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### **Breaking the Stereotype: Celebration of the Girl Power in Barbie Movies**

Globalization made Barbie an iconic figure and a role model for little girls all across the globe and the post- colonial India was also influenced by the wave. Barbie animated series became a house- hold watch for children as it was readily and easily available in DVD's.

To Freud's 'Anatomy is destiny' Simone de Beauvoir says 'women are not born, women are made'. Rightly so in the social set up gender is differentiated by allocating specific roles to the males and females and structuring of women as gendered subjects. This acculturation extends itself in fairy tales which are an intrinsic part of Literature for children. In the process of growing up every child goes through a ritual of fairy tales loaded with gender stereotypes. In stark contrast to this Barbie animated film series provide a refreshing alternate and surprisingly have not been duly acknowledged. Initially produced by Mattel Entertainment and later renamed Barbie Entertainment they have released 28 film DVD's with Universal Studios since 1987. This paper examines 5 films which subvert stereotypes and sexism, are gynocentric and also present Barbie as a sensible, independent girl. An attempt has been made to research the fresh perspective promoting a resilient spirit among young girls in the movies.

Key words: Barbie movies, gender, sexism, stereotypes, post-colonial India.

To Freud's 'Anatomy is destiny' Simone de Beauvoir says 'women are not born, women are made'. Rightly so in the social set up gender is differentiated by allocating specific roles to the males and females. While nurturing, care and passivity is associated with feminine; assertiveness, activeness and rationality are the male attributes. This acculturation extends itself in fairy tales which are an intrinsic part of Literature for children. In the process of growing up every child goes through a ritual of fairy tales loaded with gender. There is an internalization which stays with them making their foundation gendered and they absorb cultural norms where the feminine is stereotyped to secondary social roles.

Focusing on the fairy tales like Cinderella, Snow white and the seven dwarfs, Red Riding Hood, Sleeping Beauty etc. one finds a marked similarity i.e. the absence of real women. The feminine qualities of submissiveness are highlighted and the patriarchal status quo is maintained. The suffering of women is glorified and the binaries of feminine and masculine are projected in a stereotype manner. Although the fairy tales are based on pure fantasy and are intended to develop a child's imaginative faculty yet one cannot deny the fact that in the impressionable years for children the difference between reality and imagination gets blurred. These tales leave an everlasting effect on the tender minds as the first lessons of relationship outside their immediate family are learnt through them. In all the stories distinct gender coloring is visible and predominant. They invariably inculcate romantic notions promoting sexism. Marriage is the ultimate bliss and kisses are magical and life-giving. Women are either virtuous maidens or evil temptresses and wooing men is the only worthy aim in their lives. The virtuous maidens cook, clean, sing and dance waiting for their prince to arrive while the wicked ones contrive and contemplate to make another women's life miserable. These tales present life for children as a permanent beauty contest where subconsciously girls transfer cultural norms from them into real life which exalts passivity, dependency and self-sacrifice as female cardinal virtues. They perpetuate the patriarchal status quo and glorify the suffering of women.

Generally, the innocent maiden passes through a bout of suffering while she is rescued by the chivalrous prince. The feminine is presented as passive, submissive, sweet, emotional, intuitive damsel in distress and the masculine as active, dominant, courageous, rational, logical knight in

shining amour. Virtues like sacrifice, honor and delicacy are glorified and after getting married they live happily ever after.

The Barbie animated film series provided a refreshing alternate as it becomes a lead in children's literature and dominates the post- colonial twenty first century Indian market. Initially produced by Mattel Entertainment it was later renamed Barbie Entertainment and released DVD's with Universal Studios. Beginning from 1987 they have so far released 28 such films. The earlier films were based on ballet stories and fairy tales, featuring Barbie as a princess, a fairy or a mermaid. From 2010 onwards Mattel moved away from the classical princess stories and focused on more modern themes like fashion.

The paper reviews selected few films- Barbie as Rapunzel, Barbie as the Princess and the Pauper, Barbie and the three Musketeers, Barbie: Princess Charm School and Barbie: Princess and the Popstar.

All the movies are not only aesthetically produced and provide little girls abundant entertainment but also present Barbie as a sensible, independent girl breaking away from the stereotypes of sexism and gender bias. A fresh perspective promotes a resilient spirit and a confident fervor in children who watch these films. In some of the movies Barbie plays an elder cousin narrating a story to a younger relative and then plays the main lead herself.

One of the early produced films- Barbie as Rapunzel (2002) is based on the fairytale Rapunzel by Brothers Grimm's and presents a beautiful girl with the most radiant hair who lives as a servant of Gothel, a ferocious witch. She is kept hidden in a forest and guarded by dragon Hugo and an enchanted glass wall. Her discovery of a magical paintbrush takes her to a journey where she finds herself, breaks through the world of deception and with support of Penelope brings peace between two rival kingdoms and falls in love with the Prince Stefan. She is victorious by using her own intelligence and goodness of heart and proves that love and imagination can change one's life. She meets prince Stephan while saving his little sister who has fallen down in a well and the film ends when Rapunzel imprisons the villain Gothel. The message is loud and clear, she is no damsel in

distress and she does not need Stephen to protect her. Barbie as Rapunzel shows that love and imagination can bring a positive change in the world.

