



How Patriarchy Fails Men: An Analysis of Ken in Barbie (2023)

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Abstract

This study investigates the representation of masculinity and femininity in *Barbie* (2023) by analyzing how gender identity is constructed and contested within its narrative. The research aims to uncover how patriarchal norms shape male self-conception and how female agency resists and redefines those norms. Using a qualitative approach, the analysis employed Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity to examine Ken's dependence on recognition from Barbie as a reflection of fragile male identity within patriarchy. Additionally, bell hooks' perspective on love, selfhood, and liberation was applied to highlight Ken's eventual journey toward acknowledging his individuality beyond patriarchal validation. Data were drawn from selected dialogues in the film that capture the tension between dominance, vulnerability, and the search for authentic identity. The findings reveal that the film both critiques traditional masculinity and opens a space for reimagining more inclusive, self-affirming models of gender relations. The study contributes to contemporary gender discourse by showing how popular culture can serve as a medium of critical reflection, bridging feminist theory with cinematic representation and offering innovative insights into dismantling restrictive gender constructs.

Keywords: *masculinity, Barbie (2023), femininity*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji representasi maskulinitas dan feminitas dalam film *Barbie* (2023) dengan menganalisis bagaimana identitas gender dikonstruksi dan diperdebatkan dalam narasinya. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mengungkap bagaimana norma patriarki membentuk konsep diri laki-laki serta bagaimana agensi perempuan menolak dan mendefinisikan ulang norma tersebut. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, analisis ini menerapkan teori hegemonic masculinity dari Connell untuk menelaah ketergantungan Ken pada pengakuan Barbie sebagai refleksi rapuhnya identitas laki-laki dalam patriarki. Selain itu, perspektif bell hooks tentang cinta, jati diri, dan pembebasan digunakan untuk menyoroti perjalanan Ken dalam menemukan individualitasnya di luar validasi patriarkal. Data penelitian diperoleh dari dialog-dialog dalam film yang memperlihatkan ketegangan antara dominasi, kerentanan, dan pencarian identitas autentik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa film ini tidak hanya mengkritisi maskulinitas tradisional, tetapi juga membuka ruang bagi imajinasi baru tentang relasi gender yang lebih inklusif dan berlandaskan pengakuan diri. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada diskursus gender kontemporer dengan menunjukkan bagaimana budaya populer dapat menjadi medium refleksi kritis, menghubungkan teori feminis dengan representasi sinematik serta menawarkan inovasi dalam membongkar konstruksi gender yang membatasi.

Kata kunci: *maskulinitas, Barbie (2023), feminitas*

Introduction

Film is one of the most influential forms of mass communication, functioning not only as entertainment but also as a medium for representing the social realities that exist in society (Tombu, 2024). Through film, issues of culture, politics, identity, and particularly gender relations can be displayed in the form of narratives, symbols, and audio-visual elements that are widely accessible to audiences (Hall, 1997). Representation in film is crucial because it constructs the ways audiences understand and interpret reality, including the norms of gender and the power relations between men and women (Alsarairah et al., 2020). In global cinema, many films have addressed gender issues either explicitly or implicitly, and one of the most recent examples is *Barbie* (2023), directed by Greta Gerwig.

The film *Barbie* (2023) attracted significant public attention because it does not merely bring back the iconic Barbie character but also offers a sharp social critique of the patriarchal system that continues to dominate gender relations. Most academic and popular discussions have focused on Barbie as the symbolic center of feminist debates, consumer culture, and female identity. For example, Gómez (2007) of masculinity in "Uncle Tom's Cabin" draws from R.W. Connell's theory dissected the portrayal of white and black masculinities during the antebellum period, revealing the distortions caused by romantic racialism in the text. Also Vemuri (2017) on Bombay cinema, specifically analyzing Farhan Akhtar's "Lakshya," explores how Indian masculinities are represented and how they contribute to the construction of national identity, highlighting the shifts in masculinities in the 1990s and 2000s in both media and society. These prior investigations provide a foundation for understanding the portrayal and implications of masculinity in different cultural and cinematic contexts, setting the stage for our examination of masculinity in the 2023 film "Barbie."

Yet the character of Ken opens an equally important avenue of analysis. Ken, long considered only a secondary figure or an accessory to Barbie, is given in Gerwig's film a narrative arc that highlights his existential confusion, dependence on recognition, and his effort to embody masculinity according to patriarchal norms. This signals that the film *Barbie* is not only about women but also about men, and about how patriarchy constructs and simultaneously harms them.

