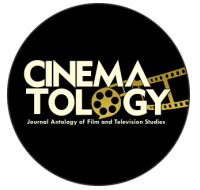




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Female Catfight in Mark Waters' *Mean Girls* (2004)

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ABSTRACT

Mean Girls (2004), an America drama movie directed by Mark Waters, demonstrates how female catfights in popular culture are often problematically portrayed as 'normal' and humorous, while simultaneously reinforcing sexist and patriarchal ideologies. The film portrays women who compete for social status and male attention. Consequently, it sustains negative stereotypes about female relationships. The objective of this research is to identify and analyze how female catfighting is represented in *Mean Girls*. Employing qualitative approach within a pop culture studies, this analysis applies Stuart Hall's concept of representation, Rachel Reinke's concept of female catfighting, and Angela McRobbie's post-feminist masquerade. Mulvey's concept of male gaze is also utilized to dismantle how dominant ideology presents women through visuals. The data consist of narrative, dialogue, and visual elements from *Mean Girls*. The research findings posit that the movie represents female catfight through the characters Cady Heron and Regina George, who are constructed within a patriarchal framework. Additionally, the film also highlights the male gaze and how female identity is linked to physical appearance. Although the ending of the movie offers a slight sense of resistance at the end, overall, it still reflects the ideological values of a sexist popular culture.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The early 2000s marked a moment when young women were increasingly targeted by popular media through stories that combined comedy, drama, and everyday teenage struggles. Beauty standards were heavily circulated in this era, shaped by glossy magazines, and teen films. Similar issues have also been discussed in several previous studies that focused on the representation of women in films. For instance, Septiani's analysis on women representation in Melanie Light's *The Herd* movie. By applying Sara Mills's Critical Discourse Analysis she found that women were often shown in two positions: as victims of patriarchy and as agents of resistance. The study also highlighted that conflicts among women were not just personal matters but part of a bigger system of patriarchal oppression (Septiani, 2016).

A similar point can be found in Novi Zumala Rahmi's *Feminist Representation in the Film Foxtrot Six*. Although this study mainly focused on feminism, it also revealed that rivalries among women emerged even in the context of collective struggle against oppression. This indicates that competition among women is not only a product of popular narratives but also something internalized within women themselves (Rahmi, 2020). Another relevant study is *Representation of Women in the Film Siti*, conducted by Wibowo Ganjar, which analyzed the struggles of a woman living under patriarchal and restrictive systems. His findings showed that while the female character was portrayed as powerless, the film also suggested moments of agency and resistance, indicating that even within limitations, women's empowerment could still be represented (Wibowo, 2019).

Lastly, Marsa Syifa Azzahra, Sunarto, and Muhammad Bayu Widagdo's *Representation of Women's Rationality in the Film Enola Holmes* explained how media can be used to challenge dominant ideologies. Their findings showed that female characters can be represented as rational and resistant figures, which helps deconstruct patriarchal ideas and provide new ways of imagining women's roles (Azzahra et al., 2022). This makes film an important object of study, because it not only reflects social realities but also shapes how audiences, especially young women, understand gender, power, and identity. As Saussure (1974) in John Storey's *Cultural Studies* explains, film is not merely a form of entertainment but also a system that produces and communicates meaning through rules of representation such as narrative, character, conflict, and symbol. In this sense, film is never value-free; it always carries certain ideologies, perspectives, and interests that influence how gender and power relations are represented and understood. Therefore, examining film means uncovering the cultural values and dominant ideologies that are embedded within it (Storey, 2010).

Mean Girls is a striking example of how postfeminist discourse operates in popular culture. At first glance, the film seems to center women as powerful figures in their social environment. Regina George and Cady Heron, as central characters, appear to control the dynamics of high school life. Their ability to influence others suggests that girls are not passive subjects but dominant players. This surface reading aligns with the postfeminist message that women can be strong, assertive, and even leaders in their own spaces. Yet beneath the humor and satire lies a more complex message about femininity, competition, and power.

