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"Imagination, Life is Your Creation": The Politics and Aesthetics of Representations in Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (2023)

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Abstract: As a popular cultural artefact, Mattel's Barbie doll has been subjected to discourses scrutinising its ideal plastic beauty. Through its emotional branding, Barbie has implemented an effective strategy to inspire impressionable girlhood into an economically independent and self-sufficient womanhood. From imitating a Caucasian, objectified femininity in a bathing suit to later incorporating ethnic and morphological diversities in its Barbie dolls, Mattel has been critiqued for its consumerist marketing and faux feminist propaganda. In 2023, Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* adapted Mattel's narrative for the cinema. As a satire, it has reinterpreted Mattel's branding through its protagonist, Stereotypical Barbie's journey from Barbie Land to the Real World. The plot highlights patriarchy as the primal issue of its metafictional world, as the Barbies, the Kens and the Humans unite together to resist it. This essay attempts to map the representational politics and aesthetics of Gerwig's film. *Barbie* assimilates in its aesthetics, the elements of Mattel's pink Barbie world within its mise-en-scène. In its politics, *Barbie* incorporates divergent discourses. They range from satirising and incorporating matriarchy, lifestyle and token feminism(s) in Barbie Land to mobilising a feminist sisterhood in reclaiming it from Kendom. The research questions will inquire into the characters' volatile identities and interpersonal relationships, predominantly influenced by patriarchy. The research methodology will incorporate theoretical frameworks from Gender and Sexuality Studies, Film Studies and Cultural Studies to signify *Barbie*'s ambivalent commentary, as a popular culture text, in framing Stereotypical Barbie's metamorphosis from plasticity to womanhood.

Keywords: Barbie, feminism, human, patriarchy, womanhood.

"That's My Barbie": Introduction

Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* (2023) is a cinematic reinterpretation of Mattel's quintessential Barbie doll that occupied a significant keystone in American popular culture. Marking its 80th anniversary in 2025, Mattel, Inc. was founded by the husbandandwife pair, Ruth and Elliot Handler, along with Harold Matson, in January, 1945. Its business identity as an American toy manufacturer began as the company implemented the leftover materials of its picture frames products, using them to fashion dollhouse furniture, along with the launch of the "Uke-a-Doodle," a children's ukulele in 1947 (Funding Universe). In the twenty-first-century, Mattel comprises a comprehensive listing of children's entertainment simulations ranging from Thomas & Friends, Fisher Price, Hot Wheels to Monster High, American Girl and Barbie (Mattel).

Regarding Barbie, Uncu writes, "this ultra-feminine doll," has been transformed into "a popular culture icon in the lust of Marilyn Monroe," characterised by "her long blonde hair," "fashionable clothing style," "high heels," "red lipstick" and "well-proportioned physique" (88). Barbie's external appearance was inspired by the X-rated German comic strip character, Bild Lilli, whose experiences encompassed maintaining her luxurious lifestyle by associating with sex work (Monteil). Before the doll's release, in 1958,

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Mattel's market research reports highlighted that mothers felt Barbie had "too much of a figure," worried about the doll's portrayed sexualisation on their impressionable daughters (Britannica). Further, in 1963, Mattel sold questionable Barbie accessories, promoting unhealthy psycho-somatic aspirations, such as a book titled *How to Lose Weight* with the advice, "Don't eat" (Monteil). Susan Stern observes that Ruth Handler's business aspirations were motivated by her daughter's proclivity to play with adult paper dolls. She deduced that a doll with a three-dimensional replica of a biological woman's body would assist little girls to "ease their feelings about themselves and their breasts" (qtd. in Tulinski 6). Handler's vision behind Barbie's fabrication followed her intention, "It would be pretty, but not so specifically pretty that girls could not imagine themselves in its place" (Lord 26). On one hand, Barbie was designed as "glamorous and American" (Lord 43), imbibing the fashion world's haute couture emulations, with the initial twenty-one ensembles, inspired by Dior, Balenciaga, Balmain, Carven, Fath, Givenchy, Gres, Heim, Schiaparelli and Saint Lauren (Boy 22). On the other hand, Handler assimilated Barbie's ensembles, mirroring the apparently recognisable representations of the twentieth-century American teenager, ranging from the ballerina outfit and tennis dress to the football game outfit.

