

A Woke Hollywood: Gender-Wokeness in
Barbie (2023), *Cinderella* (2021), and *Mulan* (2020)

By

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing a degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Abstract

This research explored the concept of gender-wokeness as represented in present-day Hollywood films, using a gynocritical lens to observe *Mulan* (2020), *Barbie* (2023), and *Cinderella* (2021). Gender-wokeness is defined as the acknowledgment of the unique, often unspoken, aspects of women's identities and experiences, along with an inclusive recognition of gender fluidity. This study highlighted how these films portray women reclaiming their authentic selves by navigating societal expectations and the unknown "wild zone" of female identity. *Mulan* (2020) examined the unshackling of silenced female potential through Mulan's acceptance of her chi, contrasted with Xianniang's alienation for embracing hers. *Barbie* (2023) explored Barbie's rejection of expected perfection and societal ideals, catalyzed by her interactions with Ken, to embrace a complex understanding of womanhood. *Cinderella* (2021) expanded this discourse by introducing Fab G, a gender-fluid character, as an expression of unique femininity and a symbolic female space helping Ella embrace her true female self. The findings revealed that gender-wokeness in these films encourages inclusivity and critiques the limited understanding of gender. By presenting diverse experiences, these films encourage audiences to rethink generalized perceptions of gender and embrace a deeper, never-spoken, authentic understanding of gender in contemporary movies. By providing an in-depth analysis of the relationship between films and wokeness, the study intends to add to ongoing discourses concerning gender studies and film studies.

Keywords: Woke; Gender-wokeness; Barbie; Mulan; Cinderella; Wild Zone

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background

Over the past few years, the widespread use of the concept "woke" in public discourse has led to a major cultural shift towards increased activism and awareness concerning social justice. The woke movement promotes awareness of issues regarding race, gender, the marginalized, and various other prejudices. The word's meaning continued to develop during the 20th century after it first emerged as an African American vernacular for being aware of racial prejudice (Hernández-Truyol 31). The woke culture highlights the significance of recognizing and discussing the challenges others face, encouraging people and organizations to be more awake, equal, and inclusive. Being woke refers to being aware of and attentive to societal issues, particularly social and racial injustice (Ilinca 27). The culture has influenced many parts of society, like education, media, politics, and such, and as a result, topics of representation and intersectionality are well discussed among people. However, some parts of society view wokeness as too sensitive and criticize the culture for establishing a "cancel culture" – a result of the woke movement which bans or rejects people, representations, or organizations for problematic actions or perceptions. Regardless of the different views, woke culture still has a big influence on how people discuss and contribute at present to promoting justice and equality in society. The subject of woke covers issues concerning race, gender, sexuality, differently abled, and so on. This research focuses on the wokeness concerning gender in recent Hollywood films.

With the growing influence of woke in various fields of society and the media, the idea of “woke films” has become vastly popular with the increasing focus on inclusion, equality, and diversity by the film industry. The woke movement led to the Hollywood film industry facing pressure from racial inclusion and civil rights groups to introduce wider diversity in terms of race, gender, and ethnicity (22). Now, the woke standards that Hollywood has embraced have resulted in inclusive narratives, expanded, diverse casting, and recruitment processes that give priority to neglected voices. Further study is required to understand the idea of wokeness in films concerning gender to recognize the approaches that can be used to wake people up to the authentic perception of gender. Thus, my paper studies how Hollywood films reflect gender-wokeness. I have selected three Hollywood films to study for my paper: i) *Barbie* (2023) written by Greta Gerwig and Noah Baumbach, ii) *Cinderella* (2021) written and directed by Kay Cannon, and iii) *Mulan* (2020) directed by Niki Caro.

By closely observing the different properties of the films, for example character portrayals, narratives, and dialogues in the selected films, this research finds out how present-day Hollywood films help create and portray gender-wokeness. Through this research, I aim to show what makes the new-age Hollywood films woke and provide some background and definition to the concept of gender-wokeness. I expect my findings to contribute to a broader discourse of woke, gender, and film studies in the future.

These films were selected for their atypical portrayal of gender, which may constitute gender-wokeness. First, I have selected *Barbie* (2023) for its modern representation of the Barbie character, moving away from its stereotypical femininity and showing the effects of reality and societal expectations experienced by both men and women. The film presents new perspectives on self-acceptance and empowerment through the journey of the female protagonist Barbie and

the male protagonist Ken, alongside other characters. Next, I have selected *Cinderella* (2021) for its progressive portrayal of gender, with an aspiring and ingenious female protagonist Ella, and even a genderless Fairy Godmother. Lastly, *Mulan* (2020) is appropriate for its exploration of female identity and the possibility of different perspectives on gender. The female protagonist Mulan experiences being a warrior both as a female and male and eventually embraces her true self with other influential characters contributing to her journey.

1.2 The Analytical Lens

What makes us "woke" is learning about what does not fall into the already existing, traditional understanding of gender alertness. Hence, we need to stay alert and constantly conscious of what we are engaging with. I believe the films I selected explore what constitutes women's unknown experiences. They tap into that realm of wilderness—perhaps not entirely, but they capture at least some elements that delve into the unknown horizons of women's sexuality and their understanding and construction of gender. If we are aware of these nuances, we can consider ourselves "woke" about these issues. By doing so, we avoid making generalized judgments about women. This exploration of the unknown is what defines being "woke." Therefore, my attempt was to analyze how these films critique the limited understanding of gender. I have studied the selected films and discussed the aspects constituting gender-wokeness from a gynocritical lens. "Woke" is still a recent concept yet to be researched more with time, so it does not have a fixed analytical tool to work with. Thus, I chose to do a gynocritical study of gender-wokeness using some of its concepts to help me grasp the ideas better and provide a solid understanding of gender-wokeness. The gynocritical lens works as a catalyst to help express the woke view of gender in the films. This gynocritical perspective allows me to understand women as they are

and see a side of them that has not been understood or has been hidden from the eyes of other genders. Moreover, not only females but others whose voices did not have an impact—non-binary gender in the case of my research— their identities are expressed and their true selves are portrayed through new-age films. The unique side of women that has not been truly understood is the wilderness, according to gynocritics. And, this side of the wilderness is something that I believe gender-wokeness makes available to us for comprehension through such films.

1.3 Methodology

My research takes a qualitative approach, where the nature of my analysis is textual. It involves a close reading of each text (Hollywood films) that I have mentioned above. I have accessed and downloaded all three films from an online streaming platform. For my film analysis, I first watched each movie individually without any critical analysis simply to familiarize myself with the content. Then I watched each of the three films again while analyzing them from a gynocritical perspective. The films were watched and observed multiple times to thoroughly understand the portrayal of potentially woke characters and the setting that established or influenced gender-wokeness. I took detailed notes during each viewing of the films as I observed and selected specific scenes, interactions, and dialogues. So, several codes were generated from my analysis, which were then reduced to themes. After this, a proper discussion of the themes is done for each film.

1.3.1 Limitations

This research has potential limitations. As mentioned earlier, very little research has been done on gender-wokeness, as “woke” itself is still a recent concept with limited research and is

perhaps subject to evolving in the future. Moreover, only three films are selected for analysis; more films would have provided more precise information on the themes that make a film woke. However, this research has a time constraint with a limited time of only six months. The idea of staying “woke” rose and gained momentum around 2014, and since then, gradually, potential woke films have been released till now. Searching for, watching, selecting, and analyzing more films from among those becomes difficult for this research within the given time. Therefore, I am proceeding with the three movies I mentioned earlier that are very recent and are potentially “woke.”

1.4 Research Questions

Accordingly, the research focuses on two research questions:

- i) What aspects of gender representation make the selected films woke?
- ii) What mechanisms are used in the selected films to articulate the wokeness?

Therefore, this paper explores gender-wokeness in Hollywood films by examining *Mulan* (2020), *Barbie* (2023), and *Cinderella* (2021).

Chapter 2:

Literature Review

This chapter looks into the evolution and use of the "woke" concept from its early roots in racial awareness to its broader applications in social justice, gender equality, and inclusivity. It discusses the areas of feminism, postfeminism, and gynocriticism in understanding gender-wokeness as portrayed in films. Moreover, it reviews existing scholarly works on the films *Barbie* (2023), *Mulan* (2020), and *Cinderella* (2021). Through the review of the following scholarly sources, the chapter identifies a research gap and explores the contributions of the existing scholarly works to build on and establish the main arguments of the present study.

2.1 The Concept of “Woke”

The term “woke” connects to the concept of consciousness and awareness. Being "awakened" involves recognizing hidden injustices and societal problems that others may be oblivious to. This state of awareness allows individuals to notice and comprehend the challenges faced by others, especially those who differ in culture, gender, race, religion, education, age, and such. Hernández-Truyol emphasizes that “woke” is synonymous with “awake”, stating that “(b)eing woke is being awake” (22).

2.1.1 Early Use of “Woke”

The term “woke” is traced back to Marcus Garvey’s 1923 aphorisms collection, where he implores “‘Wake up Ethiopia! Wake up Africa!’” (Hernández-Truyol 29). This call to action encouraged Black people globally to be more conscious of the political and social injustices

around them. In 1938, “woke” was brought up in the context of Lead Belly’s song “Scottsboro Boys.” This song was about the wrongful conviction of nine African American teenagers accused of raping two White women, after which the singer asked Black Americans to “stay woke,” to be conscious of racially-motivated dangers in the White community. By 1962, William Melvin Kelley used the term in his essay “If You’re Woke You Dig It” to emphasize the necessity for Black people to remain aware of racial violence (Hernández-Truyol 29). Ilinca adds to this, where Melvin’s essay, referring to the term “woke,” also expressed how “...words, already in use, can acquire new meanings” (27). Stephen Carter adds a different perspective on the widely accepted evolutionary journey of the term, arguing that the labor movement first generalized it, which was later adopted by Black activists in the early 20th century and popularized through 1920s blues music (Hernández-Truyol 31).

2.1.2 Modern Popularization and Broader Use

The meaning of “woke” evolved throughout the 20th century, transitioning from an African American term for racial awareness to a broader pursuit of social justice. After the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012 as a victim of law enforcement brutality, Alicia Garza and Patrisse Cullors started the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag in 2013 to raise awareness of systemic racism (Ilinca 20). The protests remarkably increased and intensified after the death of George Floyd from similar brutality of law enforcement. Following Michael Brown’s similar case of death in 2014, the term “stay woke” gained significant momentum on social media, becoming a cry to fight racial injustice (Hernández-Truyol 31; Ilinca 29). The extent of the Black Lives Matter movement eventually led to the formation of the “Woke Movement.”

By 2017, both the Merriam-Webster dictionary and Oxford English Dictionary included “woke” in their entries. Merriam-Webster defined it as “aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)” (Hernández-Truyol 21), and Oxford defined it as “a state of alert regarding acts of discrimination and racial or social injustice” (Ilinca 27). “Stay woke” expanded beyond racial issues to address gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, class inequities, and disability injustices. For example, the Women’s March in 2017 had the term applied to gender-related activism (Hernández-Truyol 32).

2.1.3 Cultural Impact

The Woke Movement has heavily influenced public discussions about racism, gender equality, same-sex marriage, and cultural appropriation, prioritizing inclusivity and diversity (Ilinca 21). Thus, it started to inform many popular cultural forms including films and music. This has driven efforts in media to combat racism, stereotyping, generalizations, and such. Hollywood, in particular, has faced pressure to increase diversity in its productions in terms of race, gender, and ethnicity. As a result, platforms like Netflix and HBO Max are investing in films showcasing marginalized voices and diversity, such as having actors of color and LGBTQ+ individuals (Ilinca 24). Prominent examples include *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), *Mulan* (2020), and *Encanto* (2021).