Mean Girls also reflects how beauty standards were embedded in young women's social lives at the time. Regina George, with her blonde hair, fashionable outfits, and confidence, embodies the ideal teenage girl according to early 2000s beauty norms. She is admired, envied, and obeyed precisely because she matches those standards. Cady Heron, by contrast, enters as an outsider who initially does not fit this mold. Her transformation into

someone who can rival Regina comes through adopting the same rules, dressing, behaving, and even competing in ways that are validated by male attention and peer approval. This shows how the construction of female identity is tied to beauty, appearance, and consumerist ideals.

Cady's transformation shows that a girl's identity in the film depends on beauty standards and recognition from others. This process is more than just a personal change, it reflects how culture teaches us what it means to be a woman and how power works in society. For this reason, the study applies a cultural studies perspective, film is not simply for entertainment but also a cultural text that produces meaning through its stories, characters, and visuals. Media is never neutral; it always carries values and ideologies that shape how audiences understand gender and identity.

With this framework in mind, the study can move from seeing Cady's personal transformation to examining how her catfight with Regina is constructed. The conflict between them is not just an individual matter but part of a broader cultural representation of women in popular media. This leads to the concept of female catfighting, as described by Rachel Reinke, where women are portrayed as naturally jealous, competitive, and unable to form solidarity. In this context, feminism has long emphasized the need for women to support each other and build solidarity to fight gender injustice. Yet, popular media often shows the opposite, portraying women as engaged in jealousy and manipulation. Instead of uniting against oppressive systems, women are constructed by media as competing with one another and reinforcing patriarchal hierarchies. This phenomenon, known as female catfighting, positions women as rivals in areas such as social status, physical attractiveness, and romantic relationships (Reinke, 2010).

Female catfight between Regina and Cady is not simply about personal dislike. It reflects what Rachel Reinke identifies as female catfighting, a cultural narrative that depicts women as naturally jealous, competitive, and incapable of solidarity. By framing the central conflict as a personal struggle between two girls, the film downplays the structural forces that shape their behavior. Instead of showing how patriarchy and sexism set women against each other, the narrative presents their hostility as natural, entertaining, and inevitable. This framing is what makes *Mean Girls* both effective and problematic. By wrapping female catfight in comedy, irony, and witty dialogue, the film makes viewers laugh at and enjoy the spectacle of girls tearing each other down. What might otherwise be seen as a commentary on oppressive systems instead becomes a personal feud dressed in humor. Audiences absorb the message without resistance, internalizing the idea that competition and hostility among women are simply part of female social life.

Such a strategy reflects the logic of postfeminist media. Female power is acknowledged, but only in ways that remain compatible with patriarchal structures. The spectacle of catfight is disguised as empowerment, Regina and Cady appear to be powerful figures, yet their power is restricted to beauty, manipulation, and consumerist choices. Postfeminist masquerade, as Angela McRobbie suggests, works precisely through this contradiction: offering the appearance of progress while quietly maintaining traditional forms of domination.

Ultimately, the empowerment presented in *Mean Girls* is superficial. The female characters are given space to be visible and central, but their agency is confined within the boundaries of appearance, competition, and desire for male validation. Instead of encouraging solidarity or collective resistance, the film reinforces the idea that power for women is individual, aesthetic, and consumable. By doing so, *Mean Girls* illustrates how film, as a popular cultural medium, can shape teenage girls' understanding of themselves, turning

structural inequalities into personal dramas, and disguising patriarchal control under the surface of lighthearted entertainment.

In this research, the analysis focuses on how female catfight between the two central characters is represented, and whether this catfight serves as a form of empowerment or instead reinforces dominant patriarchal ideologies. The study also explores the ways in which both characters are subjected to objectification, particularly through the concept of the male gaze, which positions women as objects of visual pleasure rather than autonomous subjects. By interrogating these aspects, this research aims to uncover how *Mean Girls* not only depicts conflict between women but also contributes to broader cultural narratives about femininity, beauty, and power in a postfeminist context.

