CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

Gender inequality has remained a critical global issue, deeply ingrained in social, political, and economic systems across various cultures. It manifests in numerous ways, often influenced by traditional gender roles that assign distinct responsibilities and expectations to men and women. Gender inequality is not a natural or inevitable feature of human societies, but a social construct that is produced and reproduced through daily interactions and institutional practices (Lobrer, 2001). Historically, men have been associated with leadership, strength, and decision-making roles, particularly within the public sphere, while women have been relegated to nurturing, domestic, and submissive roles. While gender can be seen as a set of cultural assumptions and practices (Barker and Jane, 2016), feminine qualities are still perceived as less significant compared to masculine ones (Nash, 2020), leaving women in a subordinate position. Patriarchy, a belief system embedded in political, social, and economic structures, reinforces gender inequality by upholding traditional gender roles that favor men (Nash, 2020). Patriarchy can be understood as a system of social structures and practices where men dominate, oppress, and exploit women (Walby, 1990).

Traditional gender roles refer to the set of expectations and norms that society holds regarding the behaviors, traits, and activities deemed appropriate for

men and women. Gender stereotypes can be defined as beliefs about specific attributes that differentiate how women and men are (descriptive beliefs) or should be (prescriptive or proscriptive beliefs), and frequently address traits, physical characteristics, role behaviors, and occupations. (Johar et al. 2003). The persistence of these traditional gender roles has far-reaching implications. They contribute to systemic inequalities, such as wage gaps, unequal career opportunities, and the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions across various sectors, including politics, business, and academia. Sylvia Walby's theory of patriarchalism in her *Theorizing Patriarchy* (1990) elucidates how these entrenched gender roles are perpetuated through six structures: the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, the state, male violence, sexuality, and cultural institutions. These structures, although interconnected, vary in their influence and documentation across different contexts (Walby, 1990). Patriarchal structures create and sustain gender inequality by embedding these roles within the very fabric of social life.

Media and popular culture also play a significant role in shaping societal perceptions of gender roles. Media portrayals are not only widespread but also visually influential, as characters with highly idealized appearances are more likely to be viewed as aspirational (Greenwood, 2016). Through films, television, advertising, and other forms of media, traditional representations of masculinity and femininity are both reinforced and challenged. Boys and men are frequently overrepresented in mainstream media, while girls and women often occupy secondary or supporting roles (Baker & Raney, 2007). These representations usually reflect broader social ideologies, either perpetuating patriarchal norms or

offering critiques of them. Even when women are represented, they are often depicted in stereotypical roles, focusing on their beauty, appearance, and relationships. At the same time, male characters are typically portrayed with greater complexity, engaging in more action-oriented and leadership roles (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004). Films not only entertain but also convey messages about gender dynamics, societal power structures, and individual identity. The portrayal of characters in terms of gender roles, power, and authority within a cinematic narrative can either reinforce existing stereotypes or challenge the status quo, providing an opportunity for audiences to engage critically with these issues (Gerding & Signorielli, 2014).

In recent years, there has been growing attention to how cinema can serve as a platform for critiquing gender inequality and patriarchal structures. Media consumption has been shown to have a significant impact on the development of gender stereotypes, particularly in children and adolescents. With youth spending several hours a day consuming media content (Rideout & Robb, 2019), it is not surprising that media content has a powerful impact on shaping gender beliefs and reinforcing traditional gender roles (Signorielli, 2012). Many filmmakers have utilized their works to explore and challenge traditional gender roles, offering fresh perspectives on masculinity and femininity. However, some films continue to reinforce these stereotypes, often by objectifying women through the lens of the male gaze. The media usually emphasizes physical appearance, particularly for women. Female characters are often portrayed as being concerned with their appearance and are more likely to be judged based on it (Gerding & Signorielli, 2014). Cinema positions the viewer to see women through the perspective of a

heterosexual male, reducing them to passive objects of visual pleasure rather than active participants in the narrative (Mulvey, 1975). This objectification is not just a portrayal of women as submissive or dependent, but rather as figures whose primary role is to be looked at, admired, and sexualized. By rendering women into spectacles for male desire, these films reinforce traditional patriarchal notions of gender, where men are seen as dominant, assertive, and in control. In contrast, women are often viewed as existing primarily for male consumption. This dynamic makes it essential to critically analyze how gender roles are represented in popular films, particularly those that reach a broad audience and have a lasting cultural impact.