According to Frederic Stopp, satire has traditionally "borrowed its ground-plan, parasitically" and "by ironic inversion, from other forms of ordered expression in art or in life" (201). In her film, Gerwig, taking after Stopp's definition, borrows and ironically inverts Mattel's "ordered expression" of a projected culture of lifestyle feminism. By the early 1980s, the politicised sisterhood, intrinsic to the radical feminist movement, gradually lost its significance to a lifestyle-based feminism. This notion of interpretation has rendered feminism more attainable. It has propagated the practice of feminist politics through consumerist choices and appropriated alternations to daily routines, replacing a fundamental destabilisation of patriarchal culture and oppression. It has contextualised individualistic oppression and retaliation as a generalised phenomenon, facile in its emulation and interpretation. During the initial ten years of Barbie's existence, she signified quintessential Caucasian features as a traditionally tall, slender, white young woman with straight, blonde hair. Mattel's production schemes to diversify Barbie's ethnic and professional characteristics can be comprehended as attempts to strengthen its capitalist profits by penetrating multifarious community markets. In 2002, Mattel introduced the first pregnant Barbie, Midge, flaunting a detachable stomach which popped "out a curled-up baby when her belly was opened" (CBS News). As the customers were concerned with the representation of a pregnant doll with their children, Mattel discontinued its production due to the product's substandard sales. In Gerwig's film, this has been satirised, as the narrator muses, "Midge was Barbie's pregnant friend. Let's not show Midge, actually. She was discontinued by Mattel because a pregnant doll is just too weird" (*Barbie* 1:47:47–41).

The introductory montage of Gerwig's film surfaces numerous Barbie models. It frames the Stereotypical Barbie in a bathing suit, the Astronaut Barbie, the Totally Hair Barbie with long blonde hair, the Aerobics Workout Barbie, the Flight Attendant Barbie, amongst others, behind a white background. Gerwig's satire directs itself against Mattel's lifestyle feminism, as the narrator voices:

> Yes, Barbie changed everything. Then, she changed it all again… She might have started out as just a lady in a bathing suit, but she became so much more. She has her own money, her own house, her own car, her own career. Because Barbie can be anything, women can be anything. And this has been reflected back onto the little girls of today in the Real World. Girls can grow into women, who can achieve everything and anything they set their mind to. Thanks to Barbie, all problems of feminism and equal rights have been solved (*Barbie* 1:51:11–50:20).

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This narration is accompanied by the scene (*Barbie* 1:50:35), portraying girl children of multifarious ethnicities, dressed in the professional makeovers, ranging from that of a gymnast, a singer, a hairdresser to those of a chef and a doctor, who pose beside their accompanying Barbie doll representations. Birkle writes that in 2000 Barbie became President. From the 1970s, she became a Pilot, an Astronaut, a Doctor, a Businesswoman with the accessories of a laptop and a mobile phone. Being a Nurse, a Beach Girl and a Rock Star previously, she incorporated around seventy-five career diversities over the years (260). Mattel's slogan, "'We girls can do anything, right Barbie?'", for Rand, is as "pseudo rhetorical as Barbie's body is pseudo proportional", because "Barbie can't do everything, and neither can we girls" (198).

While the feminist movement of the 1960s initiated a debate about the concept of femininity represented by Barbie, the Civil Rights Movement, with its strive for racial equality, initiated changes in the toy industry (Birkle 261). Neither Francie, Barbie's black ethnic version, introduced in 1967, nor Barbie's friend, the black Christie, introduced in 1968, were successful. In 1980, Mattel introduced Black Barbie, "the first doll with Afro-style hair". However, she too "appears to have suffered from a low advertising profile and low sales" (Urla and Swedlund 404). More than twenty years of Barbie's white portrayal could not sensitise Mattel's teenage and child consumers to Black ethnicities. Until 1990, the white Barbie doll was the only one to be advertised on television (Debouzy 141). In Gerwig's film, the President is a Black Barbie, who is not compartmentalised in her administrative role in The Pink House. Symbolising a feminist solidarity, she says, "Everybody, turn to the Barbie next to you. Tell her how much you love her. Compliment her" (*Barbie* 1:47:22–18). In Stereotypical Barbie's "giant blowout party" (*Barbie* 1:42:58), she grooves to the music beats, later staying back to participate in the Barbies' Girls' Night. Similarly, the Lawyer Barbie traverses beyond her role in the courtroom to assist the Doctor Barbies in Ken's physical treatment. In one of the scenes, when she states, "I have no difficulty holding both logic and feeling at the same time" (*Barbie* 1:46:36–34), as Gerwig's mouthpiece, she repudiates patriarchy's classification of womanhood with hysteria, echoing Lord Chesterfield's renowned letter to his son:

> Women, then, are only children of a larger growth; they have an entertaining tattle, and sometimes wit; but for solid, reasoning good sense, I never knew in my life one that had it or who reasoned or acted consequentially for four-and-twenty hours together (qtd. in Crawford 88).