2.1.4 The Anti-Woke Movement

Another movement then emerged in America in opposition to the ideals of equality, diversity, and inclusivity promoted by the Woke Movement, thus being anti-woke (Hernández-Truyol 42). This Anti-Woke movement targets LGBTQ+ rights, women’s equality, and marginalized groups,

stating how these rights (as a result of wokeness) unfairly favor specific groups, such as people of color, and lead to educational institutions inappropriately establishing opinionated views. While claiming to ban books to protect children from being brainwashed by the opinionated views, the movement is actually trying to brainwash them to believe that racism and other historical injustices do not exist (Hernández-Truyol 45). Thus, by trying to preserve traditional values, the Anti-Woke movement is accused of establishing outdated and oppressive norms rather than progressing toward inclusivity and equality that the Woke Movement stands for.

2.1.5 Redefinition of “Woke”

American conservatives from the political sphere have attempted to reframe “woke” as a pejorative term, using it to criticize progressive political beliefs (Hernández-Truyol 32). However, a March 2023 American poll reveals that most people continue to view “woke” positively, describing it as “a new form of being enlightened” (Hernández-Truyol 46). Thus, wokeness “...awakens individuals and society to the historical exclusions based on race, sex, gender, sexuality, and other marginabilizing characteristics” (Hernández-Truyol 51). Through its evolution, as discussed above, the term “woke” has become a symbol of heightened societal awareness, encouraging people to understand and address injustices actively (Ilinca 31).

As noticed above, this genre being new and at a developing stage now more than ever, the available work on the concept of woke has been instrumental in producing the framework for a broader understanding of the phenomenon in general. However, much work is needed to understand the mechanisms involved in the production and reception of woke films. Due to its recency, and with little research available on the specific issue of gender-wokeness as deduced

from reviewing the literature, the present research will hopefully pave the way for further studies on this subject.

2.2 Earlier Studies on the Films

The selected films for my paper have been studied before. Generally, they have been analyzed within specific contexts or themes, as reviewed below.

Having reviewed the literature on the selected films, I have observed that the existing studies on *Barbie* (2023) focus on feminist perspectives, women's representation, and masculinities in the film. Lubis et al. analyzed Ken's hegemonic masculinity through Connell's Types of Masculinity framework, which involves his competitiveness and patriarchal dominance in Kendom. Zheng read Barbie's evolution from idealized femininity to embracing women's complexity. This study used a gender theory lens to conduct a comprehensive analysis of Barbie's outward appearance and social image in the film. Ho's study adopted a feminist view to understand Barbie, where the lens does not undermine genders in any way. It observed the film's critique of traditional gender roles, emphasizing collaboration between genders to flourish together despite struggles. Moreover, scholarly studies on *Cinderella* (2021) are found to be very limited. Bernier, Jim, and Palguna & Juniarta studied the film and observed the reshaping of gender norms and feminist ideals. Bernier's study aligned with fourth-wave feminism to highlight Ella's transformation into an ambitious woman rejecting traditional expectations. Jim conducted a paradigmatic study on the film using structuralist theory, emphasizing its innovative approach where Ella defies societal expectations by pursuing her dream as a dressmaker over marriage. Palguna and Juniarta studied Ella's opposition to gender inequality through Tong's theory of liberal feminism, exemplified by her defiance of restrictions on women owning

businesses and their marriage without consent. Both Bernier and Jim highlighted the Fabulous Godmother's genderless portrayal to emphasize the film's progressive stance on inclusivity. Furthermore, studies on *Mulan* (2020) are mostly comparative analyses of the present film and the 1998 *Mulan*. Additionally, there are feminist studies on the subject of gender inequality in the 2020 film. Hallamaa used Butler's gender performativity theory to study the 2020 film's progressive portrayal of female gender roles, marking Mulan and Xianniang as saviors while having traditional portrayals for male characters. Qingli and Ying's study on the film thematically compared its characters with the 1998 version. They conducted a comparative analysis of 1998 Mulan's ending, where she returns home and finds a partner, with the 2020 Mulan's ending as an independent warrior, rejecting the need for a romantic subplot. Wang further conducted a comparative study of both films using the fourth-wave feminist framework, emphasizing the 2020 Mulan's confidence as a warrior to inspire female persistence. The study also critiqued traditional masculinity through the film's portrayal of vulnerable male soldiers, and highlighted the restrictive societal expectations for both men and women.

However, none of these studies demonstrate a sustained scholarly interest in the portrayal of gender-wokeness as I perceive it. This gap creates an opportunity for further exploration of gender-wokeness in these particular films, which I am undertaking.

2.3 Feminist Discussions

If gender-wokeness constitutes the unacknowledged, incomprehensible layers of women's gender and female identity, then Showalter's gynocriticism can better assist in grasping the ideas and interpreting those unknown horizons in defining this idea of wokeness in the films. Therefore, I have used some of the gynocritical concepts discussed below for my research.

Additionally, postfeminism mainly suggests that we do not need feminism as it has already achieved its goal— women are emancipated from all oppression. However, there are still areas concerning women's expression of their true selves that have not been discussed before or its related issues that have resurfaced, and postfeminism can highlight those areas. Thus, some of the postfeminist concepts discussed below have been useful in the gynocritical study of gender-wokeness.

2.3.1 Postfeminism

Rivers discusses how postfeminism marks a significant shift within feminist discourse, diverging from the collective activism of second-wave feminism and its emphasis on gender inequality and systemic issues affecting women. Postfeminism emerged in the early 1990s as a separate ideology, unrelated to its association with being a backlash against feminism. It reframes feminist discourse to prioritize individualism and difference, aligning with third-wave feminism's aim to obstruct white, heteronormative perspectives. However, as Gill elaborates, postfeminism's influence on contemporary media introduces a complex interplay of empowerment and limitation. It recognizes femininity as a bodily property, framing a woman's "sexy body" as the main source of power and identity. Women are presented as active sexual individuals who tend to portray themselves as seemingly objectified to follow their liberated interests, changing the male judging gaze to the self-loving gaze. Yet, these portrayals often reinforce narrow ideals of beauty and femininity, prioritizing pretty, young, and slim women as desirable while leaving bigger women, older women, and such, as targets of derogatory depictions. The demand for intense self-surveillance to perform successful femininity and constant transformation through "makeover paradigms" exemplifies the contradicting nature of

postfeminist media, where empowerment and liberation are linked with conforming to restrictive beauty standards. Postfeminism also operates within a media culture that intertwines feminist and anti-feminist perspectives. Through irony or humor, it allows systemic vilification and sexist content to go unchallenged, and thus, feminist critiques are dismissed as excessive. This marks feminism as commonsense yet also inauthentic and cruel, even refusing women the enjoyment of traditional femininity. Rivers adds that while postfeminism promotes individual agency, it remains deeply established in colonial and Western biases, reflecting Western interpretations of agency and progress.

In the context of my paper, the prevailing issues and restrictive ideas surrounding female empowerment in postfeminist media culture shed light on the barriers to true empowerment and the authentic expression of women's identities. The postfeminist concepts assist in highlighting and addressing these issues in the selected films, through which we better understand women's genuine perception of gender and become more aware of the persistent gender issues within media culture, ultimately contributing to a better understanding of gender-wokeness.

2.3.2 Gynocriticism

Gynocriticism, as coined by Elaine Showalter, shifts the focus of feminist criticism from examining women as readers to understanding women as writers. This approach emphasizes the need to explore women's unique voices, aesthetics, and experiences, advocating for a theoretical base focusing on true female creativity and identity. Unlike feminist criticism that critiques male representations or misconceptions of women, gynocriticism seeks to uncover and celebrate the authentic expressions of womanhood in women's writing.

The study of gynocriticism is structured around four key elements: women's language, women's body, women's psyche, and women's culture. Women's language was historically suppressed or misunderstood, as men could not comprehend the truly intelligible female languages. Some of them marked these women as witches for the language they spoke. This reflects their struggle to articulate their experiences within a male-dominated language system. As Showalter notes, the language accessible to women for speaking or writing is inherently male-oriented, limiting their ability to express authentic womanhood. To overcome this, women must either selectively adapt and use the available language or find a distinct female language that reflects their unique perspectives. Adrienne Rich explains that a woman's body is the real resource in women's creative and authentic expression. Womanly experiences—menstruation, giving birth, motherhood, and such—are exclusive to women, so women's creation comes from their bodies, the biological experiences of a woman. As Nancy Miller states, we should focus on the body of a woman's writing and not the writing of a woman's body to understand women as they are and their unique contributions to their work (190). Women's psyche, based on the Freudian idea that writing is like urinating and women have wider bladders, positions them as inherently more expressive and capable of articulating complex emotions and experiences. Showalter emphasizes that women's writing reflects their struggles, emotions, and aspirations—whether positive or negative, right or wrong—which show what truly makes them a woman. The expression of such true experiences and their capacity for self-expression are often dismissed as inferior or overly emotional. But these are defining features of women's writing that allow us to understand the individual female psyche. To understand womanhood and the difference in women's writing, we have to observe women's culture. Women's language, body, and psyche are

deep-rooted in their culture. If such a culture is found instead of sharing a culture with men, it can offer a framework for understanding female creativity in its historical and social context.

Showalter refers to Edwin Ardener's model of the muted group (women) and dominant group (men) to highlight the concept of the "wild zone" (200), a space representing the unknown and incomprehensible aspects of women's experiences. This female space, inaccessible to male perspectives, encapsulates the silent and invisible dimensions of female identity, offering insights into the understanding of true womanhood. It is their personal space that no man can interfere with as only a woman can truly feel and understand what another woman expresses, thus providing a foundation for understanding the unique characteristics of women as they are. Showalter's discussion of the muted group and the wild zone highlights the need to explore the cultural dimensions of women's writing, uncovering the influences and restrictions that shape their work.

Thus, by observing women's language, body, psyche, and the wild zone, gynocriticism highlights how these elements shape the narratives and characters in the selected films and brings light to how these films reveal these hidden dimensions of female identity. If the unseen and misunderstood aspects of women's gender and identity are what represent gender-wokeness, then gynocriticism helps make sense of these ideas. A gynocritical study of this research allows the interpretation of those unrecognized dimensions in defining wokeness as portrayed in films.

Moreover, the discussed feminist concepts in this section help understand how the films navigate the complexities of female identity, empowerment, and societal expectations. This exploration of hidden strengths, silenced aspects, and evolving identities paves the way for exploring gender-wokeness and emphasizes its importance in modern feminist discourse. Thus,

conducting a gynocritical study on and applying some of the ideas of postfeminism to *Mulan* (2020), *Barbie* (2023), and *Cinderella* (2021) help reveal how these films reflect and contribute to the understanding of gender-wokeness, offering a detailed critique of femininity, female identity, and empowerment in contemporary media.

Chapter 3

The Unique Female Space and True Female Potential in *Mulan* (2020)

Mulan (2020) reflects gender-wokeness by exploring the undiscovered dimensions of female identity, power, and voice within a restrictive society, particularly through Mulan and Xianniang's depiction of chi that highlights the "wild zone" of true female experiences. Mulan's initial need to perform the male gender to access this power reflects society's limitation in accepting true female strength. She eventually realizes her true female potential and discards the male disguise, unapologetically embracing her chi and liberating her "wild zone" that defines her true identity as a woman. The film humanizes the antagonist, Xianniang's character to understand her vilification as a "witch" for openly embracing her chi, emphasizing the alienation women face when their potential does not fit societal definitions of women. Her connection with Mulan indicates finding a woman's language in navigating this misunderstood space. The film, through these portrayals of women, highlights a complex tapestry of female empowerment that goes beyond general judgments about women. By acknowledging and expressing these hidden aspects of the female experience, the film taps into the unknown horizons of women's identity and unique potential. It suggests being woke in terms of gender is to move beyond reductive stereotypes and appreciate the unknown, often unacknowledged, female strength and identity at their fullest potential. Thus, this chapter explores gender-wokeness by examining *Mulan's* (2020) celebration of the unique female space and true female potential. The analysis that follows is aimed at exploring how the film conveys this idea of gender-wokeness.