2. METHODS

This study aims to examine whether the representation of female catfighting in *Mean Girls* provides space for women's empowerment or instead reinforces dominant ideology. To achieve this, the research adopts a qualitative approach that emphasizes cultural and feminist textual analysis. A qualitative method is appropriate because it allows the researcher to investigate meanings, contexts, and representations rather than numerical data (Sugiyono, 2017). The theoretical foundation of this study is rooted in post-feminism, which analyses how media incorporates feminist language while still reinforcing traditional domination. This framework helps explain how *Mean Girls* frames empowerment as spectacle but limits it to beauty, consumption, and competition. In this way, post-feminism reveals how the film presents female catfight as entertainment while subtly maintaining patriarchal norms. Angela McRobbie's idea of the postfeminist masquerade is especially relevant here, as it illustrates how feminism is acknowledged only to be undone, making female agency appear empowering on the surface while keeping it confined within traditional boundaries (McRobbie, 2004).

In addition, this study also applies a cultural studies approach, which sees how popular culture reproduces gender inequality and places women in subordinate positions, one of which is through the narrative of female catfighting as portrayed in the film. A visual approach is also applied in this study to examine how visual elements contribute to shaping the narrative of female catfight (Storey, 2010). In line with this, Stuart Hall in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997) explains, representation is an active process of producing meaning through language, images, and symbols (Hall, 2013). According to him, meaning is not naturally attached to objects or events but is produced through cultural practices and symbolic systems shaped by specific social and historical contexts. This perspective is crucial for this study because it emphasizes that *Mean Girls* does not merely depict female catfight as it exists in real life, but actively constructs and circulates certain meanings about femininity, beauty, and power.

Building on this understanding of representation, another important theoretical lens is Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, which highlights how visual media often positions women as objects of heterosexual male desire. Mulvey (1975) explains in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* that the camera frequently functions as an extension of the heterosexual male perspective. In this context, women's bodies are not only placed as objects of the gaze but also constructed to fulfil male visual fantasies as the dominant spectators.

The object of analysis is *Mean Girls*, with the data consisting of dialogue, narration, and selected visual scenes. In addition to textual analysis, this study also applies a visual approach to examine how meaning is communicated through costume, setting, body

language, and cinematography. This approach allows the researcher to uncover how female catfighting is visually constructed and how visual codes reinforce ideas of femininity, catfight, and power (Rose, 2016).

Expanding on this, the study also employs textual analysis as a complementary method. Textual analysis focuses on interpreting film narratives through dialogue, visuals, characterization, and story structure. According to McKee (2011), this interpretative approach goes beyond the surface content of the text to examine how meaning is constructed within broader social and cultural contexts. In other words, textual analysis does not only consider what is said, but also how and why it is said.

Film is chosen as the primary text because it plays an important role in shaping cultural meanings. As a form of popular culture, film functions not only as entertainment but also as a vehicle for ideology. *Mean Girls*, aimed particularly at teenagers and young women, reflects how beauty standards and gendered power relations are disseminated through narratives that appear light hearted and comedic. By packaging conflict between women as natural and humorous, the film circulates postfeminist ideas in ways that are easily internalized by audiences (Bowen, 2009; Morisan, 2019).

Data analysis in this study follows the stages of data reduction, organization, and interpretation. Raw data in the form of dialogues, visuals, and secondary literature are first selected and categorized according to relevance. These are then analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns in the representation of female catfight, beauty standards, and postfeminist narratives. Finally, conclusions are drawn by linking these patterns to the theoretical framework, to reveal whether the representation of female catfighting in *Mean Girls* reinforces or challenges dominant ideology (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Moloeng, 2017).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses how postfeminist media disguises patriarchal domination through a fun and entertaining narrative structure. Using Rachel Reinke's (2010) framework on female catfighting, the analysis focuses on whether popular media, particularly film, creates space for women's empowerment or, conversely, reinforces dominant ideologies.