While Doctor Barbie operates as the Disco Jockey in Barbie's blowout party, Writer Barbie achieves the Nobel Prize for Literature, besides supervising Ken's medical treatment. Stereotypical Barbie, representing Mattel's original Caucasian Barbie, traverses beyond her cosmetic pursuits to attend the President Barbie's Pink House session and the Lawyer Barbie's trial address. In her pursuits to have the "best day ever" (*Barbie* 1:40:35), predominantly through partying and participating in the Barbie's Girls' Nights, she exudes material superficiality. From waking up in her pink heels in the Malibu Dream House of her "own pink world," waving to her "own homegirls" (*Barbie* 1:50:02–49:48), she relinquishes "the pastels and plastics of Barbie Land" (*Barbie* 00:07:43) to transform into Barbara Handler of the Real World, as the last scene (*Barbie* 00:07:11) depicts her in a customary attire of a beige jacket, white inners, blue jeans, a pastel pink bag and Birkenstock sandals. Although the doll Barbie's metamorphosis into womanhood may signify a transition from an inanimate plasticity to a human sensitivity, Gerwig's satire does not necessarily imply it to be an evolution. In the last scene, when she is asked, "And what are you here for today, Barbara?", she replies, "I'm here to see my gynaecologist" (*Barbie* 06:50–46).

According to Knight, "the satiric practice of imitating, parodying, and borrowing other forms" are implemented "in the interests of attacking not only evil but the actual, historical individuals who penetrate it" (22). "Imitating, parodying, and borrowing," Gerwig's satire attacks Mattel's legacy of a cultural influence

that has represented womanhood through plastic tokens, fabricating feminism with consumerism. When Barbara sees her gynaecologist, the discourse around the limiting anatomical and clinical signifiers of womanhood is highlighted. It depicts Mattel's paradox that moulds Barbie on the morphological dimensions of womanhood, yet it only imitates them, as Stereotypical Barbie confesses, "I would just like to inform you, I do not have a vagina. And he [Ken] does not have a penis" (*Barbie* 1:25:14–12). In *Barbie*, not only does the want of a phallus for both Barbie and Ken liberate them from the panoptic gaze of biological signification, it also renders them able to mimic and destabilise the cultural performativities of gender representation, segregating feminism from biological sex.

The representational politics of *Barbie* (2023) is to disintegrate labels. Mattel's consumerist stratagem to categorise Barbie into disparate professions is undermined in the film. Writer Barbie can simultaneously be Doctor Barbie, Totally Hair Barbie can both be Doctor Barbie and Disco Jockey Barbie, Weird Barbie is essentially not the discarded 'other' to Stereotypical Barbie's Caucasian beauty epitome, as she can assume the leadership of the sanitation department in President Barbie's cabinet. Although Barbie and women can be everything and "extraordinary" (*Barbie* 14:59), they can also choose not to integrate themselves within the consumerist contest of evaluating their self-worth by assuming capitalistic professions. Nevertheless, *Barbie*'s politics is ambiguous. As one of the co-producers of the film, Mattel generated a $150 million revenue increment from *Barbie*, including direct movie participation, associated toy sales, and consumer products (Verdon). It implies the film's satire to formulate a schematic self-sabotage programme for Mattel to participate in the webwork of 'woke' diplomacy.

"Looked So Alive, Turns Out I'm Not Real": Barbie, Plasticity, Perception and Humanity

According to Kim Toffoletti, Barbie takes after the department store mannequin, as a "quintessential modern emblem of consumerism, femininity and artifice" that invites the window-shopper's gaze (64). Griswold contends that to situate Barbie within a cultural context is to comprehend that she is a collective product, who is "fundamentally social in her genesis," comprising multifarious processes of production by a plethora of social actors (14–15). Griswold writes that it is through cultural production that an object becomes public, entering "the circuit of human discourse" (71). With the social and economic parameters intersecting, the Barbie doll becomes "retrievable" (Schudson 161), as the popular cultural icon, rendered available to the masses. Gerwig's film renews Barbie's narrative for the consumer, making her retrievable, as popular discourse reinterprets the multiplicity of her representation. Alluding to Laura Mulvey's theorisation on scopophilia that establishes the conventions of screening and narrative conditionings to provide the spectator an "illusion" of looking into "a private world" (806), *Barbie* formulates a complex narrative, when it fabricates the toy story for the cinema. On one hand, the audience, as the panoptic onlookers, seem to consume the apparently private "to-be-looked-at-ness" (809) life of Barbie. On the other hand, beneath this illusion, *Barbie* intimates the shopper's consumerist associative gaze that "demands product after product" (Motz 128). The film upholds the cultural discourse of rendering Barbie retrievable, a token to be desired, with the aesthetics of Mattel's branding, Barbie's pink plasticity, her accessories, the mannerisms of children's playtime with Barbie, incorporated within the film's plot. It associates the "primordial wish for pleasurable looking" of the consumer/spectator with the "narcissistic aspect" (Mulvey 807) of fulfilling their self-recognition by wanting to integrate themselves within the moving frames of Barbie Land. Bellas writes that the "youthful and feminine mode of consumption" emphasised throughout the film invites spectators to window shop in its "shimmering and girly landscape" (3). Friedberg writes that the shop window with its captivating displays and alluring glimmer becomes a site "for visual intoxication, the site of seduction for consumer desire" (65). The association of pink with feminine consumerism aesthetics has been mirrored with such precision that speaking to *Architectural Digest*, Gerwig and the film's production