The issue of masculinity in *Barbie* resonates with long-standing theoretical debates in gender studies. Butler (1990) has argued that gender is not an essential identity but a performative act: a set of repeated behaviors regulated by social norms that create the illusion of stability. Ken's obsession with being "macho," his display of physical dominance, and his embrace of patriarchal symbols such as horses are not authentic expressions of self but social performances enacted to gain recognition, from Barbie and from other Kens alike. These scenes show that masculinity in the film is not portrayed as natural, but as performance, repetition, and spectacle.

Connell (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity provides a sharper lens to understand this phenomenon. Connell explains that patriarchy organizes masculinity hierarchically, elevating certain forms of masculinity as dominant and relegating others to subordinate positions (Lubis et al., 2024). Masculinity is therefore not stable but constantly contested, requiring performance, validation, and recognition. In *Barbie* (2023), this is clearly seen in the ways Kens compete with one another for attention,

mimic each other's macho behaviors, and fight to dominate not only women but also their fellow men. Ken's desire to be validated, both by Barbie and by other Kens, reveals how patriarchy traps men within a system of competition and dependence. This leads to the first research problem: how does patriarchy, through hegemonic masculinity, construct Ken's identity and entangle him in cycles of rivalry and performativity?

At the same time, Ken's portrayal resonates with Hooks (2004) perspective that "patriarchy hurts everyone." In *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, hooks argues that patriarchy not only denies women's agency but also inflicts wounds on men by alienating them from their emotions, relationships, and sense of authenticity. Patriarchy trains men to repress vulnerability, to equate worth with domination, and to depend on external recognition for validation. In *Barbie*, this paradox is dramatized through Ken: even when he seizes patriarchal power and proclaims "Kendom," he finds it hollow and unsatisfying. His masculinity is not organic but socially imposed, repeated as a performance, leaving him empty and uncertain of his own identity beyond patriarchal scripts. This leads to the second research problem: how does patriarchy, as hooks contends, promise men power while actually creating fragility, emptiness, and suffering for them?

The purpose of this study is to analyze Ken in *Barbie* (2023) as a representation of the contradictions of patriarchy for men. Specifically, the study aims: first, to examine how hegemonic masculinity, as theorized by Connell, constructs Ken's identity through cycles of competition and hierarchical performance; and second, to explore how patriarchy, as theorized by bell hooks, harms men by producing emptiness, alienation, and inauthentic masculinity. Through this dual theoretical approach, Ken is revealed not merely as Barbie's accessory but as a cultural figure that embodies the paradox of male identity under patriarchy: promised power that results in fragility, and dominance that conceals deep vulnerability.

Method

To accomplish this study, a qualitative research design was (Creswell, 2018). The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for a descriptive and interpretive analysis of cultural texts, with the aim of exploring how social meanings are constructed and represented. The object of this research was the film *Barbie* (2023), directed by Greta Gerwig, which was treated as the primary text of analysis. The focus of the study was not on human subjects but on the representation of characters, particularly Ken and the other Kens, who functioned as the units of analysis. Their behaviors, dialogues, and narrative arcs were examined as data that reflected how masculinity and patriarchy were constructed and performed in the film.

The study also employed documentation techniques by consulting secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and scholarly writings in the fields of gender studies, masculinity studies, cultural studies, and film studies. These works served to provide the theoretical framework and strengthen the interpretation of the findings

(Nawawi, 2005). In particular, the theories of hegemonic masculinity proposed by Connell (2005) and the argument of bell hooks (2004) were used as central analytical lenses. Connell's framework guided the analysis of how masculinity is hierarchically constructed and maintained through competition and recognition among men, while hooks' perspective was used to examine how patriarchy ultimately harms men by producing emptiness, alienation, and fragility behind the promise of power.

The procedure of the study was carried out in several stages. First, the film was watched repeatedly in order to identify recurring themes, dialogues, and scenes related to masculinity, performance, and patriarchal structures. Notes were taken systematically to capture Ken's character development and his interactions with other characters. Second, the data were categorized into thematic units such as "competition among men," "search for recognition," "performance of masculinity," and "patriarchy and emptiness." These themes were identified through a process of observation combined with theoretical reflection. Finally, the selected data were analyzed qualitatively by interpreting the cinematic representations through the chosen theoretical frameworks.

The findings of this research were thus derived from a process of textual analysis that treated Barbie as a cultural artifact. The method ensured that the study could be replicated, as the procedures, watching the film carefully, taking notes, categorizing themes, and interpreting them within the framework of established theories, can be followed by other researchers.

Result and Discussion

Hegemonic Masculinity and the Construction of Ken's Identity

Hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant form of masculinity that legitimizes men's power and subordinates both women and alternative masculinities. According to Connell (2005), masculinity is not a natural trait but a social practice that must be constantly performed and validated through recognition. In Barbie (2023), Ken demonstrates this by competing with other Kens and striving for Barbie's attention. His identity is not self-defined but dependent on patriarchal approval. This cycle of rivalry and mimicry illustrates how hegemonic masculinity constructs male identity through competition, hierarchy, and the need for external validation.



