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Decoding the Perpetuation of Patriarchal Culture in the *Barbie* Movie

Nabila Myisha¹, Angelia Brigita Maharani¹, Akira Hilal Ramadhan¹, Dinda Sabila¹, Mirza Fathima Jauhar Kamalia^{1*}

¹Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyze the representation of patriarchal culture in the Barbie film through a semiotic study that uses Roland Barthes' theory. Roland Barthes developed semiotic theory into three parts, namely denotation, connotation, and myth, but in this study, the researchers only utilized connotation and denotation. This research uses a descriptive qualitative method. The data was taken from the scenes and script of the Barbie 2023 film. The researchers collected data by watching the film, observing the characters in every scene and the script, then taking some notes to categorize the semiotic symbols based on Roland Barthes' theory and analyzing the research data. The results of this research show that despite the movie "Barbie," association with feminism, it does not change the fact that the movie still embodies a patriarchal culture that harms women. This cultural framework perpetuates traditional gender roles, positioning men as leaders, decision-makers, and primary providers while assigning women subordinate roles. In patriarchal cultures, male privilege is ingrained, leading to the marginalization and subjugation of women. This entrenched culture of male privilege influences deep-rooted misogyny, sexism, and societal expectations.

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INTRODUCTION

The scientific method now has a new hue because to the advancements in filmmaking, which make it possible to employ movies as a teaching tool for all societal levels. This progress is possible because movies are today a relatively accessible form of audio-visual media that can be accessed by anybody, anywhere, at any time. Depending on what the film intends to teach its viewers, a movie can cover a wide range of topics. Film serves as a visual medium these days, using visual cues, symbols, and images as components of its teaching and presentation (Albiladi, et al :2018). Film viewers may find it simpler to absorb knowledge and education through the use of images, symbols, and visual cues. But occasionally, this causes audiences to perceive things differently. The film's message will have a wide range of interpretations because

*CONTACT: mirza.kamalia@untag-sby.ac.id

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several factors can affect it. The audience's capacity to comprehend the visual information in the movie is still the most crucial element (Lebyedyeva, 2019). People can enter a time where visual symbols are used as social culture because they can comprehend the visual parts of the film. In this instance, individuals frequently use visual cues to deduce the meaning and interpretation that results in the film's message. These kinds of phenomena are social phenomena that are strongly tied to people's daily lives in the modern period. In addition, Mirzoeff (1998) claimed that this has forced people to engage with modernity, which is primarily focused on social and cultural issues. One of the instructional strategies for the social development of persons, mainly the film audience itself, is the comprehension of messages in films.

Considering that many women still face discrimination in their daily lives, movies frequently address the idea of gender equality. Since this is a very serious issue, research and analysis of it must continue to be done and publicized for public consumption. The purpose of this essay is to raise awareness of this societal issue and provide women the opportunity to take advantage of possibilities to be on par with males. The aim to raise awareness among all stakeholders so that the current patriarchal cultural system can positively empower women in all spheres is reflected in the abundance of studies presented as educational media films. (Pradanri, 2018)

Patriarchy is a system of social life in which the center of power and authority rests with men, usually within the family structure or society more broadly. In a patriarchal context, men are seen to dominate leadership roles, make decisions, and control resources and social structures. (Gwen, 2009) argues that the concept of patriarchy remains relevant and useful in theorizing violence against women, as it evokes gender hierarchies, domination, and power structures. Men are often granted greater rights and privileges than women in many aspects of life, including property rights, education, and access to resources (Badaoui, 2016). Patriarchy is challenged in *Barbie* movie considering the one who dominates and becomes the ruler of the system is the woman. The writers explain how patriarchy is reversed but at the same time, it is also perpetuated in the movie and analyze the meaning behind it.

Ferdinand de Saussure was a Swiss linguist who lived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He is considered the founding father of semiotics or semiology. His famous work, "Course in General Linguistics" introduced the basic concepts of semiotics and laid the foundation for the subsequent development of semiotic science. Semiotic theory is a study of the science of signs, in semiotics considers social phenomena in society and culture as signs, semiotics itself is the study of systems, rules, and conventions that allow these signs to have their meaning (Octaviani, 2021) Ferdinand de Saussure was a Swiss linguist who lived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He is considered the founding father of semiotics or semiology. His famous work, "Course in General Linguistics" introduced the basic concepts of semiotics and laid the foundation for the subsequent development of semiotic science. Semiotic theory is a study of the science of signs, in semiotics considers social phenomena in society and culture as signs, semiotics itself is the study of systems, rules, and conventions that allow these signs to have their meaning (Octaviani, 2021).