Mulan (2020) by Niki Caro is the story of Hua Mulan, a strong and courageous young woman in Imperial China. In her village, she is unique among all the women due to her

remarkable agility and martial arts skills attained from her strong amount of chi – a powerful energy force. However, her parents persuade her to follow traditional gender roles and be a graceful wife in the future. Leading the Rouran warriors to attack, Bori Khan threatens the empire with the help of Xianniang, a powerful witch. So the Emperor decrees every family to have one man join the Imperial Army to fight the enemies. Mulan's father of poor health and old age, Hua Zhou is compelled to join the army as the family's only male member. To save her father from his eventual demise, Mulan disguises herself as his son and joins the army secretly. As she internally struggles to conceal her true self, she gradually becomes close with the soldiers. Mulan and her comrades are forced to fight when the Rouran warriors arrive, and Mulan starts to accept and use her chi. During the battle, Mulan faces Xianniang who sees Mulan as similar to her as they are women going against societal norms. Mulan eventually expresses her true self to her comrades, risking her life. They initially reject her for deceiving them, but later learn to acknowledge her leadership and bravery. Xianniang helps Mulan beat Bori Khan, sacrificing her life in the process. Following an intense battle, Mulan successfully saves the Emperor and Imperial China. The Emperor honors Mulan and offers her an officer's position in the Emperor's Guard. The movie ends with Mulan receiving a sword sent by the Emperor in front of her village, thus acknowledging her as a hero.

3.1 Celebration of the Female Potential and the Wild Zone

In the movie's beginning, it is seen that when young Hua Mulan, the female protagonist, expresses herself using her chi, the villagers look at her in disappointment, shaking their heads in disapproval, and some whispering about her with disappointed looks, ending with her father walking away from her (2:34 – 3:24). Thus, she is seen to be shunned by the entire village as that

expression of chi is not something a female is supposed to have or express. In the film, although chi could be a neutral form of power or energy utilized by any gender, it is traditionally understood as a male act associated with exceptional skills and strength, for which Mulan's expression of chi as a girl is disapproved. It is seen that her parents discourage her from embracing this part of her, with her father stating with a worried expression "Your chi is strong, Mulan. But chi is for warriors, not daughters" (5:28 – 5:38). With this, Mulan's father presents the idea that chi is not for females but for warriors, which according to Mulan's society are the men– the soldiers, protectors, and leaders. The women in the film are expected to follow only domestic roles– becoming housewives, taking care of their house, being graceful and obedient, etc. Society employs this division through the ways chi is predominantly understood and used, where men express and use it to fight and defend, and women are advised not to exhibit it. The concept of chi is presented as a gendered construction that portrays the societal expectations of male power and female passiveness. It is observed that Mulan cannot express herself as a woman using her chi– which can be interpreted as part of her true female experience that she creates– without her being marked as a witch and risking exile by the people around her. Through this, the film shows how some women cannot speak and express the side of themselves that is not seen or understood. It further shows how they would be marked as weird, incomprehensible individuals– in this case, witches– for the language they spoke or the potential they wielded– in this case, expressing chi. This provides an introduction and comprehension of the "wild zone" of women (Showalter 200), where the audience of the film is made aware of how some women are misunderstood when expressing that unknown or unique side of them that makes them who they are. Elaine Showalter uses Ardener's model of the "wild zone" to refer to the unrecognized womanly experiences that are often suppressed or misunderstood in the male-dominated

discourse (200). This female space is invisible to men since they cannot experience what women do or what they are. The “wild zone” provides the understanding of true womanhood, who women actually are. No man can interfere with this space as only a woman can truly feel and understand another woman. Their authentic female experiences are exiled to this zone. They are rendered confusing or weird to the male-dominated structure that lacks the vocabulary or language to understand and accept women's potential. Mulan's struggle to express her chi portrays a further understanding of the true female potential existing in a space out of society's reach for comprehension. This is further discussed and elaborated on in the following chapter. The rejection she faced when she was young, as discussed earlier, particularly the disapproving words of her father, affect Mulan's perception of her female gender, where she feels she cannot do anything good for her family being who she is. When her old father prepares to join the Imperial Army being the only male member of her family, Mulan states with a serious and concerned tone, “If I were your son, you wouldn't have to” (24:13 – 24:16). This expresses Mulan's disappointment in herself, showing how she is not happy with who she is, and believes being a male would have made things easier for all. This reflects an internal struggle between her chi and her expected role in this society which only values in women the traits aligning with traditional femininity and thus, considered natural or normal. Her chi, a powerful expression of her true self, cannot fully be expressed as it exists in the “wild zone”, a female space beyond the comprehension of the male gender where the true female potential exists but is misunderstood. Mulan's chi is dismissed because there is no existing vocabulary in her society that could articulate it as feminine and, thus, is understood as unnatural or dangerous for a woman. If Mulan had fully embraced her chi from the beginning, she would have been marked as weird and dangerous, similar to the women in history who were marked as witches for expressing their

voice and power. Mulan's inability to show her power without facing consequences reveals society's view of the "wild zone" of women. We can also observe this to be the case with Xianniang, the secondary antagonist of the film, who is marked and seen as a witch throughout the film. The main antagonist, Bori Khan's vengeance drives the main conflict in the film, while Xiannaing acts on his orders. Xianniang, although powerful, remains subordinate to Bori Khan and her redemption later in the film keeps her away from being the main villain. Before observing and further discussing Xianniang's case, Mulan's journey of her true female potential and portrayal of her female gender needs to be observed and elaborated first, which would allow us to be conscious of the unknown, unseen experiences of what makes a true woman.

Following Mulan's disappointment in her circumstances, the movie presents Mulan's shift in gender expression from female to male. The scene shows her female version first, wearing a simple, purple women's Hanfu (traditional clothing of the Han Chinese) with long, half-updo hair and then it shifts to her wearing her father's heavy, silver battle armor, with no signs of makeup on the face and the long hair now swept under a big helmet, thus dressing herself as a male soldier and changing from Hua Mulan to Hua Jun to join the Imperial army (25:35 – 26:00). This role reversal reflects the inflexibility of the gendered construction, where Mulan's true self as a female is concealed to gain acceptance in society. Mulan's performance as a male can be understood by Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (Butler 237). She performs the male gender to be a warrior in the male-dominated world because society does not offer any way for her to be one and only males are accepted as warriors. Butler argues that gender is a set of performances that we negotiate, influenced by society's expectations or standards. It is performative, which means individuals perform a sign of gender through repeated actions, regulated by social and cultural norms (237). Mulan's gender role reversal, thus, shows

how gender roles are prescribed through cultural practices and not determined by birth. As Hua Jun, Mulan adopts a masculine look and behavior such as wearing her father's armor, binding her chest, and participating in battle. However, her true female identity stays the same on the inside. Her chi exists in the wild zone, where it is feared and rejected as it goes against their socially acceptable understanding of women. Her transformation into a man is a strategic move that gives her the right to access the freedom and power refrained from her as a female.

As Hua Mulan changes from a woman to a man as Hua Jun, she uses a binder to compress and hide her breasts. However, it is seen in the film that Hua Jun feels discomfort from having the breasts compressed and bound up all day as she slowly unbinds them while taking in and letting out a long breath (31:51 – 32:11), thus struggling to hide them. In other words, this physical transformation is symbolic of the social performance that being a woman entails. It involves a constant struggle to conceal her complete self, here represented by her female body, which makes her Hua Mulan, the woman. As a woman. She is not allowed to embrace her full self. It is only after she is changed to a male as Hua Jun, that she is able to express herself and fight using her chi without being ostracized. She even gets the appreciation and praise, that she duly deserves for her skills, from the male soldiers. The following scene shows the male soldiers staring at Hua Jun's training fight with smiles and wonder, and later even meeting him and patting him on the shoulder with signs of approval (40:15 – 41:28). In Showalter's context of the silenced wild zone, there is the muted structure and the dominant structure, and women can express their silent zone either by finding a woman's language or through the forms of the dominant structure— language of the dominant group (200). It can be said that Mulan, as a female, could not truly express herself without being rejected for being a woman with strong chi. Because there is no existing language of their own or no existing vocabulary within the dominant

structure to express her chi as her true female potential, it is misunderstood, suppressed, or deemed unnatural. However, by selectively using the ways of the dominant structure, she is able to express the side of her that is not understood. In other words, Mulan expresses her strength with her strong chi by adopting a male identity– the language of the dominant structure who does not get rejected for using chi. This use of the male disguise to portray her unique side in defining her true womanhood is a symbolic use of the male-dominated discourse or language, which Mulan selectively utilizes in the absence of a woman’s language, to express her chi without being misunderstood. By doing so, she creates her own space and selective way of communication to show the male soldiers the side that defines her as a woman, without being marked as a witch. Through Mulan’s gender role reversal, we can observe an understanding of what contributes to the process of expressing the unique side that makes women as they are, thus acknowledging the never-spoken side of women’s construction of gender and consequently being “woke” about it.

The earlier discussed scene follows Commander Tung of their army asking Hua Jun, “Your chi is powerful, Hua Jun. Why do you hide it?” to which Hua Jun replies stuttering after a long pause, “I...I don’t know” (47:04 – 47:20). Here, Hua Jun questions his decision of hiding a part of him, or rather, hiding the very part that makes Hua Mulan who she is as a female. The chi is her female potential, her true female experience connected to her body through which she expresses it. It can be said that Mulan was made to think this part of her was not something to be proud of, even though it was who she truly was as a female and what truly defined her as a female. Being a male allowed Mulan to acknowledge her chi as an important aspect and even express that part of her without being called out for it. The following scene in the movie shows Hua Jun finally learning to use his chi without feeling wrong about it as he proudly carries the water-filled buckets up the hill with ease, while the soldiers admire his strength as they watch

from afar and smile at him (48:36 – 50:42). However, it can be said that this chi was part of what defined Mulan and her female potential, and embracing it as Hua Jun indicates he is not being true to himself. Accepting a part that defined her as a female and not embracing that female side means the true self is being pushed aside. This internal struggle is beautifully captured in the following confrontation conversation scene between Hua Jun and Xianniang. Xianniang points out the flaw of not expressing Hua Jun's true self, which is Hua Mulan as a female with strong chi:

Xianniang: Who are you?

Hua Jun (Mulan as male): I'm Hua Jun. Soldier in the emperor's Imperial Army!

Xianniang: Then you will die pretending to be something you're not. (1:03:09 – 1:03:25).

Hua Jun cannot keep up with Xianniang's strength, and thus, is easily defeated by her as she shoots her knife at Hua Jun's chest. This marks the end of Hua Jun as he is brought down, however, this also marks the rise of Mulan who embraces her true self. The movie, hence, shows the shift in Mulan's gender expression from male to once again, female. The knife that Xianniang threw at Hua Jun is blocked by the binder that was used to conceal the breasts, and thus Mulan survives (1:04:13 – 1:04:34). It can be said that the very binder that concealed her true self– the breasts being part of Mulan's true female body and true gender – that binder takes the knife's hit in Mulan's place, symbolizing the end of something that blocked her from expressing her true version. Her breasts symbolize the true self that Mulan conceals, and the destruction of the binder symbolically represents the death as well as her rejection of the limited understanding of womanhood that she has been internalizing. Thus, Hua Jun's journey ends, marking a symbolic death of the disguise she needed to come to terms with and navigate her own

feminine self. And now no longer needing to perform the male gender to express her female potential, Hua Mulan rises as a true woman, not concealing a part of her anymore and unapologetically asserting her true identity. Her now unconcealed chest symbolically represents her female body freely affirming and expressing her true self and her chi as part of her true female potential and experience, not something to be disguised or hidden. The following scene in the film shows Mulan embracing the word “True” before finally accepting her true gender as she removes parts of her armor one by one and lets her long hair flow out while moving towards the battle on a horse, now wearing only a red Hanfu. Further expressing her true femininity using her chi and skills on the battlefield as part of her true self and not of Hua Jun’s (1:05:04 – 1:06:35). She is more powerful here as a woman and is able to defeat her enemies unlike when she was fighting with Xianniang as Hua Jun. Wang, thus, aptly observes changing from Hua Jun to Hua Mulan makes her achieve a noble elegance as she recognizes and accepts her true femininity, and it is seen that she does not completely surrender her female identity (161). Therefore, Mulan represents the woman’s body being able to create true woman experiences which contribute to defining a woman as she is— in other words, it is a symbolic celebration of the power of the female body. She could be her true self and express herself more on the battlefield after freeing her body from the bind that held her back and embracing it as a true source of what defines herself as a woman. By doing so, she reclaims the wild zone— expressing the silenced female strength and power that a woman’s body can produce— and illustrates that her strength lies in her true womanhood, not in performing as a man. Her body and chi unite to show the ultimate expression of her true feminine self, thus highlighting the full potential of her female power. We observe that her chi and her body are integral to her female strength, yet society tries to silence both. Through this, the film’s audience become “woke” about or is made aware of the idea that a

woman's body is central to her identity and power. Mulan's journey uncovers the significant connection between her female body and her female potential, showing that a woman's true feminine self results from embracing and expressing the body as a source of true strength and potential.