Picture 1

The line “Barbie has a great day every day, but Ken only has a great day if Barbie looks at him” encapsulates the asymmetrical construction of gender relations within Barbieland. This narration reveals that Ken’s identity and sense of fulfillment are entirely dependent on Barbie’s recognition, while Barbie herself possesses inherent autonomy and purpose. Interpreted through R.W. Connell’s (1995) framework of gender order, the dynamic underscores a hierarchy where one gender becomes the central figure and the other is relegated to the margins. What makes this particularly striking is that Gerwig deliberately reverses the patriarchal order found in the real world: instead of men exercising dominance, here women (Barbies) control the social space. By exaggerating this inversion, the film satirizes patriarchal structures and exposes the absurdity of systemic inequality.

Furthermore, Ken’s dependency highlights the fragility of his masculine identity, which is constructed not through self-affirmation but through external validation. This aligns with Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity, which shows that patriarchal systems not only subordinate women but also impose restrictive and damaging hierarchies among men. Thus, the dialogue illustrates how gender systems, whether patriarchal or matriarchal, create existential vulnerabilities, particularly for those whose identities are defined by social recognition rather than intrinsic value.



Picture 2

The dialogue “Ken. / Oh, hey, Barbie. / Hi. / How much of that did you see? / We saw the whole thing.” appears simple on the surface, yet it exposes the fragility of Ken’s self-image within the patriarchal framework he attempts to embody. Ken’s initial hesitation, followed by his concern about how much Barbie witnessed, reveals that his performance of masculinity is not for himself but for external validation. This

aligns with Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity, which emphasizes masculinity as a social performance sustained through recognition by others, particularly by women or fellow men.

Ken's worry about being "seen" underscores the performative nature of his gender identity. In patriarchal systems, masculinity often demands constant surveillance and approval. The presence of Barbie as an observer destabilizes Ken's sense of authority; rather than embodying power, he becomes self-conscious and insecure. This illustrates the contradiction within patriarchy: while men are promised dominance, their identities remain precariously dependent on external affirmation.

Thus, the dialogue encapsulates how Ken, like many men under patriarchal norms, is trapped in a cycle of performativity where his worth is measured not by inner authenticity but by how convincingly he can enact socially sanctioned masculinity in the eyes of others.



Picture 3

The humorous dialogue "[laughs] Looks like this beach was a little too much beach for you, Ken. / If I wasn't severely injured, I would beach you off right now, Ken. / I'll beach off with you any day, Ken." is deliberately absurd, yet it functions as a sharp satire of masculine posturing within patriarchal norms. The repeated threat of a "beach-off" exaggerates how men often construct their identities around competition and confrontation, even in trivial or meaningless contexts. This aligns with Connell's (1995) framework of hegemonic masculinity, where dominance among men is established through symbolic or physical contests of strength.

What makes the scene striking is its parody of hypermasculine bravado: the Kens escalate their rivalry through nonsensical threats that have no clear meaning, yet both treat the dialogue as a serious marker of status. This highlights the performative emptiness of patriarchal masculinity, where the form of conflict matters more than its content. Ken's need to "beach off" demonstrates how fragile his masculine identity is, depending on constant one-upmanship and the gaze of peers.

Thus, beneath the comedic surface, the dialogue exposes the hollowness of patriarchal promises of male power, showing masculinity as a repetitive performance driven by insecurity rather than authentic strength.

Patriarchy Hurts Everyone: Ken and the Illusion of Power

Patriarchy is often assumed to grant men authority and privilege, yet feminist scholars argue that it simultaneously harms them. Hooks (2004) emphasizes that patriarchy alienates men from emotional authenticity, pressuring them to equate self-worth with dominance and external recognition. In *Barbie* (2023), Ken embodies this

paradox. Even after seizing control and proclaiming “Kendom,” he remains unsatisfied, revealing that patriarchal power offers only an illusion of fulfillment. His emptiness underscores hooks’ argument that patriarchy damages men by demanding performances of masculinity that suppress vulnerability, leaving them fragile, disconnected, and uncertain of their true identity.



Picture 4

The line “Here, I’m just a dude. And you know what? That’s enough.” captures Ken’s moment of liberation from the constraints of patriarchal expectations. After struggling throughout the film to define himself through Barbie’s gaze or through a distorted understanding of patriarchy, Ken finally arrives at a recognition of intrinsic self-worth. He realizes that his value is not contingent on domination, performance, or external validation, but simply on being.