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Roland Barthes is known as one of the structuralist thinkers who practiced Saussure's linguistic and semiological models (Octaviani, 2021). Barthes adapted Saussure's concept of the relationship between the signifier (symbol or sign) and the signified (concept or meaning). For him, meaning is not attached to objects or words but is formed by the relationship between signifier and signified. Barthes divides denotation (literal or descriptive meaning) and connotation (symbolic or interpretive meaning) in the study of semiotics. This can help a deeper understanding of how signs convey meaning. Barthes has contributed greatly to the development of semiotic theory and was instrumental in applying various semiotic concepts to cultural and literary analysis. Myth in the view of Roland Barthes's semiotic theory is a communication system, a communication system that becomes a message. Myths in Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory are by themselves different from the myths that we consider superstitious, unreasonable, ahistorical, and others, but myth according to Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory is a person's type of speech (Vera, 2014:26).

The previous research (Dianiya, 2020) on the film 'Parasite' discussed culture and international success. The study delved into the representation of social classes in the film using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis. The researcher revealed crucial points related to signs in the film, such as depicting different lifestyles among diverse social classes, differences in fashion or clothing worn by each class, unconscious social class boundaries, exploring how body odor can be associated with class identity, class conflicts with black and white symbols related to the contrast between social classes. The research emphasized that 'Parasite' goes beyond simple verbal representations of wealth and poverty in its dialogue; the film also portrays a positive depiction of upper-class dominance. The representation of social classes in the film 'Parasite' is considered highly effective, with careful considerations in scene selection, props, and cinematography, contributing to the film's overall success. The study concluded that the nuanced portrayal of social class dynamics in the film adds depth and authenticity to the narrative, showcasing the intricacies of societal hierarchy. Therefore, this research will expand on the semiotic perspective of patriarchal culture through the film 'Barbie,' representing patriarchal culture, and how this will be connected to Roland Barthes' semiotic concepts.

Gender in semiotics refers to the way signs or symbols are used to represent and understand gender differences in language, culture, and society. Semiotic theory, shaped by the thought of Ferdinand de Saussure and developed by Roland Barthes and others, presents an analytical approach to how signs create meaning in social contexts (Rudy & Wijayanti, 2023). Men and women are designed to possess equal worth and dignity despite having distinct physical forms and roles. Nevertheless, over time, societal expectations have assigned various roles and statuses to each gender, turning them into ingrained habits that result in unequal treatment

(Yusrina, 2022). Gender equality is one of the most interesting topics to discuss because it has pros and cons that are often attached to this topic. Gender equality began in Indonesian society in the 1990s. In this research, the representation of challenging the traditional gender roles is dominantly depicted through *Barbie* movie. However, the writers explain how the movie tries to perpetuate the traditional gender roles, especially towards women.

This research will apply Roland Barthes's semiotic theory to analyze how visual signals are employed in movies. The study's focus is on how visual cues—such as rhymes, downward signals, and arguments—are used in movies that tackle the societal topic of gender discrimination to reflect female discrimination. Similar to the previous explanation, the goal of this article is to raise awareness of the patriarchal cultural system and promote education about it to achieve parity between the rights of men and women. The purpose of this essay is to offer a fresh viewpoint on the patriarchal cultural structure to promote women's empowerment in the modern day.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative research method. Qualitative research is a research procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from people and observable behavior (Moleong, 2014). With text will focus on the semiotic analysis of the representation of patriarchy in the movie 'Barbie'. Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis will be used to identify and analyze the signs or symbols used in this film to represent patriarchal culture. The concepts of denotation and connotation developed by Roland Barthes will be applied to understand the various layers of meaning contained in the text. The results of the analysis will be examined to explore the meaning contained in the depiction of patriarchy in the movie 'Barbie'. This discussion will include the researcher's interpretation of the symbols found and their impact on the understanding of patriarchal culture. Using qualitative methods, this research will explore the understanding of how the movie 'Barbie' portrays patriarchal culture through the signs and symbols used in its narrative.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The researchers gathered the data through several scenes from a Barbie movie. The researchers discovered that there are 2 types of semiotics according to Roland Barthes, namely denotation and connotation.

