

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Patriarchy remains a pervasive social system that continues to shape gender relations in contemporary societies. Patriarchy serves as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women (Walby, 1990). According to Bartky (1990), women's bodies are objectified and judged by internalized patriarchal gaze, so that the choices to dress up and maintain the body are not merely personal decisions, but for survival and for gaining recognition within a patriarchal social system. One of the most pervasive ways this system operates is through the exploitation and visual objectification of women's bodies in the entertainment industry, a phenomenon conceptualized as the male gaze. Mulvey (1975) contended that women play the role of the image, while men play the role as the bearer of the look. Male audiences tend to project their fantasy onto the female's body in cinema which is styled accordingly. Women who appear on the screen are often treated as subjects to look at, with their appearances shaped to meet the standards. As a result, patriarchal values become internalized by women themselves, shaping how they perceive and regulate their own bodies.

The Substance (2024), directed by Coralie Fargeat, is a movie that brings the issue of women's bodies in the entertainment industry. The film revolves around Elisabeth Sparkle, who struggles with aging and societal expectations

surrounding youth and physical perfection in the entertainment industry. By introducing a “younger version” of herself, the narrative visually and psychologically exposes how patriarchal norms about beauty, aging, and identity are internalized and resisted.

This study analyses how the movie represents the issues about women’s bodies in order to have a wider understanding regarding the issue. By using Foucauldian feminist theory about domination over women’s bodies, this study shows that women’s bodies are shaped and controlled by society. Feminist thinker like Bartky (1990) stated that patriarchy not only limits women from the outside but also makes them control themselves through beauty standards and social pressure. This theory points out that women often accept and follow these expectations, watching and shaping their own bodies to fit the image of femininity created by a patriarchal society. Bordo (1993) argued that society places intense attention on women's bodies. However, they treat it more like something that should be fixed, modified, and disciplined. This obsession leads to emotional detachment from one’s body and it allows harmful practices to feel normal. This aligns with the principle of the internalization of patriarchy, in which individuals emotionally conform to standards imposed by a particular dominant group.

In the previous studies, the issue of patriarchy on women’s bodies in the media, especially in movies, has universally become an interesting topic. The female body is often treated merely as a sexual object by men, whilst their needs and emotional requirements are neglected (A & Radhakrishnan, 2023). On the other hand, institutions construct women’s body image and limit their

identities to fit into social expectations shaped and reinforced by the media that permeates everyday life (Neisya et al., 2023; Nirmalawati & Nurhayati, 2022).

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by applying Sandra Bartky's theory about body discipline to discuss the movie *The Substance* (2024) and to analyse visual and narrative construction of women's bodies in film using Roland Barthes' theory. By doing so, it extends the application of more feminist theory in order to highlight the representation of women's bodies in contemporary media

1.2 Research Question

1. How does the movie *The Substance* represent women's bodies?
2. How are systems of feminine body discipline constructed through the representation of women's bodies in *The Substance*?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

1. To analyse the representation of women's bodies in *The Substance*.
2. To analyse the construction of feminine body discipline through the representation of women's bodies in *The Substance*.

1.4 Limitation of the Study

This study is limited to analyze the representation of patriarchy on women's bodies in the movie *The Substance* (2024) using Bartky's theory about body discipline and Barthes' theory about semiology as the main

framework. It does not cover other interpretations or external factors such as socio-political context or readers' perspectives.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is to bring the issue of women's bodies as portrayed in the movie into critical discourse and to examine how patriarchal values are constructed, reinforced, and challenged against women's bodies through its narrative and characters. By analysing these representations, the study aims to raise awareness of patriarchal issues against women's bodies within society and encourage audiences to reflect on how such power structures influence gender roles, social expectations, and everyday experiences. Furthermore, this study seeks to contribute to broader discussions on body image by highlighting the role of film as a medium that both mirrors and shapes societal attitudes toward women's bodies.

1.6 State of the Art

In the media, especially movies, the issue related to women's bodies has universally become an interesting topic. A study by A and Radhakrishnan (2023) about "*Female Body as the 'Other': Rituals and Biotechnical approach using Perumal Murugan's One Part Woman and Matrubhoomi: A Nation Without Women*" discussed the exploitation of women's bodies in the movie and novel. The researchers analysed the subject using the theory of Biocapitalism, trauma theory, Judith Butler's Performative Acts and Gender Constitution. It focused on how customs, cultural traditions, and beliefs operate

as an obstacle to biotechnology. Women are expected to fulfill men's sexual desires and to deliver their infants due to the rooted patriarchy in the society and culture, while at the same time their needs and emotional requirements are being neglected. The purpose of this study is to explore how cultural norms are used to mold the female body and how this limits the development of biotechnology. Furthermore, it examines how history is being redefined from the perspective of those who have experienced trauma.

A study about *"Body Discipline in The Movie 'Turning Red': Foucauldian Discourse"* by Neisya et al. (2023) used a descriptive qualitative method to analyse the issue in the movie. The researchers focus on the forms of body discipline of Meilin Lee and the impact on the personality of Meilin Lee, a character from the movie *"Turning Red"*. Meanwhile, this study used Michel Foucault's theory about body discipline. The finding of this study is that institutions play a big role in shaping women's bodies. In the movie, Meilin Lee is regulated and shaped by her family and society with rules that later limit her. This study further revealed that power relations play a central role in regulating women's bodies within contemporary society. It demonstrates how individuals' emotional and behavioral responses to external expectations are shaped through the interaction of family dynamics, social environments, and broader societal norms.

A study by Nirmalawati and Nurhayati (2022) about *"The Concept Of Female Body In Shallow Hal Movie"* used qualitative methods to gather information about a phenomenon in a comprehensive manner. All dialogues are analysed using discourse analysis approach and Michel Foucault's theory

about power. This study concluded that to be said beautiful, a woman should meet the beauty standards in society. The standards did not exist until humans were imposed by the media. Those media show how beautiful women should look: slim, busty, fit into men's desires. These ideas become so normalized that people feel forced to conform. If they do not, they risk exclusion until they meet the accepted standard.

Although some study has already discussed the issue of women's bodies, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by applying Susan Bartky's theory about femininity and domination to discuss the movie *The Substance* (2024) and to analyze visual and narrative construction of women's bodies in movies. Furthermore, *The Substance* (2024) as a body horror movie is selected to highlight women's fear about the beauty standards and the alteration of their bodies, something that has not been done in the previous researches. By doing so, it extends the application of more feminist theory in order to highlight the representation of women's bodies in contemporary media, especially movies.