In the film, when Mulan, having now embraced her true gender and femininity, presents herself as a woman in front of her male comrades and commander, she is not trusted and is threatened to be executed. Yet, her comrade Chen Honghui defends her and states, "You would believe Hua Jun. Why do you not believe Hua Mulan?" (1:18:07 – 1:18:11), following which everyone else proceeds to support and eventually accept Mulan. It can be stated that Mulan successfully communicates to others the unspoken, unique side of her through male gender expression– symbolically through the forms of the dominant structure or male-dominated discourse– for which the other gender acknowledges her true female side. So once she expresses that very unspoken side as a woman, instead of being misunderstood now, her true womanhood is accepted by others. Thus, she is accepted as a woman with a strong, unique expression of chi, in her true feminine self. The journey of her gender role reversal ultimately shows that it was not about Mulan becoming a male but about the reclamation of her true female potential as a woman. Her acceptance of her chi marks the realization of her authentic female potential. We are, thus, being "woke" to the fact that the female experience is often misunderstood, unrecognized, and devalued. And that, embracing true feminine expression (unbound by societal definitions or expectations) is essential for women to reach their full strength. Mulan's empowerment comes from rejecting the idea that she must fit into a restrictive definition of woman, thus revealing the transformative power of the wild zone in asserting one's female potential and identity.

3.2 The Misunderstood Space of True Female Strength

Xianniang is the secondary antagonist of the film, however, her character is not presented as the stereotypical evil witch. From the film's start, Xianniang is seen helping the film's main antagonist, Bori Khan. Xianniang's first entry scene in the film occurs right after the scene where young Mulan is instructed by her father not to express her chi as I discussed in the previous section. After seeing young Mulan, the scene shifts to Xianniang who is at first seen standing afar resembling a black, blurry silhouette, and then standing face to face with a man in *The Silk Road* with her face clearly revealed now. She is then seen staring into the man's eye when he suddenly seems to be under her magic's influence, following which Xianniang takes on his disguise using her power and heads towards a village to infiltrate (6:48 – 7:27). Xianniang, from her first introduction, serves as a reflection of Mulan's potential future had she freely expressed her chi without disguising herself as a male. Her appearance can be interpreted as a warning for Mulan, demonstrating the dangers and the cost of expressing female potential in a world that is afraid of women's unique side. She unapologetically demonstrates her chi— representing the women's wild zone— and is consequently vilified by society, marked a “witch” and feared by the dominant male sphere surrounding her that has their own prescribed definition of a woman. Moreover, her character as the female antagonist symbolizes the tragic outcome of a woman when marked as unnatural and dangerous for accepting her true feminine self— something that Mulan's father feared for Mulan and warned her about.

As the film proceeds, it is seen that she infiltrates a village in disguise and kills the guards stationed there with her knives, thus assisting Bori Khan in attacking the village (8:35 – 8:40).

This marks the start of Xianniang's character as an antagonist in the film. The film then shows the relationship between Bori Khan and Xianniang, as observed in the following scene,

Bori Khan: You have proved useful, witch.

Xianniang (grabbing Bori Khan's neck aggressively):

Not witch. Warrior. I could tear you to pieces before you blink.

Bori Khan: But you won't. Remember what you want...a place where your powers will not be vilified. A place where you are accepted for who you are. (12:26 – 12:51).

Through this, it can be observed that Xianniang does not consider herself a witch, and detests being seen as one, as Bori Khan does. This indicates that people have been shunning her and marking her as a witch for her power and strength as a female, and thus, she finds Bori Khan's mission as the only opportunity to make a place for herself in the world. Qingli and Yang, hence, suggest that Xianniang uses her powers not to be the world's prettiest or strongest woman like other antagonists in Disney princess films, but to make a place for herself where she is accepted as a powerful female (115). Xianniang as a female does not have the chance to express her female potential, as in her powerful chi and abilities, selectively through the male-dominated discourse as Mulan does. Consequently, she fails to communicate her true self within the dominated male discourse. Thus, that unique and powerful side of her truly defining her female gender is misunderstood as something unnatural and weird, for which she is marked as a witch for the power she wields and not understood as who she truly is. This results in Xianniang's goal to express that misunderstood wild zone and be seen and accepted as who she truly is as a female, with her powerful female potential contributing to her identity and not the mark of a

witch. In the scene, Bori Khan addresses her as a witch and is unapologetic about it, which shows his lack of respect for her, further proving how poorly Xianniang is treated for who she is as a female. When addressing her acceptance in the world, it is not simply about Bori Khan acknowledging her power but he is also manipulating her desire for acceptance in the world. He manipulates her through conditional acceptance, so she is granted acknowledgment only when she serves him. Thus, he values her skills only as being beneficial to his goals. His constant addressing of her as a “witch” expresses his true view of her power as unnatural, even something to be controlled and used, thus reinforcing a demonized and inferior perception of her identity. Later in the film, Xianniang realizes that she is just a tool to Bori Khan, being exploited and even called a witch again as Bori Khan gets her attention saying, “Over there, witch,” despite her initial detestation toward it as discussed earlier (45:20 – 45:42).

However, despite all that, she continues to serve him, killing more people on his order. More so, she does not react to being called a witch again like she previously did. It can be said that due to all the shunning, disregard, and disrespect that she has gone through as a powerful female, Xianniang becomes hopeless and realizes her reality to be as such because of who she is. Her acceptance of her circumstances and not fighting back against her being called a witch symbolizes how she is silenced as a female through the dominated male discourse, with her unique side remaining unacknowledged, thus, blocking her self-definition and self-expression. Her chi— a part of her female experience as being deeply connected to her body, and thus, defining her female identity— is suppressed by the dominant structure as they do not understand and in a way fear the female potential she wields. The film’s audience is consequently being woken up to the systemic ways that women’s true empowerment and self-expression are repressed or demonized when it does not fit into the prescribed definitions of women. This leaves

Xianniang no way to show what truly defines her as a woman except when her potential is used to align with Bori Khan's orders, for which she sees this as the only way to highlight her unknown side. However, by doing that, Bori Khan exploits her female potential which is purposed to define her female identity, and that exploitation silences her wild side and what it truly means, as the female experience that she creates is utilized not for her self-definition but for Bori Khan's intentions. Due to this, the true potential of the wild side is muted and lost, thus, shackling Xianniang to a place where she cannot freely define herself as who she truly is and is regarded as a witch when doing so. Therefore, she finds no other option but to follow Bori Khan regardless, as this way, she can be who she is without anyone stopping her. Hallamaa's study of Xianniang's motivation supports this reading as propelled by her wish to be a powerful female without being vilified, and this very reason makes her help Bori Khan with his attacks (17). There is something more to it, something more universal that connects her with every human and not just women. All these scenes express Xianniang's human aspect too, following a wrong path not because she is a female, but because of her human side, due to being dismissed and poorly treated by everyone around her, even being called a witch for her gender. It can be said that Xianniang's villainy is tied to gendered oppression, arising due to her rejection from society that refuses to offer her a place to express her true self. It is not encouraged by a longing for power but by survival and acceptance in a world that cannot comprehend her true feminine self. This alienation makes her humanization particularly gendered. Marked as a witch in the film, her character symbolically shows the alienation of existing women throughout history who were viewed as evil or witches for simply trying to present their unique, unspoken female potential. And, her humanized gender allows comprehension of the misunderstood and silenced woman experiences, symbolizing the misinterpreted views of society towards strong women who are

seen as dangerous or weird. Thus, demonstrating the consequences of restricting women their self-expression and not understanding them as they truly are. This is further discussed in the chapter as follows.

Xianniang is observed to be more human as the film progresses. The following scene shows how she comes across Mulan and sorrowfully shares her side of the story in a pensive tone, “I was a girl like you when people turned on me. You don’t think I longed for a noble path? I’ve lived a life of exile. No country, no village, no family” (1:14:40 – 1:15:05). Here, it can be seen that Xianniang has no place to call home and no loved ones because of who she is, and choosing the wrong path was not her first choice, as she wanted to follow a noble path before but could not because of how people rejected her. Thus, Xianniang as the film’s antagonist is humanized; she is a misguided witch not because she is a female, but because of the rejection, expulsion, and ill-treatment she faced as a female with power. All that suffering as a female, that human side of her gender leads to her committing those wrong actions to have a place where she can be accepted. Through a humanized Xianniang, we get to observe how the wild side of women is often silenced and perceived as something incomprehensible and unnatural, thus failing to present themselves as they are, and further observe the struggle behind that self-expression. The audience is awakened to an understanding of the silenced side and how they work to get their voice heard. When Mulan is finally accepted as a warrior leading the Imperial Army despite being a female, she finds Xianniang and tells her, “We are the same” to which Xianniang replies with a dispirited expression, “With one difference. They accept you but they will never accept me” (1:25:58 – 1:26:07). From this, it is seen that Xianniang comes to a realization, seeing what she thought was impossible is made possible as proved by Mulan, but it was too late for her due to her wrong choice of path. In the end, the movie shows Xianniang

sacrificing her life to save Mulan by taking Bori Khan's arrow hit in Mulan's place, with her final words being "Take your place, Mulan" (1:29:26 – 1:29:32), thus giving Mulan a chance to achieve what she could not but longed for– an honorable place in society as a female with powerful skills– and at the same time, atoning for her sins. This symbolizes how Xianniang finally creates her own discourse to communicate and express her true self, breaking away from Bori Khan's exploitation and the dominant discourse that blocked her from expressing her true female potential in defining her womanhood. In other words, this decision to turn away from Bori Khan's path and help Mulan using her chi symbolically represents the reclamation of Xianniang's own voice as a female, which was silenced before. Bori Khan symbolizes the male dominant structure of society that seeks to take advantage of and silence female power while refusing to acknowledge it. With the deliberate degrading of Xianniang as a witch while also utilizing her power like a tool, Bori Khan objectifies her instead treating her as a partner. He thus presents the patriarchal tendency to silence, objectify, and use women who act outside of the socially accepted gender roles. However, by saving Mulan from him, Xianniang frees herself from being a tool of oppression and decides to empower a woman instead. This moment symbolizes her freedom from the restraints that bound her to Bori Khan's will. Thus, Xianniang embraces her bodily power in defining herself as a female rather than letting it be exploited by the other gender which opposes self-expression. She expresses her unique female potential in her own way contributing to her real expression as a woman, tapping into her wild zone where her true female identity is revealed and understood.

Moreover, although Mulan and Xianniang were initially against each other, they share relatable experiences of rejection and suppression. Xianniang sees a reflection of her suffering in Mulan– a female trying to deal with the same oppressive system that she once fought against.