1) Scene 1



Figure 1 Barbie and Ken in Construction site

a) **Denotation:**

- In Figure 1, Barbie feels that the real world they are visiting is very different from their world, Barbie Land. But it's different with Ken who likes the conditions that occur in the real world.

b) **Connotation:**

- Barbie's comment about construction sites being *"very... male"* is a sharp critique of the gender balance in certain industries. Despite the progress that has been made in terms of gender equality, many fields are still dominated by men, creating an unfriendly or even hostile environment for women. Barbie's wish to see *"a little bit of girl power"* on the construction site highlights her awareness of this issue and her desire for change. The response from Ken, *"Yeah, everything is almost, like, upside down, here,"* is an acknowledgment of the differences between the real world and Barbie Land. In Barbie Land, traditional gender roles are subverted, with women taking leadership roles and men often playing supporting roles. Men are dominating in every sector, especially in business, by being CEOs or directors of companies in real life. Men are also dominating in the domestic sector in real life. This reversal serves as a critique of power dynamics in the real world and highlights the potential for a more equal balance of power between men and women. However, this scene also highlights the toughness and potential of women. Despite the challenges they face, women continue to struggle for equality and representation in all areas of life. They are not just passive observers, but also active participants in the fight for gender equality.

2) **Scene 2**



Figure 2 Mattel company are holding a meeting

a) **Denotation:**

- In this Figure 2, the Mattel company leaders are holding a meeting.

b) **Connotation:**

- This is deeply rooted in societal norms and stereotypes that have long associated leadership with masculine traits. Men are often perceived as assertive, decisive, and strong, qualities traditionally associated with effective leadership. This preference is so common that it continues to exist even in companies that sell products specifically for women,

implying that men are better equipped to understand and fulfill the needs of the market. This scene subtly suggests that women are not considered for leadership roles, enforcing the stereotype that leadership is a male domain. It implies that women, regardless of their skills, expertise, or understanding of the market, are not seen as potential leaders since women are less logical than men (Tyson, 2006). Women should remain in the domestic sector. They are not able to expand their role in more expanded areas such as business that need the sense of strong leadership. This is a reflection of society's belief that leadership traits are essentially for men.

3) Scene 3 and 4

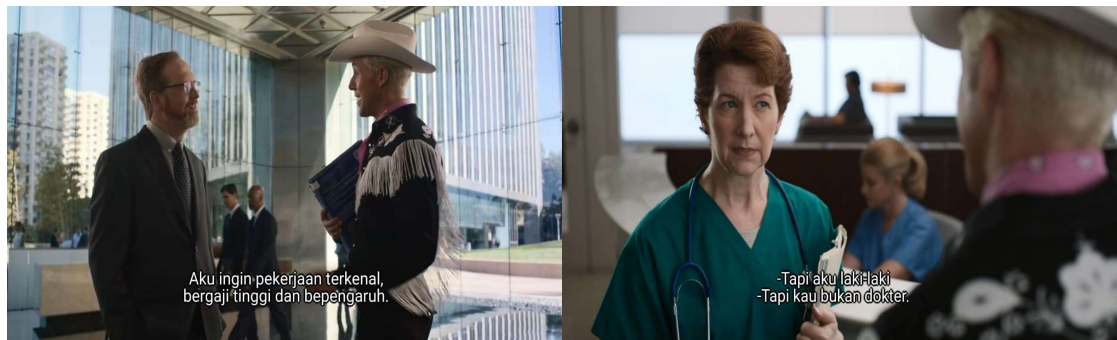


Figure 3 Ken applies a job

a) Denotation:

- In Figure 3 shows that Ken is slowly realizing the concept of patriarchy and would like to implement it into his life.

b) Connotation:

- This scene portrays the prevalent societal idea that men, due to their gender, can do any role or profession. This belief is deeply rooted in traditional gender norms and stereotypes that associate men with power, authority, and competence. This suggests that men's potential is limitless, and their abilities are not restricted by society's expectations or norms. However, this paradigm is being increasingly challenged in today's world. The reality is that women are just as capable as men in any role or job. Women have proven time and again that they can excel in traditionally male-dominated fields, breaking boundaries and challenging the norm. They have demonstrated their competence, resilience, and leadership in sectors ranging from science and technology to politics and business. Despite such progress, there are still social injustices and structural barriers that constrain women's full participation and advancement in the world of work. These include the gender pay gap, lack of representation in leadership positions, and societal expectations of gender roles. These challenges underscore the need for continued efforts to achieve gender equality in the workplace.