This resonates strongly with bell hooks’ argument in *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (2004), where she asserts that patriarchy wounds men by forcing them to suppress vulnerability, authenticity, and love. Instead of allowing men to embrace themselves as full human beings, patriarchy insists on rigid performance: strength, control, aggression. Ken’s declaration rejects this framework. By affirming that being “just a dude” is enough, he aligns with hooks’ vision of men stepping away from patriarchal scripts and embracing self-acceptance.

The scene also demonstrates the possibility of transformation. Ken does not gain fulfillment through power or control, but by recognizing his humanity beyond patriarchy. This marks a pivotal departure from hegemonic masculinity and offers a critique of the system that initially left him lost and empty.



Picture 5

The lyric “And I don’t know if I’ve ever been really loved by a hand that’s touched me” from Ken’s musical number conveys a profound sense of emptiness and longing that reflects the emotional consequences of patriarchy on men. Rather than

celebrating intimacy or vulnerability, the line communicates doubt, alienation, and the absence of genuine affection. Ken's uncertainty about whether he has ever been truly loved shows how deeply patriarchal conditioning has estranged him from authentic emotional connection.

Bell hooks in *The Will to Change* (2004) argues that patriarchy systematically teaches men to suppress tenderness and vulnerability in order to conform to ideals of dominance and control. This leaves men emotionally stunted, often incapable of recognizing or experiencing love in healthy, reciprocal ways. Ken's lyric resonates with this critique: despite his proximity to Barbie and other Kens, he recognizes an aching void, he has not felt love that is nurturing or affirming, only performative interactions shaped by social scripts.

The song moment thus becomes a commentary on the emotional cost of patriarchal masculinity. It exposes the loneliness men often endure when forced to live within rigid gender roles, highlighting the urgent need for men to reclaim love, intimacy, and self-acceptance beyond the patriarchal framework.

The line "You play on their egos and their petty jealousies, and you turn them against each other" reveals how patriarchy not only conditions men into competitive dynamics but also weaponizes their vulnerabilities against them. Barbie's observation underscores that Ken and the other men are not empowered through patriarchy but manipulated by it, trapped in cycles of rivalry and insecurity. This reflects bell hooks' assertion in *The Will to Change* (2004) that patriarchy ultimately disempowers men by encouraging them to measure their worth through domination over others rather than through authentic selfhood or connection.

Ken's susceptibility to ego-driven conflict illustrates how masculinity under patriarchy becomes fragile and precarious. Instead of fostering solidarity or empathy, patriarchal structures push men to seek validation through recognition from women and competition with other men. These petty jealousies signify not strength, but a deep insecurity born from internalized social conditioning.

Barbie's statement highlights that the supposed promise of male power within patriarchy is hollow: the system exploits men's need for affirmation, keeping them distracted from pursuing genuine fulfillment. The critique embedded here aligns with hooks' argument that men are also victims of patriarchy, as their identities are reduced to performances of rivalry and ego rather than authentic expressions of self.



Picture 6

The dialogue "It's okay if you're crying. You know, I cried too. It's actually kind of amazing." followed by Ken's response "I'm a liberated man. I know crying is not

weak.” illustrates a pivotal moment where Ken begins to challenge the patriarchal mandate of emotional repression. Throughout the film, Ken is portrayed as embodying a masculinity dictated by external validation and power, yet here he voices a counter-narrative: that vulnerability does not diminish manhood. His declaration of being “liberated” suggests that freedom lies not in domination, but in reclaiming the full spectrum of human emotions.

From bell hooks’ perspective (*The Will to Change*, 2004), this moment aligns with the argument that men are also victims of patriarchy because they are socialized to suppress their feelings, equating masculinity with stoicism. Ken’s willingness to admit that crying is “not weak” resists hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995), which enforces an emotionally detached ideal. Barbie’s supportive response validates this shift, showing how recognition and acceptance from others can help dismantle internalized patriarchal norms.

This short but profound dialogue signals that true liberation for men lies in embracing emotional honesty, challenging the patriarchal script that equates strength only with hardness and denial.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that the portrayal of masculinity and femininity in *Barbie* (2023) offers critical insights into how patriarchal structures both limit and damage gender identities, while also opening possibilities for transformation. Through the lens of Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity, the study reveals how Ken’s dependence on Barbie illustrates the fragility of male identity when defined solely by dominance and recognition from women. Meanwhile, bell hooks’ perspective illuminates how Ken’s eventual recognition of selfhood beyond patriarchal validation reflects a pathway toward liberated masculinity rooted in emotional honesty and self-acceptance. The innovation of this study lies in situating a contemporary popular culture text within feminist theoretical discourse, bridging Connell’s structural analysis with hooks’ emancipatory vision to show how cinematic narratives can expose and challenge entrenched gender norms. This not only enriches scholarly conversations on gender representation in media but also contributes to broader discussions on dismantling patriarchal constructs and encouraging more equitable, humanized models of masculinity in both academic inquiry and social practice.

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