In Barbie as the Princess and the Pauper she comes to life in a classic tale of mistaken identity and the power of friendship. The story is a retelling of Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper* into a female oriented one where Barbie is a princess and also her look alike poor village girl. They cross ways when princess Anneliese is captured and Erika her look alike tries to save her. The king Dominick falls in love with Erika mistaking her as princess Anneliese. She tries to seek to end her kingdoms economic crisis and while she is imprisoned in a mine she discovers valuable geodes. In the movie Annaliese saves herself twice, first in outsmarting the two goons who guard her prison, the second in making use of water to float out of the whole she is trapped in, eventually making it in time to ruin the villains vile plan. She does not need physical strength, or any of the typical masculine traits to save her, her own resourcefulness is enough to save the day. In the end, the guys' strength is more or less useless, the villain's escape is thwarted by an intelligent horse. She does get married, but to the man of her choice, and her intelligence saves an entire kingdom from ruin. Erika plays the princess and saves the real princess by foiling her captor the evil Preminger. The two girls follow their dreams and create their own destinies.

The three Musketeers based on Alexander Dumas classic have large number of male characters yet Corrine unmistakably is the hero. She is a farm girl who lives with her mother Gascony and dreams of being a musketeer. She moves to Paris to pursue her dream and meets three other girls who secretly nurture the same dream. They apparently work as maids in the palace and begin their covert training with an old stooped maid and a crypto- musketeer Helene. She teaches the four young girls serious fighting skills. Prince Louis experimenting with balloon flight is rescued by Corrine from being crushed by a chandelier when in a foil its ropes are cut and later again rescues him when his balloon flies too high due to sabotage. Finally in the palace ball the four girls fight the evil Philippe's troupe exposing the foul plot and Corinne fights Philippe on a rooftop with actual sword and saves Prince Louis. Louis is totally smitten by her and invites her to a romantic balloon ride while she receives information about another anti- royal plot and riding off with her three female companions tells the Prince- "we'll have to take that balloon ride later, right now I have got somewhere else to be".

The Princess and the Popstar is a sparkling musical adventure and Barbie stars as Tori, a kind hearted princess of the magical kingdom of Meribella. She loves music and when she meets her favorite popstar Keira who is a look alike they trade places. Tori teaches Kaira everything about the palace including the Gardenia that gives diamonds and is guarded by two little fairies. Crider and Rupert uproot the garden and when the kingdom's magical secret is stolen their true friendship is tested and they are able to stop the evil and also discover that the best thing is being you.

Finally Princess Charm School presents Barbie as Blair Willows who lives in the kingdom of Gardenia with her sickly mother and younger sister, Emily, while working vigorously as a waitress in order to help support them. She wins a lottery as a commoner to attend the Princess Charm School an elite training for the future Princesses. Blair doesn't wish to leave her responsibilities to her family behind, but her mother, who sees it as a good opportunity for her daughter manages to convince her. Blair loves her training and is doing well with the help of magical sprites and her new friends Hadley and Isla. The Royal teacher discovers that Blair resembles the kingdom's missing princess and does everything possible to stop her training. She fears that Blair might claim the throne. With everything against her Blair along with Hadley succeed in finding the enchanted crown which testifies Blair's true identity as the real princess. The girls arrive at the graduation ceremony just in time, and Blair confidently makes an open claim to the throne, stating that she is Princess Sophia. The new Lady Royal, Delancy, then announces that the Princess has some special visitors, which are revealed to be Emily and her mother. Blair welcomes them to their "new home". Emily then asks Blair if, Blair is now a princess, does that also make her one. Blair warmly tells her: "Of course; there's a princess in every girl," and says that she wishes to introduce both she and their mother to everyone.

The films can be summed up with the following observations-

All the stories are well knitted, entertaining movies which transmit into the young minds the power and celebrations of womanhood. They not only deconstruct the sexiest stereotypes but also affirm the positive about women. Barbie is competent character and has definite vision and plans for her life.

Messages to the young girls are inspiring and practical-

No one can make you feel inferior. Not without your consent.( Three Musketeers)

I don't know will I like what I'm going to see- you might not. But sometimes we need to face things that frighten us.

Big or small, there's a difference only you can make. (12 Dancing Princesses)

There's a princess in every girl. (Charm School)

Can't you tell me what to paint? - And take away the best part? Kelly you can create anything you imagine. (Rapunzel)

True courage is pursuing your dreams even when everyone says it's impossible. (Three Musketeers)

We're no damsels in distress. (Three Musketeers)

Live your dream (Princess and the Pauper)

The films emphasize on their agency of girls and their rewarding relationships with each other. They come together to stand by each other, help their friends fulfill their dreams and brilliantly complement each other's shortcomings. In the DVD covers Barbie shares the cover with other female characters but no male character is seen.