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designer Sarah Greenwood highlighted that during the construction of Barbie Land, which is almost fluorescent pink in its totality, the film had caused an international shortage of the pink colour (Malle)

The scene (*Barbie* 1:49:21) frames a medium-long shot of Stereotypical Barbie facing her wardrobe, as she selects her outfit. It progresses to feature a featureless pink mannequin wearing a pastel pink gingham dress, along with pastel pink floral necklace and a glossy pink oversized brow. Bellas writes that made of thick, transparent Perspex, the wardrobe's doors exude the aesthetics of both, the glass store window and the Barbie doll packaging's plastic vitrine. In the film, as the next shot stages the magical disappearance and replacement of Barbie's outfits accompanied by the visual transition of a flurry of sparkles, it echoes, according to Bellas, the narrative of the shop window that inspire the desires for "endless consumption" and "maintenance of the glamorous body" (3). The aesthetics of pretend play with dolls are emulated in Gerwig's film. Barbie does not bathe in tangible water, she mimics the procedure. She is not reflected on a material mirror, but a hollow one. Her hairbrush and car are disproportionate to her face and body, respectively, similar to Mattel's doll accessories. She imitates breakfast proceedings. Doors automatically open for her and she is lifted off her Dreamhouse to her car, as the narrator states, "When you're playing with Barbies, nobody bothers to walk them down the stairs and out the door, et cetera. You just pick them up and put them where you want them to go" (*Barbie* 1:48:08–47:55). "While there are inner walls," in the Dream houses, each house is "open for everyone to look in." Incorporating the spectator's gaze into Barbie Land, "there are no secrets or hidden agendas in Barbie Land." As thoughts of death begin to bother Stereotypical Barbie, she's unable to screen it from the other Barbies (Business Insider).

According to Ferriss, window shopping in fashion films often encapsulate scenes that can function as a "moving shop window" or "a kinetic substitute for flipping through the pages of a magazine" (54). The montage sequence (*Barbie* 1:28:00) that frames the journey of Stereotypical Barbie and Ken to the Real World, signifies this. As Barbie drives her pastel pink car on the pastel pink brick road, it echoes the yellow brick road from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). In her journey, she traverses the likenesses of Californian desert lands, the oceanic space, the universal space, flower-fields characterised by fluorescent pink and yellow flowers and the snow-fields. Wipe transitions signify the passage of each setting from Barbie Land to the Real World, emulating the aesthetics of catalogue or magazine pages being turned. Each vehicle, from the bubble-gum pink motorboat, the neon pink bicycle, the pastel pink caravan and snowmobile to the pink, blue and yellow miniature rocket ship, on top of which Barbie sits, emulating the posing for a magazine cover, sports the Barbie branding, captivating attention to the displayed commodity. These "elements of playful spectacle, glamour, and surprise in window shopping," writes Bellas, present an enticing consumer girlhood, as the spectators are invited to indulge into the cinematic pleasures "aesthetically and kinetically" (3). To incorporate the aesthetics of Mattel's marketing, history and Barbie's plastic accessories, Gerwig integrates multifarious meta-references. Stereotypical Barbie's golden iridescent blowout party jumpsuit is a homage to Mattel's 1980 Golden Dreams Barbie. Skipper, Barbie's younger sister, introduced in 1964, is shown in the film, framed in a long shot (*Barbie* 1:47:52), situated at the door-step of her miniature purple house, waving at Barbie. The neon outfits of Barbie and Ken that they sport at Venice Beach are inspired by the 1994 Hot Skatin' Barbie's neon costume. The discontinued Sugar Daddy Ken, Earring Magic Ken, Growing up Skipper Barbie and Video Girl Barbie, Barbie's Poop Scooper Dog, all appear in Weird Barbie's house. Further, there are references to the Mattel's archival fashion attires from the Celebrate Disco Bell Bottoms, Ice Capades Pretty Practice Suit and Pajama Jam in Amsterdam Set to the Pretty Paisley Palazzo Pants.

De-familiarising the tradition of pretend play with baby dolls, Barbie as an imitation of self-sufficient, adult womanhood, attempted to inspire girlhood femininity to destabilise the domestically 'othered' archetypal motherhood and persuade capitalistic recognition. This is reflected in the film's narratorial voice:

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"The girls who played with them could only ever play at being mothers. Which can be fun, at least for a while, anyway. Ask your mother." (*Barbie* 1:52:36–25). The politics of representation in *Barbie* initially depicts motherhood and domesticity as antithetical to economic self-sufficiency. This has been reflected in the emotionally distanced mother-daughter relationship between Gloria and Sasha. The flashback sequence (*Barbie* 1:00:56) explores this strain. In one scene, Gloria and a child Sasha play together with Barbie dolls, followed by the scene where Sasha runs through the green door to embrace Gloria as she is working late hours on the sketches of Barbie dolls. It is contrasted by the scenes, where the teenager Sasha gradually becomes emotionally reticent, as she disposes off the Barbies and her other playthings in a cardboard box. It is complemented by the scene, where she does not convey parting goodbyes or affectionate gestures to Gloria as the latter leaves for work or the former for school. When Sasha condescends Gloria for relating to Stereotypical Barbie on thoughts of death and cellulite, through the sketches of Irrepressible Thoughts of Death Barbie, she states, "Oh, Sasha, listen. I'm just a boring mom with a boring job and a daughter who hates me. Can you blame me for wanting to have a little fun?" (*Barbie* 1:00:14–08). Naomi Wolf's observation of the twentieth-century American woman's questioning of the rigid "ideal of beauty", considered as "unfeminine" and "heretical" by the patriarchy of the departing "Evil Eighties" (2), has been interrogated by Sasha's confrontation with Stereotypical Barbie, contextualised in the twenty-first-century:

> You represent everything wrong with our culture. Sexualised capitalism, unrealistic physical ideals… You set the feminist movement back 50 years. You destroyed girls' innate sense of worth and you're killing the planet with your glorification of rampant consumerism (*Barbie* 1:13:31–01).

When Gloria advances the conception of Ordinary Barbie, who "want[s] to be a mom," or a "president," or "a mom who is president" (*Barbie* 14:54–46), the dichotomy between motherhood and capitalistic professionalism is blurred. It echoes Ruth Handler's trajectory of motherhood, her observation and interest dispensed towards her daughter, Barbara's playtime with adult figured dolls that manifested Barbie. Contextually, Barbara, Barbie, girlhood, and perceptibility evolve and destabilisednormativities. Towards the film's conclusion, Stereotypical Barbie converses with the character of Ruth Handler:

> Barbie: Do you give me permission to become human?
>
> Ruth: You don't need my permission.
>
> Barbie: But you're the creator. You… Don't you control me?
>
> Ruth: I can't control you any more than I can control my own daughter (*Barbie* 10:35–22).

Barbie's metamorphosis from plasticity into imbibing perceptibility is a journey from being "the idea" to a desire to "do the imagining" (*Barbie* 10:44). It is an enterprise towards autonomy, accountability and mortality along with the acceptance of their qualifying consequences.

In Barbie Land, the Barbies imitate humanity in their faculties of emotional perception. However, unlike Stereotypical Barbie, they possess a one-dimensional emotional quotient, wanting the human nuance, association and will. In their pursuits of materialistic hedonism and the 'beauty myth,' they do not traverse beyond their unidimensional plasticity into corporal mutability. As Stereotypical Barbie voices out her thoughts about death, "You guys ever think about dying?" (*Barbie* 1:40:25), instead of empathising with her through an associative sisterhood, they stare at her in shock and petrification, linguistically castrated, while the merrymaking at the blowout party is momentarily terminated. When Stereotypical Barbie confesses about her morning bad breath and the mutation of her flat feet from her arched heels, Doctor Barbie screams,

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"Flat Feet!" (*Barbie* 1:35:58) before imitating the gesture of disgusted regurgitation. They encapsulate her within a medical gaze as Physicist Barbie touches her flat foot and screams in terror along with the other Barbies, with Writer Barbie otherising her to have been "malfunctioning" (*Barbie* 1:35:27). Interestingly, as they recommend her to visit Weird Barbie instead of incorporating Barbie Land's medical treatment, it suggests that Stereotypical Barbie's "malfunctioning" is more physiognomic than anatomical. In *Barbie*, Weird Barbie is the satiric manifestation of cosmetic pretend play. The montage (*Barbie* 1:35:08–34:58) that frames the 'making' of Weird Barbie, shows a girl child of the Real World slice, burn, dishevel and highlight the blonde hair of a Stereotypical Barbie doll emblem, before misappropriating her attire, splitting her legs and dumping her into a waste paper basket. Although the act contextualises Naomi Wolf's inquisition of the woman's body as "the pliable sex," conditioned to being "shaped," "cut," and "subjected to physical invasion" (270), it liberates Weird Barbie from the societal expectation of being "the most beautiful Barbie of all" (*Barbie* 1:35:12). Contextually, as Weird Barbie and Stereotypical Barbie destabilise the ideals of the 'beauty myth,' they familiarise themselves with the ontological comprehensions of the functionings of Barbie Land and the Real World. While Weird Barbie initiates Stereotypical Barbie's demystification of the Barbies' negligible autonomy in aspiring feminism in the Real World, it is the latter's primary oppression by patriarchy that renders her to negate her categorisation into a passive 'dollness'.