Thus, her sacrifice for Mulan portrays a moment of female solidarity, symbolizing her recognition of their common struggle and her wish to see another woman succeed in her place. It signifies a bond between two women forged by their sense of solidarity and recognition of their womanhood despite the different paths they have chosen for themselves. Additionally, this female bond and solidarity is a symbolic gesture of women finding a language of their own. In their society, the male-dominated language and structure determined the values, expectations, and roles for women, and thus, limited their ability to show their true selves as a woman. To be accepted into the male-dominated battlefield, Mulan had to conceal her womanhood and change into a male. She could not freely express her female power or her chi as a woman, because of the lack of a female language or structure for society to comprehend and accept powerful women in their true selves. Similarly, as society could not comprehend Xianniang's power, she was demeaned, brought to the role of a witch, and pushed to be a villain. Thus, Xianniang's sacrifice for Mulan represents two women, whose voices were silenced by society, to have finally found a new female language through their forged solidarity and shared womanhood. This moment highlights the importance of women's unique potential and their ability to navigate the wild zone, where they discover their true voice. We learn about and become "woke" about the idea that women's language—rooted in their female experiences—has been silenced or misunderstood by the male-dominated structure. Through Xianniang's journey and her solidarity with Mulan, we see the power of women reclaiming their language and space. This language is a covert understanding of what truly defines a woman and what powerful women have to go through in a world that cannot understand their unique female space. Mulan and Xianniang go beyond existing boundaries set for women in the male-dominated sphere and highlight their wild zone, speaking a language of their own formed through shared resistance against suppression.

3.3 Selective Female Empowerment

Xianniang is presented as a version of Mulan had she not had the chance to express her true womanhood or make others accept the side of her that makes her as she is. In this case, Mulan and Xianniang can be viewed as two sides of the same coin, where one is advantaged and the other is disadvantaged while having the same gender, the same strong sense of chi, and the same desire to be accepted, and be a warrior. However, society's response towards them drastically differs based on how they express their strength, showing the selective nature of approaching and accepting female empowerment. Rosalind Gill's postfeminist idea of modernized femininity helps to understand this case better. The postfeminist media portrays women as active, desirable individuals, representing a modernization of femininity through which women feel empowered. However, only certain women with certain advantages are offered that chance of modernized empowerment in the culture, such as the pretty, young, slim women, etc. Women who fall outside these representations, such as the bigger, older women, etc., are not given that chance like the others in the media and are victims of offensive and vicious perceptions or portrayals (151-152). In this case, it can be said that not all women, but only some women who possess certain qualities (qualities people find acceptable or desirable) can earn recognition and empowerment. Now, Mulan is accepted and praised as a woman for her chi (her female power) and her leadership in the battle, although she had to start by initially performing as a man to reach this goal. She ultimately reflects that postfeminist modernized representational practice of empowerment, where her expression of her true feminine self is set as acceptable when following society's morals like honor, loyalty, and defending her country. From Mulan's journey, it can be said that women can become empowered and accepted as they are when they follow or possess "good" qualities that society finds acceptable. In the film, morals such as loyalty and

honor— ones that Mulan fits into, resulting in her acceptance— symbolize the certain qualities that people find desirable or acceptable to allow women to be active, modernized, empowered individuals. On the other hand, Xianniang represents the excluded women from this modernized female empowerment. Women who do not possess those certain desirable or accepted qualities are not accorded the recognition and empowerment like other women and are prone to being disregarded, humiliated, or vilified and such. This is exactly what happens to Xianniang in the film. Unlike Mulan, Xinniang does not follow moral ways and therefore, does not possess the qualities that can make people perceive her as desirable or acceptable, so she does not get the chance to be empowered and accepted. Instead, she is vilified and subjected to offensive perceptions like being called a witch.

The tragic fate of Xianniang at the end of the movie portrays the selective nature of modernized female empowerment within postfeminist media culture. Despite their similar female potential, she is denied the same chances for acceptance as Mulan received. Mulan gets the chance to express her true self— accessing the male-dominated discourse as a male and creating a path to reveal her true feminine self— and is later accepted by her male comrades and her family. While Xianniang, having no family or friends, does not get the chance to be accepted as her true self— not even able to create a chance like Mulan for herself— thus, she is exiled and rejected. Her sacrifice at the film's end symbolizes the limits of such representational practice, where ones who are deemed undesirable or unacceptable are not allowed recognition and empowerment in the media, and thus, are cast aside. With the film providing an understanding of the perspectives of both sides of the same coin, it allows its audience to be awakened to the reality of the different experiences gone through by the particular gender with certain circumstances, thus, making us woke towards it. We observe how the representation of

modernized, empowered femininity also includes the dangers of such representations in perceiving women. Through this, the film makes its audience aware of the existing issues and provides a greater understanding of the unrecognized side of the female gender that changes our earlier generalized perception. It further highlights the need for inclusive recognition of all expressions of female strength.

The film *Mulan* (2020), thus, represents gender-wokeness by illustrating how true female potential, represented through Mulan and Xianniang's chi, exists and works in an unknown zone often silenced or unrecognized by the other gender. By presenting a character who initially disguises her female power as male, the movie shows a gradual unfolding of Mulan's true feminine self, ultimately rejecting society's definition of women and her male performance. Mulan to fully embrace her true female identity during battle symbolizes her reclamation of the women's "wild zone." However, Xianniang's character expresses how women are alienated when their true potential is viewed as unnatural. With her marked as a "witch" for her open expression of chi, she portrays the upsetting societal exclusion due to her misunderstood but unique female strength. Her bond with Mulan represents the solidarity between women steering through this misunderstood space, expressing the significance of shared understanding and acceptance to reclaim the silenced aspects of femininity. Through these perceptions, the film reflects gender-wokeness by acknowledging the female wild zone as a source of identity and power that exceeds generalizations about women. We are allowed a comprehension of what women's bodies can contribute to in understanding their unrecognized, true female selves. Additionally, we learn about what women's language can be like and can offer, something that remained outside of our recognition. *Mulan*, thus, raises awareness of women's complex gender

expressions, making the audience more conscious or “woke” about the unknown aspects of women’s identity and steering towards a deeper understanding of the full female potential.

Chapter 4

Authentic Female Experiences in *Barbie* (2023)

The film *Barbie* (2023) portrays gender-wokeness through Ken's humanization as a male antagonist, making him a catalyst for Barbie's discovery of her "wild zone," the unknown aspect of her identity and female experience. Through his misguided attempts to control Barbie Land to assert his self-worth, Ken's actions bring attention to the external pressures placed on both genders. Barbie's interactions with Ken ultimately lead her to seek an authentic understanding of herself as a woman, uninfluenced by societal validation or idealized femininity, pushing her beyond prescribed definitions of womanhood. Instead, her embrace of supposed "imperfections" and genuine women's experiences shifts her from a doll-like figure into a fully realized woman, suggesting that true female identity lies in authentic experiences beyond societal expectations. This interplay illustrates gender-wokeness as the film delves into the unknown experiences of women— Barbie's recognition of herself beyond societal expectations, a journey prompted by Ken's role yet explored fully through her own evolving self-awareness. By examining male presence from a female perspective, the film reveals how interactions with men can push women to navigate and expand their unknown female identities. Thus, this chapter explores gender-wokeness by examining *Barbie*'s (2023) recognition of authentic female experiences. The chapter discusses the above aspects and shows how the film portrays this idea of gender-wokeness.

Barbie (2023) by Greta Gerwig focuses on Stereotypical Barbie in Barbie Land – where Barbies have authority and various occupations whereas Kens are just Kens. Stereotypical Barbie undergoes physical changes and faces existential issues, after which Weird Barbie, a socially

excluded disfigured doll, tells her that she must find the one who plays with her in the real world to solve her issues. Barbie and her Ken, whose day goes well only if acknowledged by Barbie, go to the real world together. They soon realize that the real world runs in a patriarchal system. Barbie finds her owner's daughter Sasha, but sees that girls do not like Barbie dolls anymore and men objectify her. Ken finds patriarchy to be great and goes back to Barbie Land to start one of his own. Barbie later takes her owner Gloria and Sasha to Barbie Land, where they see Ken's patriarchy established with all the Barbies conditioned to work for the Kens. Barbie tries to change the system back but fails, resulting in her going into depression. However, Gloria ignites her self-confidence through an empowering speech about society's conflicting female expectations. Barbie and others then regroup the Barbies and break them free from subjugation. Barbie Land gets restored, and Barbie admits that the new Barbie Land should be fair and include the Kens and the discontinued dolls. Barbie and Ken admit their mistakes and reunite. However, without Barbie, Ken feels unclear about his purpose, and Barbie persuades him to find an independent identity. The ending shows Barbie as Barbara Handler in the real world visiting a gynecologist, who chose to leave Barbie Land with Gloria and Sasha to live as a real-life woman.

4.1 The Role of Male-Female Interaction in the Comprehension of the Female Space

Ken or Beach Ken is the main antagonist of the film *Barbie* (2023), however, he does not start being one initially. He is not presented as entirely evil and is humanized. Instead of a stereotypical dominant or superior male antagonist who seeks nothing but control and dominance over women, we can witness a different perspective in the film. Ken's humanization allows us to observe how this dynamic contributes to Barbie's understanding of her true female identity. Ken,

when viewed from a female perspective, provides an understanding of what the male gender can represent or stand for in the process of women's expression of their wild zone. Women do not exist alone in the world, so we can understand the working or function of their unknown side through their interactions with the other gender– in this case, a male.

The movie initially shows how Ken wants to feel loved by Barbie and tries to impress her with every chance he gets. However, their relationship is presented as one-sided, with Barbie not paying much attention to Ken or his needs. After a party at Barbie's Dreamhouse, Ken wants to spend time with Barbie at her house, as shown in the scene,

Ken: I thought I might stay over tonight.

Barbie: Why?

Ken: Because we're girlfriend-boyfriend. (14:38 – 14:42)

However, Barbie does not consider his feelings and frankly but politely says "Oh, but I don't want you here" (14:46 – 14:49), then proceeds to tell him why he should not stay at her house, to begin with, "It's Barbie's Dreamhouse. It's not Ken's Dreamhouse. Right?" (14:54 – 14:56). The scene ends with Barbie reminding Ken that every night is their girls' night, later going back to her dreamhouse to party with the girls, thus leaving Ken alone. This scene offers an idea of Barbie and Ken's relationship, where Barbie openly prioritizes her female friends over Ken, resulting in him feeling unloved by her and not good enough for her. Ken remains lonely and unacknowledged due to Barbie not giving him enough time. So, it is observed that Ken does not hold much significance in Barbie's life, and he lacks a proper identity for himself, only

associating his identity with Barbie. This void results in a need for something that would affirm his importance, which is later discussed in the chapter.

Barbie does not completely acknowledge Ken; he primarily exists as an accessory to her. And, she seems happy with her circumstances and prefers Ken just as he is. However, he does play a role in her life– he pushes Barbie towards thinking about her authentic self as a woman, and his journey as a humanized male allows us to gradually observe that as follows. In the beginning, Barbie was the “perfect” doll living happily in Barbie Land with her female friends, having no flaws, and enjoying a smooth life. Her first weird and flawed experience transpires with her thoughts about “dying” (13:38 – 13:40) during her dance party in her dreamhouse. Following this, she experiences a new, strange, and upsetting turn of events, and she mentions them to her female friends:

Barbie (sighs): Bad breath this morning, a cold shower, burnt waffle, and falling off my roof.

Writer Barbie (gasps): You’re malfunctioning.

Barbie: What? No, I’m just, I’m– Am I? (18:27 – 18:36).