As a recent popular film that addresses the main issue of gender inequality and patriarchy, *Barbie the Movie (2023),* a film directed by Greta Gerwig and co-written by Noah Baumbach presents a suitable subject for the analysis. The film tells the story of Barbie, an iconic cultural figure, who lives in the seemingly perfect, all-female world of Barbie Land. In this utopian setting, Barbie enjoys an idealized existence, free from the societal constraints and inequalities that women face in the real world. However, this perfection is disrupted when Barbie begins to question her own identity and purpose, prompting her to journey into the real world. There, she confronts the complexities of gender inequality, patriarchal systems, and the limitations placed on women in society. Barbie's journey from the idealized world of Barbie Land to the real world encapsulates a central conflict in the film: the tension between a utopian vision where women hold power and the entrenched realities of gender inequality in the patriarchal structures of the real world. Using humor, satire, and fantasy elements, the film

critiques the social construction and reinforcement of gender roles, shedding light on the pressures placed on women to conform to societal beauty standards and restrictive stereotypes. The narrative thus challenges traditional notions of femininity and the limitations imposed by patriarchal ideologies, offering a compelling commentary on how such gendered expectations restrict women's agency and self-actualization.

Parallel to Barbie's exploration, Ken's character also undergoes a transformation that critiques hegemonic masculinity. Initially portrayed as a passive figure in Barbie's world, Ken embarks on his journey of self-discovery, which leads him to challenge the toxic ideals of masculinity upheld by patriarchal norms. His evolution from being an accessory to Barbie to an individual confronting the pressures of male identity highlights the impact of patriarchal structures on men, questioning the rigid expectations placed on them as well. Ken's arc thus parallels Barbie's, allowing the film to present a dual critique of how patriarchy confines both genders to predefined roles. The interactions between Barbie and Ken in the film provide a lens through which the complexities of gender inequality are explored. While Barbie's narrative exposes how patriarchy limits women, Ken's journey highlights the equally harmful effects of a patriarchal society on men, showing how gender norms harm both sexes. Through their shared transformations, the film interrogates the pervasive nature of gender inequality and the need to challenge entrenched societal norms. *Barbie the Movie* uses its fantastical elements and satirical tone to engage with these serious themes in a way that is both accessible and thought-provoking.

Several previous studies have employed similar approaches to this study, focusing on gender inequality and patriarchal structures in cinema. Taha (2024) analyzed how women in the film are represented through gendered language, offering insights into the linguistic elements that shape perceptions of femininity within a patriarchal framework. However, Taha's study is limited to language and does not fully explore visual or narrative representations that this study aims to fill. Byrnes, Loreck, and May (2024) critiqued the feminist aspects of the film, questioning whether its portrayal of empowerment is genuine or superficial. While their work engages with feminist discourse, they do not delve deeply into the structural critiques of patriarchy, which is a focus of this study through Mulvey's Male Gaze theory and Walby's Patriarchalism. Yakal (2024) provided an essential analysis of the deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity through the character of Ken, contributing valuable insights into how the film challenges traditional male dominance. However, Yakal's work is primarily focused on masculinity, leaving the exploration of how this deconstruction interacts with female roles and patriarchal structures, which this study seeks to address. Myisha et al. (2023) critically examined how the film continues to reflect patriarchal values, noting that some scenes may unintentionally reinforce traditional gender roles despite its feminist intentions. While their study highlights these limitations, it gives less attention to the ways *Barbie the Movie* actively pushes back against patriarchal norms, the perspective that this study will explore more fully. Lastly, Dewayani (2024) applied a semiotic analysis to examine how gender equality is represented through visual symbols in the film. While this approach aligns with this study's interest in visual culture, Dewayani's work is limited to symbolic

representation. It does not engage with the narrative or structural elements of gender inequality, leaving room for this study to offer a more comprehensive critique.