They are empowering alternatives to the stereotyping of showing girls as weak, brainless playing second fiddle to boys and entertaining the males when they take off from their missions. There is no learnt or feigned helplessness in the female characters.

Barbie in her roles is central and drives all the action around herself. She is brave, resourceful, and skilled in battles and risks her own life to do good. She is the brains in all the operations and usually requests or commands the male lead.

The strength in the Barbie movies lies in heroines who save the day not only with strength, but with their female traits: with negotiation, compassion and generally being true to themselves.

Barbie in all her characters fights sexism of the patriarchal mindset. The head of the musketeers tells her outright- Girls can't be musketeers and boys laugh at her when she insists. She fights the masculine monopoly on the construction of femininity. Corinne emerges victorious as an excellent musketeer and saves the prince and her kingdom.

The films also deconstruct the social masculine construction. The male lead characters like Prince Louis are not mysterious or threatening. In Rapunzel Prince Stephan does not involve himself in his father's fights with the neighboring kingdom. Louis in The Three Musketeers is content letting his cousin rule.

The boys do not present rescue and are not potential marriage partners. The relationships are healthy and platonic harboring on likes, admirations and friendships and do not see women bodies in sexual framework. The prevalent concept of hetero normative romance is diluted to create an equal say atmosphere in the films. The boys respect the female leads and value their decisions.

Women and girls have compatible relationships and mothers are supporting and encouraging. In three musketeers the mother sees off Corinne to Paris to let her fulfill her dream and in The Princess Charm School Blair is sent to the training by her sick mother for a bright future. Mothers feel proud on their daughter's achievements and encourage them throughout.

All the lead girls in the films have their talents and hobbies which are not traditionally feminine. Unlike traditional fairytales they are not willing to sacrifice. In The Princess and the Pauper Erica leaves her prince to pursue her singing career and Corinne in the Musketeer makes the prince wait as she proceeds on her call of duty.

The binaries of male/ female and good/ bad, sensibility/ sensitivity and strength/ coyness are imbibed in our culture. To the usual stereotype "brave boys don't cry" we might generally tell little girls- "oh it's ok to cry...after all you are a girl". This common example of gendered upbringing in nearly all the households reinforces the binaries in a subtle but a very powerful way. General presumptions that girls are jealous of each other and girls cannot hold secrets are totally negated in these movies. Barbie in various roles portrays girl hero role models herself.

In the Barbie movies gender roles are not conceived, enacted and learnt within a complex of relationships to men or with other females.

In a fantasy themed entertainment for young and pre- adolescent girls the dominance of girl-culture is impressive. They might not be posing the contemporary real life challenges as they exist in real life because the presence of men is by and large minimized in the films, yet the movies install in the girls a non- gendered approach to developing their talents and above all a belief that they can be victorious and happy if they believe in themselves.

For the target age group of these films this belief nurtures and motivates them. The establishment of self- identity by the lead protagonist instills a confidence in them and at their age every text offered need not necessarily contain stark realism.

The songs in the movies are best of their kinds and again reinforce a spirit of self- quest and dignity in girls. They too are break away from the mushy romantic numbers which invariably leave a message that sole mission of a girl's life should be to find a man to look- after and protect her. Songs like- Constant As The Stars Above from Rapunzel, If You Love me for Me and I'm on my Way from *The Princess and the Pauper*, Making my Way, All for Love and Unbelievable from *The Three Musketeers*, Top of the World, We rule from *Princess Charm School* and Look how High we can Fly and Here I Am from *The Princess and the Popstar* are statements of the unfailing spirit. These songs celebrate the power of womanhood and inspire young girls to retain their individualities.

Barbie as a doll also revolutionized the doll market and in 1980's entered the "be anything" stage by being a career girl in a series of professions like dot com entrepreneur, a programmer, the president, a doctor etc. she did not teach girls to be a mother or good housewife. However, the feminist debates over anti- pink literature, Barbie's unrealistic body standards and the sexualized image stand away from this unapologetic aura of femininity posited in the movies. Barbie remains iconic in the movies because of the pro- feminist treatment she gets in the role she plays. Barbie has over 130 careers in her fifty years so the possibilities are endless in her live action reincarnation. Hence the criticism of featuring Barbie in the lead roles stands no ground and Barbie as a protagonist only reinforces the stability of feminist purpose.

The paradigm of the recent debates elsewhere have been limited to Barbie as a doll and whereas feminists have been highly critical of her codifying the female body the paper is a pointer to look beyond the obvious. Barbie movies break the glass ceiling by bringing Barbie into the mainstream feminist discourse from the periphery and call for some in-depth researches by making an obvious claim to be included in non- gendered literature for children.

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