4) Scene 5



Figure 4 Barbie finds inequalities in Mattel Company

a) **Denotation:**

- In Figure 4, Barbie seems to be confused by the difference in authority that exists in the real world because what she knows is that this Mattel company sells dolls and there should be a woman in charge of this company.

b) **Connotation:**

- Figure 4 represents a sharp contrast between the authority dynamics in Barbie Land and the real world, leaving Barbie a bit shocked. In Barbie Land, where she is from, women are often in positions of authority, in contrast to the real world where men hold more of these roles. This difference came as a shock to Barbie when she observed it in a company that specifically serves women. Barbie's shock highlighted the incongruence that she felt. She found it surreal that a company, whose primary audience is women, did not have a woman in a responsible leadership role. This wish derives from her belief that those who best understand the needs and wants of consumers – in this case, women – are supposed to be the ones who make important decisions. Figure 4 highlights the issue of gender inequality that is pervasive in leadership roles in the corporate world. Even though women form an important part of the consumer base and workforce, they are often underrepresented in decision-making roles. We often find that the one who makes decisions is the man since logic and intelligence are naturally associated with the man (Tyson: 2006). This is particularly ironic in a company like the one observed by Barbie, where the products are designed for women, yet the decisions are largely made by men.

5) **Scene 6**

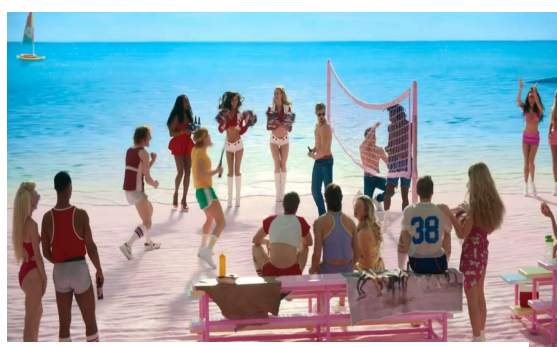


Figure 5 Barbies and Kens are having fun at the beach

a) **Denotation:**

- A bunch of Barbies and Kens are having fun and are gathering at the beach.

b) **Connotation:**

- In Figure 5 the Kens and Barbies can be seen gathering at the beach. A conspicuous patriarchal undertone permeates the atmosphere, notably evidenced by the Kens actively engaging in a game of volleyball against each other. Meanwhile, the Barbies assume passive roles on the sidelines, observing the game, serving beverages, and offering vocal encouragement. This scenario perpetuates a patriarchal culture, symbolizing the traditional expectation that men partake in sports while women adopt supporting roles. The stark division between the activities reflects societal norms, implying that certain physical pursuits are deemed exclusively masculine. This perpetuates the notion that women are meant to serve and support men rather than actively participate in the same sports and recreational activities. The scene, therefore, serves as a visual commentary on deep-rooted gender stereotypes, shedding light on the societal expectations that continue to shape dynamics within recreational spaces.

6) **Scene 7**



Figure 6 Barbie exclaims to Ken

a) **Denotation:**

- In Figure 6, Barbie exclaims to Ken that he is currently in her house to which he denies.

b) **Connotation:**

- In this intriguing scene, Barbie finds herself in a challenging situation as she attempts to persuade Ken to leave her house, only to be met with resistance as he boldly asserts a claim over her living space. This scenario serves as a reflection of prevailing patriarchal norms, where traditional gender roles dictate that men are often perceived as the primary breadwinners or providers within a household. Ken's unwavering refusal to vacate Barbie's home not only underscores the power dynamics at play but also symbolizes a broader societal expectation that men should assert dominance and control, particularly in matters related to property and residence. The refusal to acknowledge Barbie's autonomy over her own space perpetuates the deeply ingrained gender norms that have historically positioned men as the dominant figures in both the economic and domestic spheres. Figure 6, therefore, serves as a poignant commentary on the persistence of patriarchal ideals and the challenges individuals may face when challenging traditional gender roles within the broader cultural context.