Despite these contributions, a significant gap remains in the literature regarding the multifaceted relationship between gender roles, patriarchal structures, and feminist critique in *Barbie the Movie (2023)*. Previous studies, such as those by Taha (2024) and Myisha et al. (2023), have focused on specific aspects of gender representation such as language and patriarchal perpetuation yet neither fully addresses the film's broader engagement with feminist theory or its attempt to challenge these structures while Byrnes, Loreck, and May (2024) critique the film's portrayal of feminism, they do not explore the film's deeper structural critiques of patriarchy, leaving an incomplete understanding of its feminist discourse. Yakal (2024) sheds light on the deconstruction of masculinity through Ken's character; however, this study does not sufficiently explore how this theme interacts with female roles or the broader societal implications of gender dynamics. This study aims to fill that gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of how *Barbie the Movie* (2023) portrays patriarchal ideals and gender inequality through its narrative, characters, and visual representations. The film's innovative approach to addressing these issues makes it a valuable subject for further academic exploration.

The novelty of this study lies in its application of Laura Mulvey's Male Gaze theory and Sylvia Walby's concept of patriarchalism to analyze the gender dynamics in *Barbie the Movie* (2023). Mulvey's theory provides a critical lens for

examining how women are objectified and presented as passive objects for male viewers' pleasure in mainstream cinema. This portrayal aligns with patriarchal systems that frequently diminish women's agency and reinforce traditional gender roles by positioning men as active and dominant figures in narratives. Walby's concept of patriarchalism complements this perspective by elucidating how gender inequality is perpetuated through key societal institutions, such as the family, the state, and the broader social system. By integrating these theoretical frameworks, this study aims to explore how *Barbie the Movie* both critiques and reflects patriarchal power structures, particularly through its central characters, Barbie and Ken.

This study will research the portrayal of gender in *Barbie the Movie*, which is particularly significant in the context of modern feminist discourse. As both a cultural critique and a reflection of contemporary gender debates, the film offers a rich source for investigating how media can shape and challenge societal perceptions of gender roles. By applying these theories to the film, this study contributes to ongoing academic discussions on the representation of women and patriarchy in modern media, offering a fresh perspective on how gender inequality is both reflected and critiqued in contemporary cinema.

1.2 Research Questions

The research questions of this study are :

1. How does *Barbie the Movie (2023)* challenge societal perceptions of masculinity and femininity?

2. How does *Barbie the Movie (2023)* critique the objectification of women?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purposes of this study are to :

1. Explore how *Barbie the Movie (2023)* challenges traditional gender roles by addressing societal perceptions of masculinity and femininity.
2. Explore how the film critiques the objectification of women within the framework of patriarchal culture and the male gaze.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This study examines the narratives and scenes in *Barbie the Movie (2023)* that depict the persistence of traditional gender roles in the film and their implications for gender inequality. Additionally, this study will employ Laura Mulvey's Male Gaze theory, in conjunction with Sylvia Walby's concept of patriarchy, to analyze the power dynamics and mechanisms of societal control depicted in the film, particularly how it portrays masculinity and femininity within patriarchal structures. The study also seeks to understand how *Barbie the Movie* critiques conventional gender roles through the lens of feminist theory and its broader impact on societal views regarding gender dynamics and equality.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how gender dynamics in *Barbie the Movie (2023)* influence societal views on gender equality

and patriarchal norms. This deeper analysis is intended to contribute to critical discussions on the role of media in shaping public perceptions of gender roles. By examining these dynamics, the study seeks to enhance scholarly discourse surrounding the challenge of patriarchal structures within contemporary society. It is also expected to serve as a valuable reference for future researchers exploring similar topics on gender inequality and patriarchy or applying the same theoretical approaches, such as Laura Mulvey's Male Gaze theory and Sylvia Walby's concept of patriarchalism.