Representation of Cady Heron

Mean Girls opens with the introduction of the main character, Cady Heron, a teenage girl who has just returned to the United States after living in Africa for several years with her zoologist parents. Cady is portrayed as naive, having never attended formal school and being unfamiliar with typical American teenage social norms due to her homeschooling background. This positions her as a socially blank slate, untouched by the implicit codes and structures of American high school life. In terms of Stuart Hall's theory of representation, this construction functions as a narrative device to emphasize her outsider status, highlighting that she does not yet possess the cultural codes that define femininity, popularity, or beauty within the setting of North Shore High School.

Another detail that further distinguishes Cady is her interest in mathematics. Within popular culture, girls who enjoy math are often represented as unusual or different from stereotypical depictions of femininity, where greater value is placed on appearance or social life. By presenting Cady as someone who values academic pursuits, the film subtly frames her as resisting traditional gender expectations. From the very beginning, she is positioned as a character who will be tested and ultimately transformed by the pressures of beauty standards, popularity, and the social rules of femininity that dominate North Shore High School.

The film quickly moves to a very different moment, when she is harassed by one of her male classmates. This is an example of how the male gaze works in the film, where young women are made into objects of sexual jokes and attention. This is evidenced through the following narration, “*Would you like us to assign someone to butter your muffin?*”. For Cady, who is still new to the culture of American high school, the comment is confusing. Her reaction shows that she is not yet familiar with how teenage boys use sexual humour to target girls.

From Laura Mulvey’s idea of the male gaze, this moment shows how girls in films are often treated as passive objects of male desire through “jokes”. Director Mark Waters uses this scene to show the way high school culture normalizes harassment, making it look like harmless humour. At the same time, it shows how Cady, no matter how smart she is or how different she starts out, gets pulled into a world where a girl’s value is often judged by how boys see her. This shift in perspective becomes clearer when we apply Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze, which highlights how visual media often positions women as objects of heterosexual male desire. In this context, women’s bodies are not only placed as objects of the gaze but also constructed to fulfil male visual fantasies as the dominant spectators.

The scene where Cady first walks through the school hallway illustrates this dynamic. The camera frames her frontally in slow motion, centering on her face and upper body while students in the background turn to look at her. The framing draws particular attention to her chest area, subtly sexualizing her presence even though the narrative situates her as innocent and new to high school life.



Figure 1. Cady walks through the hallway

Source: Mean Girls (2004), (Waters, 43:40)

This technique emphasizes Mulvey’s idea of the male gaze, where the female body is fragmented and positioned for visual consumption. In this moment, Cady is not just introduced as a character, but as a spectacle whose value is mediated through how her body is looked at, both by the students within the film and by the audience. Moreover, Cady’s initial portrayal reflects how women in popular culture are often positioned as subjects of transformation. Angela McRobbie (2009) notes that female representations in media frequently serve to illustrate the process of socialization into dominant norms that are rooted in patriarchal culture. In Cady’s case, her innocence becomes the narrative starting point through which the film demonstrates how she is gradually absorbed, shaped, and even controlled by the dominant ideologies of high school life.

Cady functions not only as the protagonist but also as a narrative medium that represents the dynamics of power in teenage female social relations. Her presence enables the audience to witness how beauty standards, social status, and gendered behaviour operate as ideological tools that determine inclusion and exclusion. Through Cady's journey, the film reveals how young women are negotiated into power structures dominated by figures such as Regina George and *The Plastics*. Thus, the representation of Cady Heron goes beyond simply portraying her as a naive teenage girl. She symbolizes the process of internalizing popular cultural values that subtly instruct women on how to behave, how to appear, and how to adapt to gain social acceptance.