Barbie is marked as “malfunctioning” because of the experiences she goes through, which does not make her normal and perfect but instead seemingly abnormal and imperfect. As a result, Physicist Barbie advises Barbie saying, “You know, you’re gonna have to visit Weird Barbie” (18:40 – 18:44), so that she is instructed by Weird Barbie on how to “fix” herself again. Rosalind Gill’s postfeminist idea of the makeover paradigm helps to understand this case. In this concept, rather than being accepted as they are, women are made to believe they are lacking in ways,

susceptible to transformation or “makeover,” and thus presented solutions to achieve validation or modern empowerment. Their self-worth is often related to their ability to change and correct their perceived flaws, forming a cycle of upgrading their selfhood as a societal expectation (156). Barbie as the “perfect” doll represents her former makeover, and her existence in Barbie Land represents the advised, empowered woman. Her initial “makeover” goes with society’s idea of a “fixed” woman with no flaws or insecurities. And, when she suddenly has imperfect experiences, they are perceived as malfunctions that threaten her identity. They disrupt her established “makeover,” leading her to believe that she is now flawed. These experiences like bad breath or even intrusive thoughts of death (which often result from anxiety or depression) are normal for a woman or anyone to have, and it is not supposed to make them weird or imperfect. However, Barbie is expected to be the perfect female doll with no such flaws, or else she cannot be Stereotypical Barbie anymore, her assigned identity which she happily follows and believes to be. Physicist Barbie’s suggestion, to meet Weird Barbie for advice and fix herself, pushes Barbie back into the postfeminist cycle of requiring constant transformation to remain empowered. Moreover, Barbie’s case symbolically represents the prescribed ideal or impossible definition of what a woman should be like as society expects. And, she follows that definition to be the right kind of femininity, thus going farther away from realizing what a woman actually is or what truly makes women as they are. This is further discussed in the chapter, where we observe how there is a change in the direction of her understanding of being a woman, as follows.

When Barbie and Ken visit the real world, people notice him and some even interact with him. When a lady asks Ken a simple question, “Excuse me, sir, do you have the time?” he instantly responds with “You respect me” (41:50 – 41:54). From this scene, it can be observed that Ken is so deprived of respect, particularly from Barbie, that a basic question such as this

made him feel respected. It can also be said that Barbie never asked Ken such questions or sought his help for which he could feel reliable or admired. Hence, Lubis et al. suggest that Ken's response to the attention he received in the real world indicates his desire for recognition and validation (33). The following scene shows Ken learning about patriarchy in the real world from which he learns that men rule everything, and he finds this as an opportunity to be seen and respected (42:01 – 42:11). From this, it can be seen that Ken's decision to apply patriarchy results from his deprivation of love, respect, and attention from Barbie no matter what he tried. This experience of his is what humanizes him, and that unfair experience is what brings a change in his character as a patriarchal figure taking over Barbie Land, it is not simply because he is a male that he is performing this role. Ken's case of adopting patriarchy can be understood better through Gill's concept of self-surveillance in postfeminist culture. It involves intense self-monitoring and surveillance where individuals, particularly women, constantly assess, monitor, and regulate themselves according to societal expectations of success. It promotes an increased self-consciousness where people are compelled to fix their problems to be accepted. And, its extensiveness gradually renders many aspects of their life into problems that need more monitoring (155). Ken's change reflects this postfeminist self-surveillance where he monitors and adjusts his behavior based on the successful ruling men he sees outside Barbie Land. He starts a cycle of self-monitoring and regulation by following the patriarchal ideals, believing that this influence over Barbie and others will earn him respect. His choice, thus, becomes a way to follow the societal ideals he believes are necessary to gain self-worth. After successfully establishing patriarchy in Barbie Land, a change is observed in Ken's attitude and behavior. When Barbie questions what is wrong with all the other Barbies, Ken casually states, "We just explained to them the immaculate, impeccable seamless garment of logic that is patriarchy, and

they crumbled” (1:01:31 – 1:01:35). Ken’s journey as an antagonist begins from this point in the film where he starts his own patriarchy in Barbie Land, and in the process, conditions the Barbies to serve the Kens. His dominant attitude is highlighted in the scene where he takes over Barbie’s Dreamhouse, turns it into his Mojo Dojo Casa House, and tells her to leave the place, saying “This is my Mojo Dojo Casa House, it’s not Barbie’s Mojo Dojo Casa House. Right? How’s that feel? It is not fun, is it?” (1:04:01 – 1:04:23). Ken delivers this similar to the way Barbie told her reason for him not stay at her place as discussed earlier, and through this, Ken tries to put Barbie in his shoes and show her how he felt when treated that way.

It can be said that Ken’s attempt at dominance or power over Barbie Land and Barbie is a misguided response to his insecurities. Additionally, it is also the consequence of marginalizing a gender (in this case, a male), also often or usually observed to be the case with females. Ken’s attempts to adopt the patriarchal ways and impose them on the Barbies illustrate how damaging these structures are for both men and women. His commitment to patriarchy demonstrates an intense self-surveillance. He monitors aspects of himself that he previously did not view as problematic– like his lack of authority in Barbie Land– and renders them as flaws that require fixing. And, his relationships become strained as he applies dominance rather than seeking mutual understanding or respect. Moreover, he can be seen as a victim of patriarchy, where his emotional growth or quality as a male is not encouraged by patriarchal values. Rather it is harming him and showing that his worth as a male is connected to dominance and control, whereas this brings him no true fulfillment and no fruitful contribution to his male identity. Through Ken’s case, the film portrays how intense self-surveillance and following perceived ideals can restrict one’s self-expression instead of empowering them.

When Barbie questions everything and states how everything is wrong in this place, Ken gets triggered and finally opens up, firmly expressing to Barbie what she made him feel like, “No! You failed me! Out there, I was somebody. And when I walked down the street...people respected me just for who I am” (1:02:03 – 1:02:23). With this, the reason behind Ken’s choices is made clear, and the film presents Ken as a humanized antagonist. He becomes the antagonist, the dominant patriarchal leader not because he is a male, typically stereotyped as being dominant, self-confident, and prone to be a leader, but because of the unfair treatment he experienced as a male. That experience, that human side of his male gender leads to his flawed actions. It can be said that Ken’s journey is intertwined with Barbie’s but not in a reductive way. He does not simply serve as an antagonist in the film but also acts as an embodiment of the larger barriers Barbie has to face in her journey to find her true self as a woman. By changing into a patriarchal figure, Ken prompts Barbie to find a different approach to viewing things. His attempts at asserting himself in Barbie Land, from Barbie’s perspective, are almost puzzling and frustrating, as they disturb her familiar and steady world. These patriarchal structures hinder women’s true expression of their identity, and Barbie decides not to follow them or be influenced. This shift reflects her own realization that the world, and the men in it, do not exist simply to revolve around or complement her, rather they have their own needs and motives which can sometimes be at odds with hers. Moreover, her rejection of Ken’s attempts is symbolic of her rejection of the prescribed female expectations in a male space and her step towards embracing the true female space that defines women as they are. This is observed through the following scene in the film.

When Ken takes over Barbie’s Dreamhouse, and her friends are brainwashed into following his patriarchy, Barbie breaks down emotionally and thinks of herself as useless, thus

becoming depressed. The movie scene starts with Gloria asking Barbie “What’s wrong?” to which Barbie replies crying “I’m not pretty anymore” (1:12:58 – 1:13:07). The scene further continues with Barbie crying and saying “I can’t do brain surgery, I’ve never flown a plane. I’m not the president. No one in the Supreme Court is me. I’m not good enough for anything” (1:13:27 – 1:13:46). Here, it can be seen that Barbie feels insecure about herself, struggles with depression, and expresses her emotions more which center on negative thoughts about herself. A woman’s psyche leads her to express her thoughts and feelings more, as they have more things to express as a woman. Through the expression of her womanly experiences and emotions— be it right or wrong, positive or negative— a woman’s genuine mind is represented (Showalter 195). Thus, through Barbie’s expression of her depressing and insecure thoughts and negative emotions, the film shows what makes an individual woman as she is. The struggles that Barbie expresses as a female, like her emotional breakdown, insecurity, and depression, are not what makes a female weak or inferior, but they are what defines one as a true woman. Following her emotional breakdown, Gloria firmly delivers an empowering speech, catching the attention of everyone present there including Barbie, on the impossible expectations set by society for women and how hard it is to keep up with their perception of what a woman should be like (1:13:50 – 1:16:10). And, Barbie realizes that she does not have to be able to perform every role expected from a woman to be a woman. This is where she accesses her wild zone, stepping towards being a woman as she truly is— where she accepts her authentic experiences as part of her and her genuine emotions as a woman. The audience is, thus, “woke” about the reality that women’s emotional experiences are often deemed inferior, but they are essential to defining womanhood. Barbie’s understanding of her psyche teaches us that embracing one’s authentic emotional experiences is a key part of accessing the unrecognized wild zone and truly

understanding women's complex identities and experiences. Gloria, as a woman, assists another woman, Barbie, in embracing her true feminine side, thus symbolically presenting how the unique female space is only accessible and limited to females. It highlights a space where women can relate to one another and comprehend the unique side that makes them as they are, just as Gloria understands and acknowledges Barbie's expression of her female psyche, usually misunderstood as inferior or weak.

As Barbie finds Ken's patriarchy to be absurd and rejects it, it pushes her towards and results in her expression and realization of her female psyche, the emotional capacity and the working of her mind as a true female. This is thanks to Ken's flaw as a humanized character, where his flawed actions lead Barbie to break away from the idealistic understanding of women and allow her to think about herself without depending on those ideals. Thus, moving towards an authentic understanding of women's experiences which, as we observe, do not always have to fit the ideal definitions or expectations for women. We become "woke" in terms of gender as we are enlightened to a new perspective on womanhood— one that values imperfections and experiences as essential to female identity. We are encouraged to have a deeper appreciation of the complexities of emotional and psychological struggles faced by women. Moreover, Barbie's breakthrough in acknowledging her female psyche allows her to reject the ongoing makeover paradigm. She realizes that she does not need to constantly "fix" herself to fit society's standards of perfection. In other words, embracing her supposed imperfections and authentic experiences as a woman represents a move away from the makeover pattern, thus, symbolizing genuine female empowerment.

Ken is portrayed as a man striving to define himself through traditional, patriarchal values, yet, falling short. His efforts to control Barbie Land represent an attempt to reshape a

female-dominated space to fit his understanding of recognition and power. However, his attempts ultimately symbolize his limited comprehension of Barbie's world and her female identity. Ken, as a male, is not aware of the existence or function of the unique female zone, but he does serve as an unintentional drive for Barbie to recognize that zone for herself, as discussed earlier. Thus, Ken's journey as a changed, assertive character serves as a symbolic catalyst that illuminates Barbie's true female experiences, not only through what she embraces but also through what she resists—Ken's limited understanding of her true feminine self. Barbie's realization of her female psyche reveals that women's wild zone often emerges in response to, but not dependent on, male attempts to define or control them. Moreover, her self-realization displays a part of her identity that is shaped by her rejection of patriarchy, showing that the wild zone is solely a female-constructed space. In other words, Ken's desires shed light on the limits of her former perception of women and push her to expand her self-perception, revealing a space of women's understanding that is unknown and inaccessible to Ken as a male but is later understood by Gloria as a female.

While Ken initially defines himself through Barbie, the film gradually presents his and Barbie's independent growth influenced by Ken's character arc as a humanized antagonist. His humanization further lies in his realization that he does not need to control Barbie for the fulfillment of his identity, as we observe in the following scenes. When the Barbies succeed in taking back their land, therefore putting an end to Ken's patriarchy, he has a meltdown. However, Barbie has already realized her mistakes with Ken by this point. Ho aptly supports this, stating even though Ken takes over Barbie's place and treats her badly, she also acknowledges her unfair treatment toward Ken in the past (10). Thus, Barbie approaches a crying Ken, and the scene is as follows,

Barbie: Ken, I think I owe you an apology.

Ken: Huh?

Barbie: I'm really sorry I took you for granted.

Ken: Oh.

Barbie: Not every night had to be girls' night.

Ken: Thank you for saying that. (1:33:54 – 1:34:12).