7) Scene 8



Figure 7 Ken teach Barbie

a) Denotation:

- Ken is explaining to Barbie how to use Photoshop.

b) Connotation:

- Figure 7 has a Ken who is leaning closer, over to Barbie as he explains how to use Photoshop correctly. Within the overarching context of patriarchal culture, a pervasive notion of male superiority over women prevails. This cultural backdrop gives rise to a phenomenon commonly recognized as mansplaining, wherein men tend to overly explain subjects, either to impress or belittle others. In the specific scenario depicted, Ken engages in mansplaining, seeking to impress Barbie through elaborate explanations. Beyond verbal interactions, the scene unfolds with additional layers of gender dynamics. Ken's body language takes center stage, as he leans over Barbie, physically asserting his dominance and creating a metaphorical cage around her seated form. This deliberate posture serves to underscore the power dynamics, with Ken towering over Barbie, symbolizing a display of dominance. Moreover, there's a nuanced layer of gendered objectification evident in the scene. Barbie's attire, coupled with Ken's physical posture, introduces an element of oversexualization. The revealing outfit worn by Barbie, juxtaposed with Ken's leaning position, suggests a potential exploitation of the female form. Ken's point of view could be interpreted as a means of objectifying Barbie, reinforcing the complex interplay of power, gender, and sexuality within the broader patriarchal narrative.

8) Scene 9

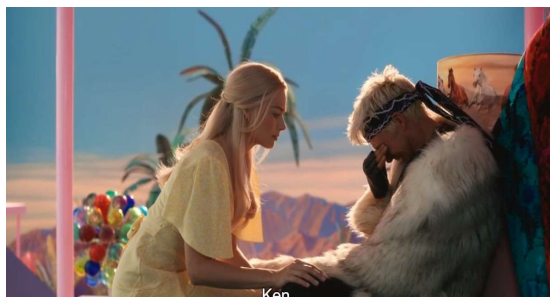


Figure 8 Barbie console Ken

a) **Denotation:**

- Ken is crying while Barbie is trying to console him.

b) **Connotation:**

- This scene occurs when Ken is crying on top of Barbie's bed while Barbie is trying to console him. In general, patriarchal form, women are often assigned the role of being patient and nurturing, as these traits are closely associated with traditional motherly duties. The depicted scene encapsulates this societal expectation as Barbie assumes the role of nurturer towards Ken, despite the Kens infiltrating Barbie's land with their harmful cultural influences. Barbie, in this context, mirrors the societal archetype of women's patience and gentleness even when faced with challenging circumstances. Her approach involves nurturing Ken through a soft-spoken voice and a demeanor marked by patience, mirroring the real-world dynamics of patriarchy. In reality, women are often expected to remain patient even in situations where men may make mistakes or infringe upon their rights. This portrayal in the scene reinforces the societal construct that places women in the role of caretakers, fostering an understanding of how gender norms and expectations shape interpersonal interactions within the broader patriarchal framework. In another hand, patriarchal gender roles are destructive for men as well considering that men are forbidden to cry. Men are supposed to be strong; they are not supposed to cry since crying is a sign of weakness. Men can also cry every time they feel sad or disappointed. Naturally, every human can feel some emotions over something that happen in their life.

CONCLUSION

The notion of patriarchal culture from the movie "Barbie" is prevalent according to the researchers. In general terms, patriarchy refers to a social system where men hold primary authority, dominance, and power, shaping societal norms, values, and structures to favor male perspectives. This cultural framework perpetuates traditional gender roles, positioning men as leaders, decision-makers, and primary providers while assigning women subordinate roles in patriarchal cultures, male privilege is ingrained, leading to the marginalization and subjugation of women. This systemic imbalance extends to various aspects of life, influencing family dynamics, work environments, and societal expectations. These traits of patriarchy are identified accordingly in terms of denotative message and connotative message from the scene in the movie. Patriarchal cultures tend to reinforce gender stereotypes, limiting opportunities for women and prescribing norms that dictate what is proper behavior for women. The concept of patriarchy intersects with issues of sexism, misogyny, and unequal power distribution. It can be concluded that even though the movie Barbie is promoted and known as a feminist movement movie, it does not change the fact that the movie still embodies a patriarchal culture that harms women.

Authors Information

Nabila Myisha, English Department of Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Student, messhabil@gmail.com

Angelia Brigita Maharani, English Department of Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Student, angeliabrigitha97@gmail.com

Akira Hilal Ramadhan, English Department of Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Student, akiramadhani@gmail.com.

Dinda Sabila, English English Department of Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Student, dindaaasabillaa666@gmail.com

Mirza Fathima Jauhar Kamalia, English English Department of Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Lecturer, post-colonialism and gender studies, mirza.kamalia@untag-sby.ac.id

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