It can be highlighted that Gloria's apparently consumerist inception of manifesting the sketches of Irrepressible Thoughts of Death Barbie furnished Stereotypical Barbie's initiation into humanity's free will. Nevertheless, as Weird Barbie says to Stereotypical Barbie, "You had something to do with this too… Takes two to rip a portal" (*Barbie* 1:32:04–01), it suggests the latter's contribution into the symbiotic conceptions of the thoughts of mortality and cellulite that Gloria and Stereotypical Barbie share. While Gloria confronts patriarchy in the Real World, Stereotypical Barbie leads the feminist sisterhood in destabilising the dystopian Kendom. In *Barbie*, being human is not something granted by an authoritarian hierarchy, not something to "ask for" but "discover" within the self (*Barbie* 09:58–51). Being human is to associate, "to be a part of the people" (*Barbie* 10:56), as Stereotypical Barbie states. It is to inculcate consciousness, empathise with imperfection and mutability, defy authority. It is to foster an associative concern beyond self-interest. Unlike Victor Frankenstein, who does not provide an initiating shelter of care to his creation against the perils of humanity and civilisation, Ruth says to Stereotypical Barbie, "I can't in good conscience let you take this leap without knowing what it means" (*Barbie* 09:47–44). However, Stereotypical Barbie has known and engendered the practicality of formulating her self-narrative that "make[s] meaning" (*Barbie* 10:53) and tells her own story. Traversing beyond her erstwhile egotism to "look perfect" (*Barbie* 1:03:27), she develops an autonomy to appreciate corporeal beauty beyond Mattel's imposed cosmetic standards. The scene (*Barbie* 1:20:06) that frames Stereotypical Barbie in a long shot, seated beside an old woman, both staged in a frame-within-a-frame composition, with the metal pillars of the shed and the resting chairs, signifying their demarcated boundaries, anticipate the dissolution of confinements in Stereotypical Barbie's metamorphosis. Correspondingly, she observes the wrinkled face of the old woman, complimenting her, "You're so beautiful" (*Barbie* 1:20:17). Visually, Gerwig accentuates Stereotypical Barbie's evolution through the gradual appearance of wrinkles in her face, along with her instances of shedding tears, accompanied by the extreme-close shot (*Barbie* 09:10) of her golden heart necklace, emphasising her heart beat. Surpassing her self-interest, she assists in mending the emotional distance between Gloria and Sasha. She destabilised authority, implementing rationality, when she did not adhere to Mattel's CEO's advice to get into her packaging box, sensing it to be an entrapment. Ruth says to Stereotypical Barbie, "Humans make things up, like patriarchy and Barbie" (*Barbie* 11:21–20). Although the latter's metamorphosis into humanity and womanhood anticipates her patriarchal oppression in the Real World, it also signifies her consciousness of it. In Barbie Land, she was ignorant of her compliance as a doll, when Weird Barbie said to her, "We're all being played with, babe" (*Barbie* 1:32:27). In the Real World, she would be "a Jezebel," that Mattel could not make to "get

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in the box" (*Barbie* 1:06:37), a signifier of trans-womanhood that patriarchy could not defy. Contextually, she challenges the assertion of the Real World by destabilising the foundations of Gender Critical Feminism, as she emulates cisgendered womanhood through the apparent acquisition of female genitals not assigned at birth.

"She Got Loyalty, She Says, 'I Love You Girl'": Barbie's Sisterhood over Kendom

In *Barbie*, Ken's usurpation of Barbie Land stems from the intrinsic antagonism that patriarchy posits in its practice of otherisation. Simon de Beauvoir writes about this in *The Second Sex*, concluding from the theories of Lévi-Strauss and Hegel, as she observes that in man's journey from the state of Nature to that of Culture, "a fundamental hostility to any other consciousness is found in consciousness itself," as "the subject posits itself only in opposition," asserting "itself as the essential" while situating "the other as inessential, as the object." Contextually, socio-cultural and biological relationships are established by man's ability to comprehend them "as systems of oppositions," constructed through "duality, alternation, opposition, and symmetry" (26–27). In his visit to the Real World, Ken's compliant 'dollness' prevents him from interrogating patriarchy's ontological roots. From socio-cultural facets of the Real World, he assumes patriarchy's status-quo, imbibing its behavioural representations of a hegemonic performative masculinity. Houghton observes, when Ken appropriates Abraham Lincoln's summon of the constituent power as "Government for the Kens, of the Kens, and by the Kens" (*Barbie* 50:28–26), "his pointed change of [constitutional] syntax," depicts "how power in this new order is going to be wielded for the benefit of one group." However, the Kens are not solely asserting their place within Barbie Land, they are attempting to dominate its constitution (4).