Representation of Regina George

Regina George is introduced as a central figure in the social structure of North Shore High School. She is the leader of the most popular clique known as *The Plastics*, and she is portrayed as embodying the idealized standards of Western beauty, blonde, slim, and always fashionable. The film also presents Regina's character through the narratives of both male and female students around her. Several characters describe Regina from their own perspectives, which simultaneously reveals how she is socially perceived within the school environment.

The statement, "*Regina George is flawless*," delivered by a braided-hair student, illustrates how Regina is regarded as perfect, without flaws, and placed at the top of the school's social hierarchy. The use of the word flawless reflects the intensity of admiration and idolization from her peers, showing that Regina is not only popular but also considered an unattainable standard. Beyond beauty and reputation, Regina's wealth is highlighted through another student's remark, "*She has two Fendi purses and a silver Lexus*," this line emphasizes the luxury attached to her identity. For a high school student, owning expensive items such as Fendi bags and a Lexus car underscores Regina's image as not only beautiful and influential but also as someone from an affluent background.

Her wealth becomes part of her power in dominating the school environment. Through these two dialogues, the film introduces Regina George as a figure admired for her perfection and elevated due to her social status and wealth. This portrayal strengthens her position as the centre of attention and a symbol of power among teenage girls in the film. At the same time, the film frames Regina through irony and critique. Characters like Janis openly despise her, portraying *The Plastics* as "*the worst*" yet simultaneously acknowledging their strong influence. This duality reveals Regina's contradictory representation: she is hated and feared, yet respected and imitated. Such ambivalence reflects the postfeminist masquerade described by Angela McRobbie (2010), where women are shown as powerful and independent, but their authority is still constructed within patriarchal expectations of beauty, consumption, and competition.

The kind of indirect catfight is not only shaped by the way students interact, but also by wider patriarchal values that define femininity. Regina's identity, for example, is not just built by her school environment but also by values learned at home, where beauty means power, status becomes identity, and feminine authority depends on appearance. One clear example is the scene where Regina walks through the locker room with confidence.



Figure 2. Regina walks through the locker room

Source: *Mean Girls* (2004), (Waters, 32:05)

She knows everyone is watching her, and she uses her looks to show power. Seen through the idea of male gaze, women are often shown not as active subject but as objects to be looked at and enjoyed visually. This shows how women in popular culture are often represented through their bodies, where beauty and sensuality are treated as normal forms of power in teenage social life. As Laura Mulvey (1975) argues, cinematic techniques often work as an extension of heterosexual male desire, positioning women's bodies as visual spectacles. Regina's locker room scene reflects exactly this mechanism, as her confidence and authority are framed through her body, which becomes both the source of her influence and the object of the gaze. This pattern of representation continues in the domestic sphere, particularly in the way Regina's mother is portrayed. Instead of challenging patriarchal norms, she reinforces them in subtle yet significant ways.

In other words, sexism in the film does not only come from peer pressure or high school culture but also from the family, a space that should ideally provide protection and guidance. Regina can be seen as the picture of a postfeminist teenage queen bee. She looks powerful, admired, and at the centre of attention, but her power still depends on her beauty, popularity, and her ability to control others. This shows how femininity in popular culture is often celebrated on the surface, yet at the same time limited by patriarchal values that objectify women.

Female Catfighting between The Central Characters

The catfight between Cady Heron and Regina George in *Mean Girls* demonstrates how women are depicted as being trapped in a competition that ultimately weakens one another. This conflict does not merely stem from personal hatred, but rather from a patriarchal social structure that positions men as the centre of power. To illustrate this, the catfight begins to unfold when Cady expresses her attraction to Aaron, Regina's ex-boyfriend. This dynamic reflects how, within a patriarchal system, women are often positioned in competitive relations with one another, where men serve as the symbolic prize to be fought over. Such logic is reinforced by Gretchen's reminder of the unspoken rule within *The Plastics*. This is evidenced through the following dialogue, "Oh, no, you can't like Aaron Samuels. That's Regina's ex-boyfriend."

