

**Barbie Movies and the Conceptualization of
An Alternate Public Sphere**

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Abstract:

It is been more than fifty years since Mattel Toy Company introduced their first Barbie doll which has gone on to become an adult cultural icon for children all over the world, giving them their first glimpse on the roles they can enact in the futures they dream of. Irrespective of the criticisms aimed against her unnatural body shape, Barbie still retains her position as the single most successful fashion doll ever produced, and continues to mesmerize little girls not only through her doll figurines but also through the animation movies produced featuring her as the central character. This paper examines how Barbie animation films successfully portray an alternate public sphere for women echoing the ideas of an Outsiders Society as envisioned by Virginia Woolf in her work *Three Guineas*. By visualizing a world furnished with music, magic and other wonders and adventures, they ask each girl to look within and uncover the magic they hold inside.

Key Words: Barbie Movies, Public Sphere, Virginia Woolf

Public sphere as conceptualized by Jurgen Habermas in his *The Structural Transformation of Public Sphere* (1989) is a platform of people who create a public opinion through rational-critical debates which in turn help to check the authoritarian power of the state by democratic policies. The dichotomies between the public and the private come into question when one is faced with the gender aspect associated with both realms: public with masculinity and power and private is associated with home and nurturing which is primarily considered to be the aboard of the fair sex.

The advent of feminist movements stirred a change in the aspect of gender restrictions to the public and the mantra of second wave feminism, 'personal is political', further blurred the boundaries dictating both the spheres. More and more women started encroaching to the so called masculine jobs which opened their way to power and politics, simultaneously destroying the breadwinner status of men. Legislations passed on the issues of women diminished the sanctity of the private space which was normally considered to be a safe haven from the pressures of the outside world. In the process, women were forced to discard their feminine nature in favour of a masculine behaviour and body language which their respective jobs demanded.

It is in this context that a society which works as separate sphere for women so that they do not have to compromise on their natural traits and can still enjoy the benefits of power, comes into relevance. Virginia Woolf proposes such a concept in her essay *Three Guineas*, naming this alternate realm as the *Outsiders Society*. She refuses out rightly the offer to become a member of men's society since a society which refuses her the right to earn her living or the right to educate herself cannot be called her society.

Inevitably we look upon societies as conspiracies that sink the private brother, whom many of us have reason to respect, and inflate in his stead a monstrous male, loud of voice, hard of fist, childishly intent upon scoring the floor of the earth with chalk marks, within whose mystic boundaries human beings are penned, rigidly, separately, artificially; where, daubed red and gold, decorated like a savage with feathers he goes through mystic rites and enjoys the dubious pleasures of power and dominion while we, 'his' women, are locked in the private house without share in the many societies of which his society is composed. . . it seems both wrong for us rationally and impossible for us emotionally

to fill up your form and join your society. For by so doing we should merge our identity in yours. (Woolf 96-97)

Bearing Woolf's idea in mind this paper examines how Barbie movies, created using the popular icon of Barbie doll, provide an alternate world for children – a world of women with male intervention restricted to its minimal level.

Barbie, the iconic fashion doll of Mattel Toy Company is the brain child of Ruth Handler whose husband was the co-founder of Mattel. On watching her daughter Barbara playing with paper dolls, she noticed that the girl enjoys giving adult roles to the dolls even though the children's toy market was restricted to producing representations of infants at that time. Determined to compensate this deficiency in the market, Ruth reworked on the German toy doll Bild Lilli which had an adult appearance, and Barbie (named after Barbara) made her first appearance on March 9, 1959 at the American International Toy Fair held in New York. This first Barbie doll with her zebra striped black and white swim suit was available both as a blonde and brunette and over the years her family has grown bigger with her boyfriend Ken, and a bunch of siblings and cousins including Skipper, Todd, Stacie, Kelly, Krissy and Francie.

Barbie made her debut in animation industry in 1987 through Barbie and the Rockers: Out of this World, a miniseries created by DIC entertainment with Saban Productions. Fourteen years after this event Mattel finally took the charge of releasing her first movie which resulted in the adaptation of E. T. A. Hoffman's classic tale, "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King" in Barbie in the Nutcracker (2001) and is soon followed by twenty seven other movies enlarging the collection. Beginning with princess themed stories, Mattel moved her to Mermaid, Fairytopia and modern day tales giving them a new look and originality.

Unlike Disney's princess stories of happily ever after which demands the marriage ring from a prince charming, Barbie princess stories offers a girls' world where most often the princess or queen is of supreme command, and her quest for identity or freedom leads to many heart throbbing adventures which makes the story of these movies. Usually a girl of seventeen, she will have to fight against the evil witch or the cunning courtier or a malicious uncle or aunt, and she battles against all these odds with the aid of her loyal female companions (in majority of the stories) who could be either animals or humans. Men partake here as passive characters, as a docile father or as a prince who makes occasional appearances and finally requests for her hand impressed by her courage,

nobility and steadfastness. Though her companions are equally charming and beautiful, the real Barbie who plays the major role is endowed with unique dark blue eyes and thick blonde hair. And added with these is the customary pink costume usually associated with Barbie dolls which makes no mistake as to who the heroine is.

