various problematic social constructions, such as toxic masculinity and the objectification of women. Audience responses show that although many reject the idea of violence and objectification in romantic relationships as usual, there is still a tendency among some audiences to consider such acts acceptable as romantic attraction. This study highlights how important it is to understand how age and background influence how audiences receive and conclude about gender representations in films. It also provides valuable insights into culture and behavior in today's society.

Previous research has shown how films act as a tool to voice gender issues. In addition, films are also a medium to influence views on gender. Through the

representation, it is hoped that feminist narratives can be conveyed in different socio-cultural contexts. In addition, many films explore themes related to gender issues, serving as a forum for addressing these issues by depicting women as victims and highlighting efforts to fight for gender rights and justice. Previous studies highlight the importance of understanding the impact of media consumption on body perception and gender equality in society. Previous studies have focused on analyzing the issue of objectification in films without considering its relationship to existing social issues. Several studies have also provided insight into how film as a medium can reinforce or challenge stereotypes and objectification of women. An important aspect of this research is that the author will examine how women are objectified in the drama Mask Girl 2023. The author will examine all forms of objectification, including self-objectification, sexual objectification, and the consequences experienced by women in the context of objectification through signs in the drama *Mask Girl*, which shape perceptions of objectification and stereotypes of women in the drama. Through the semiotics lens developed by Charles Sanders Peirce, the author will examine the objectification experienced by female characters in the drama *Mask Girl.* Through the objectification theory approach by Fredrickson & Roberts, the main issue in the drama *Mask Girl* is related to objectification including self-objectification, sexual objectification, where female characters are constantly judged based on their physical attractiveness and women tend to be victims and are considered not as living beings but only sexual objects in sexual crimes and personal interests for men. This approach focuses on how women are often treated as objects based on their physical appearance, especially their body shape and relevance to women's stereotypes. In the context of sexual

objectification, women are often seen and judged based on their sexual attractiveness. *Mask Girl* also highlights the impact of objectification that causes women as victims to tend to feel shame, anxiety, and try to meet social expectations by objectifying themselves.

1.2. Research Question

1. How does the main female character in the drama *Mask Girl* reflect Women's stereotypes through objectification?

2. How does *Mask Girl* represent the objectification in visuals and narrative?

1.3. Purpose of the Study

1. To explore how the representation of the main female character in the Korean drama *Mask Girl* reflects female stereotypes related to female expectations.

2. To explore how the main female character in the Korean drama *Mask Girl* represents objectification through visual and narrative.

1.4. Scope of the Study

This study focuses on women's representation through the main female character in Mask Girl, through the personality and interaction with other characters. This study will explore how the objectification of women is shown in the drama and its relevance to women's rights and justice stereotypes. This study aims to provide in-depth insight into how the drama *Mask Girl* influences the audience's views on gender issues.

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study aims to voice gender issues and obtain gender rights through an objectification approach. The primary goal is to enhance students' understanding of gender issues. The study results are expected to provide in-depth insights into how female characters are portrayed and how this affects the audience's views on gender issues. This study aims to provide a more substantial representation of women, with the goal of having a positive impact on society.