Through this, it can be observed that Ken finally receives acknowledgment and respect from Barbie which he never had before, thus giving him that solace that his patriarchy previously provided as a substitute. Ken even expresses how he did not like patriarchy much to begin with, saying “It was hard running stuff. I didn’t love it” (1:33:11 – 1:33:15) which shows that the only reason he chose this path was because of what he went through in the past. While helping Ken realize his mistake, she explains that patriarchy is not the answer and that being a male can have other contributions too. Advising Ken to embrace his identity as himself, rather than in relation to Barbie, leads her to a realization about finding her own identity as a woman. Barbie tells Ken, “Maybe all the things that you thought made you you aren’t...really you” (1:35:40 – 1:35:50). As observed, Barbie has a sudden realization as she suggests to Ken. This is when Barbie finally begins to question her identity as a woman and realizes she wants to be more than what she once thought defined her. She seeks to explore by herself the experiences that can truly define her as a woman, allowing her to be as she is without relying on ideals or expectations of what a woman is supposed to be. It can be stated that Ken’s presence serves as a wake-up call for Barbie, helping

her realize her sense of self can only fully thrive if she understands herself independently of any male validation. This is further discussed in the chapter as follows.

Towards the end of the movie, it is seen that Barbie is not sure about who she is anymore saying “Maybe I’m not Barbie anymore” (1:42:12 – 1:42:15). She then decides to be a real woman in the real world as observed in the following scene where she states, “I want to be a part of the people that make meaning. Not the thing that’s made. I want to do the imagining. I don’t wanna be the idea” (1:43:04 – 1:43:19). This is when the spirit of Ruth Handler decides to show Barbie all the women’s experiences of the real world to make her understand what it means to be a woman (1:44:40 – 1:46:10). Through this, the film expresses the importance of women experiences contributing to what defines a true woman, because, through the experiences shown to Barbie, she understands what makes one a woman and then agrees to become one. Toward the end of the film, Barbie is seen as a real woman in the real world, visiting her first gynecologist (1:47:00 – 1:47:18), which indicates that she now has the female reproductive system. This shows that she can now have the biological experiences to be a real woman, something she could not before as indicated in an earlier scene where she tells a random man, “And I would just like to inform you, I do not have a vagina” (28:50 – 28:53). Through Barbie’s transformation into a real woman, the film portrays the importance of women’s biological experiences contributing to women’s creation, which represents the true woman. The woman’s body being the true essence of such creation because the exclusive women experiences make them who they are. This is why Barbie is seen to become a real woman by first observing the women's experiences from Ruth and then starting her journey as one to have all those experiences herself. Thus, the film allows us to see a side of what a woman’s body can present through the character of Barbie becoming a real woman. It makes us “woke” in terms of gender, where this moment uncovers the often

overlooked aspect of women's biological experiences. We are made conscious of the importance of these experiences in shaping the female identity. The film emphasizes that womanhood is not just a mental or emotional construct but also deeply connected to the physical and biological experiences that women uniquely undergo. Moreover, Ken's humanization ultimately leads Barbie to consider the significance of women's biological experiences in shaping her female identity, as well as her independent expression of the aspects that make her a true woman. By humanizing Ken, the film highlights his complexity and vulnerability as a male, yet shows that even a more emotionally aware Ken cannot fully define Barbie's female identity. Barbie's wild zone, thus, becomes more defined by both her resistance to Ken's dominating influence as discussed earlier and her recent discovery of an identity separate from male expectations and involving true female experiences.

Furthermore, Ken is portrayed not as a stereotypical dominant and nonchalant male but more as a human in his genuine self, realizing his mistake with Barbie and learning to define his identity without any relation to her. He represents how, from the female perspective, the male gender "should" engage with the female gender, as Ken pushes Barbie to reflect on the limitations of her previous unquestioned female expectations. He symbolically paves the way for women to coexist with men while living truly as the women they are, highlighting the significance that females' interaction with others holds in contributing to their exploration and revelation of their wild zones.

Thus, the film *Barbie* (2023) demonstrates gender-wokeness by uncovering the true female experiences defining womanhood through the interactions between Barbie and Ken. Ken's journey, from seeking validation to adopting patriarchal ideals, becomes a catalyst for Barbie to confront the prescribed definitions and expectations for women and seek authentic

experiences that define her true female identity. From a female perspective, Ken's misguided use of patriarchy and dominance over Barbie Land disturbs Barbie's steady world, pushing her to reject those expectations and explore her wild zone that presents her true self as a woman. This reflects gender-wokeness as it acknowledges the complexity of male and female interactions and how they contribute to revealing the unknown aspects of women's experiences. Moreover, the film enlightens its audience on how the male gender is perceived and expected to be from a female perspective in terms of contributing to their true womanhood, thus being further aware of women's perception of gender. Barbie's access to the wild zone is illustrated by her realization that her identity is not defined by societal validation or patriarchal influence but by her unique experiences of her mind and body that define her true womanhood. We are offered an illustration of what a female psyche is like and the significance of women's authentic, biological experiences that pave the way to expressing the never-understood aspects of womanhood. Through this perspective, we become aware of or woke about the transformative power of acknowledging the unknown aspects of women's identities, going beyond the limited understanding of the gender.

Chapter 5

Gender Fluidity and its Contribution to Expanding Femininity in *Cinderella* (2021)

Cinderella (2021) defines gender-wokeness through the expression of gender fluidity, portraying how it is acknowledged and understood from a female perspective and its influence on the unique understanding of women as they truly are. Fabulous Godmother (Fab G) is presented as a gender-fluid character in the film. By assisting the female character Ella in her transformation, Fab G symbolizes the capability of women's wild zone that empowers her to embrace her true self as a businesswoman. And, the unique femininity Fab G expresses, through the normally understood feminine role of "godmother," expands the understanding of what femininity can be. This portrayal taps into the unknown perception of women's expression and understanding of gender, making the audience aware of this perspective. The film suggests that being woke in terms of gender means recognizing and embracing these complex, non-binary gender identities, entering a space of a newer, deeper understanding of gender and femininity. Moreover, we are enlightened to a female perspective on how these gender-fluid identities can contribute to, even if symbolically, a better understanding of the function and uniqueness of women's wild zone. Thus, this chapter explores gender-wokeness by examining *Cinderella's* (2021) acknowledgment of gender-fluid identities and their contribution to expanding femininity. The chapter elaborates on the above aspects, showing how the film reflects this idea of gender-wokeness.

Cinderella (2021) by Kay Cannon is the story of Ella, an aspiring young woman who wishes to be a fashion designer and open a shop to sell her dresses. Aside from seeking love, her

main focus is to start her business. Her dreams are ridiculed by her stepmother Vivian and her two stepsisters. But Ella stays determined and continues to make beautiful dresses in her basement. Meanwhile, Crown Prince Robert is a charming man but is partially unwilling to ascend the throne, whereas his intelligent sister Gwen is capable and interested. He disguises himself one day to explore the village, where he meets Ella and is charmed by her free spirit and confidence. Robert's father arranges a grand ball for Robert to find a bride, and he invites Ella saying there will be people who may show interest in her dresses. However, Vivian forbids her from attending the ball. Later, Ella meets her Fabulous Godmother who guides her and uses magic to dress her up with one of her stunning designs. She goes to the ball, getting Robert's attention, but she focuses on finding someone who can support her dress-making business and eventually finds someone. Ella hesitates when Robert expresses his feelings to her, prioritizing her dreams over love. Ella flees the ball when midnight strikes, leaving a glass slipper behind. Robert then looks for her throughout the kingdom to marry her and help her achieve her dreams. He and Ella manage to have both love and independence. The movie ends with Ella following her dreams and the kingdom advancing towards progress, with Gwen being made the heir to the throne.

5.1 Gynocritical Recognition of the Muted Experiences

Gender Fluid is defined as “(a)n identity referring to people who reject gender labels, and live as women, men, neither, and/or both in varied situations over the life course” (Sumerau et al. 2007). Being gender-fluid means embracing a fluid nature towards gender expression or gender identity, where the shift depends on the circumstances or occurs at any time. Thus, a person can be one gender, several genders, or even genderless. In the film *Cinderella* (2021), the character of

Fabulous Godmother, or Fab G portrays the fluid nature of gender identity. When Ella is not allowed by her stepmother to attend the ball and thus has her hopes crushed, her fairy godmother arrives to help her saying, “Allow me to introduce myself. I am your Fabulous Godmother” (46:10 – 46:18). In the scene, we see the character with a high-top fade hair, circle beard, and subtle makeup, wearing a long, sequined dress, high-heeled butterfly boots, and a crystal choker style necklace. Here, the character is not a female as a Godmother traditionally would be. Although the character does not directly mention their gender identity, it can be seen from the character’s portrayal that Fabulous Godmother is gender-fluid. Jim aptly clarifies how Fabulous Godmother expresses magic to have no gender by being presented as a gender-agnostic person in the film (31). Bernier further mentions how Billy Porter, who played Fabulous Godmother’s role in the film, talks about his role being evolved to express magic to have no gender, thus making Fabulous Godmother gender-fluid, or genderless, and such (83).

By including Fabulous Godmother as a gender-fluid character, the film makes a bold statement about the evolution of fairy tales and the increasing inclusivity in family-friendly, mainstream films or children’s fairy tale adaptations. The portrayal of gender-fluid themes in films and media culture is not a new concept, however, it has rarely appeared in classic fairy tale adaptations, especially those for younger audiences. Fairy tales usually reinforce specific representations of gender roles— such as princesses, and the heroes— often limited to binary expressions. Through Fab G’s character, the film portrays a reimagining of these tales, reflecting the present gender diversity and complexity of modern society. This inclusion of gender-fluidity expresses that gender discussions are relevant in all spaces, even in children’s fairy tale adaptations. It pushes back against the idea that these discussions may be too complex or irrelevant to be in children’s fairy tales and also for their comprehension. Observing characters or

representations like Fab G can help promote empathy and understanding towards gender diversity among younger audiences. Moreover, their portrayal as an empowering and nurturing role expresses to the audience that gender fluidity is not something to be feared or misunderstood but rather to be celebrated. Showalter's gynocriticism highlights how Ardener's model of women's wild zone acknowledges that women are not the only muted group in a dominated structure (202). There are others too who can experience their own form of silencing or alienation in a society. It can be said that non-binary or gender-fluid individuals can be the other muted group who were once silenced or excluded from mainstream representations. The film, from a female perspective, includes a gender-fluid character to express an understanding and recognition of these identities through their shared muted experience. It suggests that both women and gender-fluid people have been limited in their true expression of themselves, however, through their solidarity and shared recognition in spaces like this fairy tale adaptation, their voices now resonate together. So, the film illustrates that gender fluidity deserves to be celebrated instead of being misunderstood or feared. And, by illustrating this point on gender fluidity, the film, from a gynocritical stance, symbolically expresses the need for women's unique wild zone to be acknowledged and celebrated, which is often misunderstood. Just like the wild zone, Fab G's portrayal of gender fluidity challenges the limitations of expression and offers a more inclusive idea of gender identity.

5.2 A Symbolic Representation of the Wild Zone

When Ella is not allowed to go to the ball by her stepmother, it hinders her plan to find business partners who could assist in fulfilling her dream of opening her own dressmaking shop. Rather she is said to be engaged to Thomas without her will. And, thus, she weeps alone, seeing no way

to be the businesswoman she dreams of, but remains hopeful of finding a way one day and making a name for herself (44:30 – 45:30). This is when Fab G makes his appearance in front of Ella, stating the reason behind his arrival, “Baby, you saved me. And so now I’m here to save you by sending you to that ball” (46:20 – 46:27). As a result, they guide, help, and empower her to realize her female potential as a dressmaker without needing to settle down with a man she has no interest in. By presenting this empowerment through a gender-fluid character, the film reinforces the idea that Ella’s freedom of expressing her true self and her female potential are rooted in a unique, or even, “wild” base of knowledge. In this case, the empowerment Fab G offers Ella can be read as coming from the wild zone itself, a unique perspective that allows Ella to go beyond her existing barriers and move towards her true expression as a woman. Fab G, as a magical character in the film, thus symbolically represents Ella’s wild zone— a metaphoric space of women’s potential, transformation, and free expression of their true selves beyond the prescribed limitations and definitions set by society. They act as a manifestation of her wild zone, bringing life to it through their magical prowess and highlighting the untapped, socially silenced aspects of Ella’s identity and potential as a woman, waiting to be realized into reality. As a magical character with a fluid gender expression, they emphasize that the wild zone of women is a place of new and unique possibilities and creations. Moreover, they are a figure who portrays freedom, fluidity, and transformative potential that Ella as a woman can access by stepping outside of her prescribed expectations in society. As we learn and acknowledge this representation, we become “woke” about this perspective. Thus, Fab G does not simply assist and support Ella but also represents a limitless, imaginative space of self-creation and expression for Ella, in other words, representing what the wild zone of women is all about.