In a world where public space is occupied and dominated by men with their own set of rules, Barbie movies set up a new configuration and ask the girls to look for strength from within, not from the opposite gender. The first of the Barbie princess movie Barbie in the Nutcracker projects this message which is greedily followed and expanded by the rest in the series. E. T. A. Hoffman's timeless classic "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King" (1816), where the court inventor's nephew is cursed to be a nutcracker while saving the princess from the same curse by the Mouse Queen, is transformed magically in the Barbie animation picture. In Hoffman's story the princess refuses to marry the ugly nutcracker who eventually banished from the doll kingdom seeks refuge in the human world in order to get a cure from his curse.

Film limits the story pattern to situate it within a specific time frame and focuses on Clara's (Barbie) journey to the magic kingdom with the nutcracker (who turns out to be Prince Eric) in search of the Sugar Plum Princess who it is believed the only one who has power to defeat the evil Mouse King. They have no information as to who she is other than the fact that she is kind, clever and brave. In the end they are forced to retreat from the search and encounter and defeat the Mouse King on their own only to realize that Clara who played a major role in overpowering the Mouse King is the real Sugar Plum Princess. As it is introduced in the trailer, the movie exhorts to realize the power within and light it up for the common good.

And the world they create ask the viewers to be true to themselves and aware of your identities rather than merging it with others to go high up in the social ladder. Barbie a Fashion Fairytale offers such a scenario, when Barbie, out casted and humiliated from her role as a leading movie actress flies to Paris to join with her aunt in the running of her fashion shop which much to her bewilderment is about to get shut down. Story traces the way she finds the magic in the shop in the form of three enchanted flairies and with the help of her new friend Alice, they manage to put together a fashion show which saves the day. Barbie's courage not only changes the lives of Aunt Millicent and a shy Alice, but also hers when she is finally requested to her role in the male dominated movie industry where the male director barks orders and is considered to be perfect and supreme

in his ideas. Here her secluded time with trusty female companions helps Barbie to realize her true potential and regain her inner strength which is the prime aim of a society for women where she is accepted and respected for who she is and what she is capable of.

In an effort to introduce the same feeling of the predominant classics by men, Mattel adapts some well known tales into its female version. Barbie and the Three Musketeers (2009) follows up the story of Alexander Dumas' The Three Musketeers where Barbie in the role of Corinne poses as the daughter of d'Artagnan, the chivalrous hero in Dumas' historical novel. As Virginia Woolf in her famous essay "A Room of One's Own" (1929) tries to give an answer to 'Why there is no Lady Shakespeare?', this film is Barbie's attempt to trace the life of a female d'Artagnan who possesses the same vigor and ambition of the male hero and trudges through the same paths, but the Paris that awaited her offers a different story and different welcome.

Discarded by her father's friend, who along with others rejects the idea of a female musketeer, Corinne ends up with the job of a palace maid where with like minded friends – Viveca, Aramina and Renee – who too cherish the same dream in secret, and with the help of an old lady, they continue their training, culminating in their foiling of the plan to kill the crown prince. Hard work brings its own rewards and they are accepted as the new musketeers echoing the refrain that is sung throughout the movie: 'You must pursue your dreams even when everyone says its impossible'.

Adaptation of Charles Dickens' novella "A Christmas Carol" is screened as Barbie in a Christmas Carol in 2008, where Barbie as Eden Starling reverses the gender configuration of the whole story. As the glamorous singing star of Victorian England, she too commits the crime of keeping a cold heart just as Scrooge does in Dickens' story, and her life is guided by the mantra her Aunt Marie taught her: 'In a selfish world, selfish succeeds'. When she neglects the spirit of the Christmas by not allowing a vacation for her co-workers, three spirits – spirits of the Christmas past, Christmas present and Christmas future – come to her dream so that she gets a chance to reform her life the very next day.

Loosely based on Mark Twain's The Prince and the Pauper, two Barbie movies are produced, first one being Barbie as the Princess and the Pauper and the second Barbie: The Princess and the Popstar. Both films trace the growth of the princess to her maturity who comes to realize the real life situations of her subjects and with her identical looking friend saves the kingdom from the malicious courtier, and the ambitious manager when

it comes to the second movie. The climax turns out to be a test on their friendship from which they come unharmed realizing the true potential of their respective social roles. By creating a modified replica of an action oriented, rationalized, and male centered public in their movies, Barbie stories envisage an alternate public for women where instead of playing the 'damsel in distress' roles, they are supposed to act on their own having faith in their power and unified action. By combining the softness of the feminine and the toughness of the masculine gender in the same person they assert the possibilities that an androgynous personality offers for the bright future of the present day society. Public realm in the Barbie movies is rooted on freedom, compassion and mutual trust where domestic issues merge with the political matters creating a harmonized relationship.

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