As Ken recounts about the Real World, "Everything, basically everything exists to expand and elevate the presence of men" (*Barbie* 55:06–03), he appropriates patriarchy's status-quo in Barbie Land without interrogating its predicament. He says to Stereotypical Barbie, "And if it weren't for these technicalities like MBAs, medical degrees," "I could have ruled that world. But I don't need any of those things here" (*Barbie* 51:28–20). His autocracy in Barbie Land is implemented through the projection of a heightened physicality and an exaggerated masculinity. He shouts at Stereotypical Barbie when she protests against him and works out with the pull up bar while explaining Kendom's schemes. Practising an emotionally reticent masculinity, in the scene (*Barbie* 31:44), when Stereotypical Barbie arrives to propose her romantic commitment, he flexes his bicep muscles. After that, he goes inside his house, screaming, "Sublime!", while strutting out and replying to her, "I don't know. I'm gonna have to think about that" (*Barbie* 31:34–29). In 1997, the Danish band, Aqua released their song, "Barbie Girl," interpreting the Ken-Barbie equation on innuendos, predominantly reducing the latter into a sexualised subordinate of the male gaze. The lyrics read:

Barbie: I'm a blonde bimbo girl in a fantasy world

Dress me up, make it tight, I'm your dolly

Ken: You're my doll, rock and roll, feel the glamor in pink

Kiss me here, touch me there, hanky-panky (lines 15–18)

In Kendom, the Kens' dialogical conversation with the Barbies is manifested in similar objectifying characterisation. Ken classifies Stereotypical Barbie as his "long-term-low-commitment-distance girlfriend." Writer Barbie arrives in an essentially fetish fashion black one-piece dress, stating, "Where are my hungry

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boys? Who wants snacks?" Similarly, Doctor Barbie says, "I like being a helpful decoration," after carrying brewski beers for the Kens (*Barbie* 53:21–52:50).

The aggression and virility that Ken associates with masculinity, identifying patriarchy with men and horses, is possibly imitated by him through the consumption of the Real World's print media. In the film, he steals the books titled, *Why Men Rule the World (Literally)*, *Men and Wars*, *The Origins of the Patriarchy* and *Horses* from a Real World school library. Contextually, Gerwig's satire situates itself when the Kens unconsciously give into the Barbies' schematic sisterhood, fighting a simulated war amongst themselves with toy bows and arrows, balls and hockey sticks. It is the film's inversion of the archetypal patriarchal discourse that associates femininity with irrationality and masculinity with reason. The Kens' brainwashing of the Barbies to dissociate them from their professional achievements and situate them as their submissive 'others' symbolise the patriarchal oppression of womanhood to limit them within domesticity. It echoes Wollstonecraft's critique of Rousseau's observation of women to be made "a coquettish slave" to render her "a more alluring object of desire," as "a *sweeter* companion to man." However, the "*natural* cunning" that Rousseau advises women to not exercise, is satirised, as the Barbies do not "resign" but 'govern' their "arbitrary power of beauty" to restore Barbie Land. In doing so, the Barbies do not "prove that they have *less* mind than man," as Wollstonecraft had opined regarding women, but they outperform the Kens in their rationality. (24–28). In *Feminism is for Everybody*, Bell Hooks writes:

> Feminist sisterhood is rooted in shared commitment to struggle against patriarchal injustice... Political solidarity between women always undermines sexism and sets the stage for the overthrow of patriarchy (15).

Gloria's feminist speech of protest that accounts for women's patriarchal oppression in the Real World functions as an antithesis to the Kens' brainwashing of the Barbies. Having a deprogramming effect, it restores Writer Barbie's feminist consciousness.

The Barbies manifest their fabricated submission into the Kens' "masculinist signifying economies" that perform "in the service of expanding and rationalizing the masculinist domain" (Butler 19). Appropriating the archetypal iconography of 'damsel-in-distress,' they "distract" the Kens "by appearing helpless and confused" (*Barbie* 36:31), feigning a complacency to essentially uplift their masculine egotism. Gerwig here satirises popular culture elements that inculcate an essentially masculinist discourse. Contextually, Writer Barbie recounts her disillusionment when she was invested in the Zack Snyder cut of Justice League. Similarly, when Ken talks about the influence of Porsche 365 on the motoring world to President Barbie, Writer Barbie as the Decoy Barbie, pretends to be inefficient in using the Photoshop software, distracting Ken away from President Barbie. After President Barbie's deprogramming, she acts as the Decoy Barbie, affecting her interest in the film *Godfather*, distracting Ken from Lawyer Barbie. As Stereotypical Barbie dresses up, applying cosmetic makeup, she conforms to her 'beauty myth' while simultaneously destabilising it, when she inculcates Ken within the illusion that she has subjugated to be his "bride wife" (*Barbie* 53:21). The political sisterhood that the Barbies share, unites "radically differing identities: humans, Barbies, Kens, Skipper and Allan" (Burke and Kon-Yu 8). It renders them to identify patriarchy's segregationist politics as a system. Correspondingly, Gloria's speech highlights patriarchy's moulding of women "to answer for men's bad behaviour," conditioning them "to stay pretty for men but not so pretty" to "tempt them too much" or "threaten other women" because women are "supposed to be a part of the sisterhood but always stand out" (*Barbie* 39:18–05). Gloria and the Decoy Barbies deprogramme the Brainwashed Barbies by recounting to them the nuances of patriarchal oppression. It signifies their attempt to interrogate patriarchy's gender-conditioned ontology by highlighting its subjugating practices that

essentially masquerade as normativities. When the Barbies come out of their manipulated phases, their initial reactions involve a critical questioning and denunciation of their sexualised subordination comparing them to their erstwhile professional accomplishments.