To elaborate on their symbolic representation, when we look into the features of Fab G's character more closely, their get-up, language, and body language as a gender-fluid character can serve as significant aspects of women's wild zone. Particularly because it relates to Ella's own journey toward her true female potential and expression. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, Fab G's get-up— fade haircut, circle beard, light makeup, a long, sequined dress, butterfly boots, and a crystal necklace— is colorful, flamboyant, and noticeably gender-fluid, with masculine and feminine elements combined. It can be said that this attire symbolically represents the wild zone's embracing aspect of an inclusive and transcending form of self-expression for women. Thus, for Ella, Fab G's attire expresses an invitation to imagine her own female identity as something expansive and not limited by prescribed expectations or stereotypes set by society. Moreover, Fab G's dialogues in the film can be said as bold, playful, and free, a form of verbal expression or language that differs from Ella's more muted voice within her oppressive circumstances. That silencing structure would be her household, where her stepmother restricts her from following her dream of dressmaking and forces her to marry someone against her will. The movie shows how Ella confirms to Fab G that she wants to go to the ball and change her life. Following this, Fab G magically transforms her, dressing her up with a magical gown that was designed by Ella herself. In this scene, Fab G performs his magic on Ella and states the following lines as he sings, "Shining star for you to see / What your life can truly be / What you can truly / Be..." (48:54 – 49:17). We see him encouraging Ella through his language, telling her during her transformation to see what she can truly be as part of her transformation process towards her true self as a woman. As the transformation is complete, Ella expresses joy and excitement squealing "This is gorgeous!" following which Fab G excitedly screams "Yas, future queen! Yas!" (49:20 – 49:27). The concept of the wild zone includes a linguistic freedom that

allows women to express their true selves and true desires beyond the understanding and expectations of society. Fab G's language symbolizes this freedom of expression, revealing to Ella a world where words can be used to assert themselves just as they are. The ease and fluidity in Fab G's dialogues symbolically reflect the wild zone's encouragement of unrestricted expression and potential, pushing Ella to find and use her own voice in a way that feels true and not restricted or prescribed by others. Furthermore, Fab G has very confident and expressive body language and does graceful, almost dancelike, and playful gestures, like finger flicks, certain hand gestures, and head tilts, that highlight their magic and style. They are not limited to just masculine or feminine gestures. This can be exemplified by the same scene when Fab G expresses their excitement and admiration for Ella after she is transformed as discussed earlier. They deliver the line "Yas, future queen! Yas!" with their eyes and mouth wide open, repeatedly tapping their two fingers together and slightly bending down while saying so (49:24 – 49:27). In women's wild zone, physical expression is free from the restrictions placed on women's bodies, thus allowing movements, body language, and expressions that reflect true womanhood. Fab G's unrestricted body language represents this aspect of the wild zone, suggesting a space where Ella can express her true female identity without worrying about how she "should" act or appear and such. This fluidity in their body language symbolizes an openness within the wild zone for Ella to carry her own female body with confidence and individuality, embracing a femininity that is entirely her own.

Consequently, Ella is seen to be doing that, embracing the magical influence by accessing her symbolic wild zone— her Fab G— and finally attending the ball to successfully reveal her true self as a woman. The following scene shows how Ella manages to find a Queen at the ball and impress her with the gown she is wearing:

Queen Tatiana: Where did you get that dress? It's so structured and yet so delicate and-and... and beautiful (59:59 – 1:00:07).

Ella: I designed it.

Queen Tatiana: Then I am honored to be in the presence of such an artist. Would it be possible to see more of your work?

Ella (keenly): More than possible.

Queen Tatiana: Good. I attend lavish events around the world, and I hate all my clothes. I'm looking for someone to travel with me to enliven my wardrobe. Maybe that person is you.

Ella (in disbelief): Me? (1:00:43 – 1:01:09).

This exemplifies Rosalind Gill's postfeminist concept of choice and empowerment, particularly through Ella's choice to design her own gown and seek potential business partners in the ball through her designs. The idea refers to how all women's actions are freely chosen, showing women as independent agents free from all forms of inequality and power imbalances (153). The magical gown was designed by Ella herself, and thus, it symbolizes her dedication to achieving her dreams and represents a manifestation of her work, talent, and vision as a woman. By choosing to display her own design at the ball and even impressing a potential business partner through it, Ella asserts her true female potential and unique female identity as a dressmaker and a businesswoman. Moreover, rather than waiting to be defined by a romantic partner, Ella actively seeks to show the world who she truly is, expressing the postfeminist stance that portrays empowerment as a personal choice of self-expression and achievement. Thus, Ella's

self-designed gown becomes not only a symbol of her potential but also a demonstration of her right to pursue her dreams as she is. And, this was made possible thanks to Fab G, her symbolic wild zone that brought her self-designed gown, in other words, her dream and potential into life and guided her path toward realizing her true self. We consequently become “woke” in terms of gender as we recognize the non-binary identities and learn about the unique potential of the wild zone through their representation. Thus, Fab G can be seen as a symbolic representation of the wild zone, portraying a space where Ella’s potential to express her true self can flourish. And, through their aspects— their get-up, language, and body language— Fab G channels the features of the wild zone and encourages Ella to explore a more genuine version of her identity as a woman.

5.3 Unique Form of Femininity

Furthermore, Fab G’s role in the film brings a more inclusive and unique female perspective by expanding the definition of femininity. The film presents the role of the fairy godmother through a gender-fluid character, breaking the understanding and practice that a binary woman or biological woman must portray such a feminine role. As discussed earlier in the chapter, even their overall attire portrays their unique and personal feminine dress-up (alongside their masculine elements.) The film allows its audience to see femininity as a fluid, inclusive category that goes beyond biological definitions. In other words, it makes its audience “woke” towards the diversity within femininity itself—how each expression of femininity can be unique. As a fairy “godmother,” Fab G performs a motherly role— typically portrayed by a woman in classic fairy tales— and expresses their femininity in their own way. Through Fab G’s portrayal of femininity, the wild zone thus becomes a space where femininity of all forms is welcomed, including those expressed by individuals who may not biologically be a woman but represent femininity or

perform feminine roles. Thus, through a gender-fluid character within a feminine role, the movie redefines and presents a unique, expansive femininity. So, it is observed in *Cinderella* (2021) that a genderfluid person is portrayed and understood as such in a female perspective film, showing how they are understood, how they contribute to and can amount to in women's lives, and their true expression as themselves. We thus acknowledge and become "woke" about this perspective, further understanding women's unique perception of gender.

Thus, the film illustrates gender-wokeness by reimagining the fairy-tale adaptation to explore complex, non-binary gender identities and their connection to women's wild zone. Fab G as a gender-fluid character highlights how non-binary identities contribute to a richer understanding of women's wild zone as an untapped, transformative female space of individuality and potential. Fab G not only supports Ella but also represents her wild zone, embodying the freedom and creative potential that allow her to go beyond the barriers that limit her true female self. Their expressive attire, playful language, and fluid body language demonstrate the wild zone's encouragement of women's unrestricted self-expression, pushing Ella to embrace her true female identity as a dressmaker and businesswoman. The film portrays that being woke in terms of gender is to acknowledge these identities and their role in expanding the understanding of femininity. Fab G's redefining of the fairy godmother role exemplifies this inclusivity, challenging the idea that femininity can only be defined through biological women. By doing so, it encourages a deeper understanding of gender and femininity as fluid and diverse. Ella's transformation and self-realization, guided by Fab G's influence as her wild zone, show how this unique female space fosters empowerment, creativity, and individuality. We are awakened to the never-spoken aspects of what defines femininity and highlights womanhood. Thus, the film uses the interaction of gender-fluidity and female perspective to redefine

femininity and embrace the unknown horizons of gender identity through the metaphorical representation of what has been outside of our recognition, making it a profound expression of gender-wokeness.

Chapter 6:

Conclusion

To conclude, the idea of gender-wokeness, as explored in this paper, emerges as an evolving concept for understanding the complexities of gender representation in present-day Hollywood films. Therefore, I have studied gender-wokeness in the selected films by examining *Mulan*'s celebration of the unique female space and true female potential, *Barbie*'s recognition of authentic female experiences, and *Cinderella*'s acknowledgment of gender-fluid identities and their contribution to expanding femininity. By examining the aforementioned, the paper highlights how these films reflect a progressive shift in the portrayal of gender identities and roles, challenging the traditional understanding of gender and introducing narratives that emphasize authentic experiences and inclusivity concerning gender. The research established gender-wokeness as the recognition of authentic gender experiences, particularly through a gynocritical lens, thus revealing aspects of women's identities and expressions often silenced or misunderstood in male-dominated discourse. This framework allows a deeper exploration of the "wild zone," a metaphorical female space representing unacknowledged and unique female experiences. The analysis in this paper shows how each film taps into this zone, offering insights into what constitutes gender-wokeness.

In *Mulan* (2020), the exploration of chi as a representation of true female potential challenges societal limitations on women's strength and identity. Mulan's journey from hiding her power under a male disguise to fully embracing her female identity exemplifies the reclamation of the wild zone. Through the bond between Mulan and Xianniang, the film portrays the importance of solidarity in overcoming gendered oppression and understanding

misunderstood aspects of women's identity. The contrast between Mulan's celebrated empowerment and Xianniang's vilification further critiques the selective acceptance of female empowerment, making the audience conscious of the broader struggles and societal biases faced by women. *Barbie* (2023) explores the interaction of male and female dynamics in contributing to and shaping true female identity. Ken's humanization as an antagonist becomes a catalyst for Barbie's realization of her wild zone, prompting her to reject societal ideals of perfection and embrace authentic female experiences. The film observes patriarchal structures that restrict the true expression of oneself while also illustrating the transformative potential of rejecting these limitations. Barbie's journey as a woman highlights the significance of self-awareness, emotional depth, and biological experiences in defining true womanhood, pushing the boundaries of what femininity can involve. *Cinderella* (2021) introduces gender-fluidity as a central theme, expanding the understanding of femininity through the character of Fabulous Godmother (Fab G). Fab G's presence symbolizes the inclusivity and transformative power of recognizing non-binary identities. Their role in empowering Ella emphasizes the significance of the connection between gender-fluid experiences and the women's wild zone, where both women and non-binary individuals reclaim silenced aspects of their identities through this fairy-tale adaptation. Fab G's magical influence, including creating a gown for Ella, symbolizes the transformative power of embracing one's wild zone. By stepping into this space, Ella pursues her dream of becoming a successful businesswoman, representing her reclamation of agency and expression of her authentic female self.

These films reflect broader cultural progress toward gender-wokeness, where narratives prioritize inclusivity and encourage deeper understandings of gender complexities, things that have not been recognized before. Through their portrayal of true womanhood, male-female

interactions, and gender-fluid identity, the films highlight the varying ways in which gender can be explored and celebrated. The gynocritical perspective used in this research has been influential in revealing these dynamics, providing a lens to understand how Hollywood films contribute to redefining gender perceptions. Thus, gender-wokeness, as defined through this research, is the awareness and acknowledgment of the diverse, authentic, and often hidden experiences that constitute gender identities. It moves beyond reductive stereotypes to celebrate women's complexities and unique potential. By tapping into the wild zone, Hollywood films offer audiences a chance to reconsider their perceptions of gender, making them more conscious or “woke” about the transformative power of understanding and embracing these unknown aspects of identity. As society continues to evolve, such portrayals will remain significant in shaping a more inclusive and unprejudiced cultural narrative.

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