In the bonfire scene (*Barbie* 31:15), the Barbies destabilise the heteronormative conditioning of romantic commitment by showing interest in interacting with the Kens besides their respective partners. Subverting patriarchal discourse, they reduce the Kens to their sexual jealousy that anticipates the parodied civil war between them that ultimately disintegrates their performative homosociality. As Gloria mentions in her speech, "that the system is rigged" (*Barbie* 39:00), Kendom's restoration to Barbie Land, symbolises the erstwhile hierarchical reinstallation founded on matriarchy. However, Barbie Land's matriarchal dimensions function as a satire on the Real World's patriarchy. As President Barbie provides Ken with employment in a "lower circuit court judgeship," the narrator states, "Well, the Kens have to start somewhere. And one day the Kens will have as much power and influence in Barbie Land as women have in the Real World" (*Barbie* 15:25–13). Barbie Land's matriarchy also signifies Mattel's marketing narrative. In Mattel's conception, Ken had been introduced to compliment Barbie's companionship, to imitate a heterosexual union. Contextually, the narrator introduces Ken, saying, "Barbie has a great day every day, but Ken only has a great day if Barbie looks at him" (*Barbie* 1:46:03–00).

"Barbie, You're so Fine, You're so Fine You Blow My Mind": Conclusion and Barbie's Legacy

An article of the *Time* Magazine, titled, "Barbie's Got a New Body," posits, "Now can we stop talking about my body?", highlighting Mattel's apparent diversification of Barbie's body measurements (Dockterman). However, the "three new bodies: petite, tall and curvy," that the brand introduced in 2016, depicts its simulated inclusivity because it predominantly caters to the mainstream media's representation as, "the curvaceous bodies of Kim Kardashian West, Beyoncé and Christina Hendricks have become iconic" (Dockterman). Naomi Wolf writes, "Even Barbie has been redesigned with a more realistic body type and now comes in many colours." However, in such seemingly inclusive redesigning, Mattel creates a "pluralism in the [beauty] myth," rendering identities to strive toward the "many beauty myths" (6). Correspondingly, Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* defies normativities, simultaneously sustaining them. Towards the conclusion, as matriarchy characterises Barbie Land, the film's essential 'woke' politics attempt at inclusivity, with President Barbie stating, "I don't think that things should go back to the way that they were. No Barbie or Ken should be living in the shadows" (*Barbie* 16:00–15:53). Although Stereotypical Barbie's feminism can be critiqued in wanting dimensions of class, economy and racial diversity, the characters of Gloria and President Barbie represent intersectional resistance. Notwithstanding the emulation of Mattel's consumerist politics, *Barbie* attempts to interpret it through a feminist narrative. Despite the film's generation of a billion dollar box-office success that surpassed Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer*'s collection in the popular *Barbenheimer* narrative, it could not generate an Oscars' lead actress nomination for Margot Robbie, anticipating the netizens' dissent. The film's trailer read: "If you love Barbie/ This movie is for you" and "If you hate Barbie/ This movie is for you" (Warner Bros. 1:41–55). While Pamela Paul's iconoclastic title for her review in *The New York Times*, displayed, "'Barbie' is Bad. There I Said It," Richard Brody's title in *The New Yorker*, opined, "'Barbie' is Brilliant, Beautiful, and Fun as Hell." Through its nuanced politics and aesthetics of representation, *Barbie* accomplishes its objective in manifesting discourse(s) encompassing it that sustains its relevance as a popular culture text. Although it incorporates within its narrative, divergent representations of politics, it instils within its composition, an associative perspective in destabilising hierarchies to promote the inclusivity of multifarious identities. In Greta Gerwig's directorial trajectory, *Barbie* takes after and compliments the nuances of feminist resilience(s) in *Lady Bird* (2017) and *Little Women* (2019). Like Christine in *Lady Bird*, Stereotypical Barbie comes of age. Unlike Christine's emotionally

turbulent relationship with her mother, Ruth's symbolic motherhood, warmth and love sensitise Stereotypical Barbie into the negotiations of the Real World. Like Jo March in *Little Women*, Stereotypical Barbie's metamorphosis anticipates the stimulation of her cognition to compose her own narrative. Like the Marches, Stereotypical Barbie's humanity desires to perceive, associate and evolve beyond the accomplishment of her limited self-interest. *Barbie* is not solely the cinematic adaptation of a toy-story. It is a textual imprint of interpersonal relationships. It is a visual narrative of feminist sisterhood, characterised by satire, wit, comedy, parody and realism in the pastels and the plastics of Barbie Land and the Real World.

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