Gretchen's statement serves as an early marker of how female relationships in the film are governed by invisible rules that regulate women's territory over men. In this sense, Regina not only emerges as a figure who demands respect but also as someone who asserts power by claiming authority over past relationships. This enforcement of unspoken rules gradually transforms from subtle warnings into deliberate acts of manipulation. Regina discovers Cady's attraction to Aaron. Initially disguised under the appearance of friendship,

Regina's intervention presents itself as supportive but ultimately functions as a strategy to reassert dominance. Such tactics exemplify how female catfighting often manifests not through direct aggression but through passive-aggressive gestures that blur the line between camaraderie and catfight. This dynamic highlights that female catfight, within a patriarchal framework, is less about individual animosity and more about sustaining hierarchy, status, and authority in a system that restricts women's agency.

Regina's subtle manipulation does not end with her fake offer to help Cady. Once she realizes Cady's attraction to Aaron, she escalates her tactics by exploiting the situation to undermine her in front of him. At one point, Regina infantilizes Cady by telling Aaron, "*She's like a little girl. She, like, writes all over her notebook, 'Mrs. Aaron Samuels.' And she made this T-shirt that says, 'I heart Aaron' and she wears it under all her clothes*". By framing Cady as immature and overly emotional, Regina deliberately distorts her image and sabotages Aaron's perception of her. This act of manipulation demonstrates how female catfight is often expressed not through physical confrontation but through subtle humiliation and indirect degradation. Such moments reveal that women in the film are positioned not only as victims of patriarchal expectations but also as active participants in perpetuating rivalries that ultimately reinforce patriarchal control. The tension intensifies when Regina betrays her earlier promise to support Cady and instead openly displays affection toward Aaron. This betrayal becomes a turning point for Cady, shifting her perception of Regina from admiration to anger, and marking her gradual transformation from an outsider into someone who also participates in the deceptive system of female competition.

The catfight is no longer centered solely on romance but expands into a broader struggle for dominance, provoking jealousy, testing boundaries, and reaffirming Regina's position of power among the girls. Cady herself acknowledges this when she narrates, "*Regina was dangling Aaron in front of me on purpose. I knew how this would be settled in the animal world. But this was Girl World*". By contrasting the natural instincts of animals with the manipulative behaviours of "*Girl World*," Cady highlights how conflicts among teenage girls are governed by unspoken rules, silent competition, and emotional games rather than direct confrontation. She further explains this realization by noting, "*And in Girl World, all the fighting had to be sneaky*."

At this stage, Cady transitions from being a passive victim of Regina's manipulations to actively engaging in the same deceptive tactics. A significant example of this occurs when Regina becomes insecure about her weight. Cady pretends to be supportive, offering her so-called "*nutrition bars*," saying that "*They're these weird nutrition bars my mom uses to lose weight*." The bars are high in calories and designed to cause weight gain. Regina consumes them regularly, trusting Cady's apparent concern, which gradually undermines her physical appearance and self-confidence. This act of sabotage demonstrates how Cady begins to mirror Regina's methods, weaponizing manipulation under the guise of care.

However, Cady's increasing engagement in manipulation does not mean she has fully detached herself from Regina's influence. On the contrary, her narration reveals a deeper internal conflict. Despite actively working against Regina, Cady admits, "*The weird thing about hanging out with Regina was that I could hate her, and at the same time, I still wanted her to like me*". This statement exposes the ambivalence at the core of their relationship: Cady is aware of Regina's cruelty, yet she continues to crave her validation. The contradiction demonstrates how Regina's power extends beyond visible acts of dominance, shaping even Cady's sense of self-worth and identity. By this point, Cady not only fights against Regina but also begins to imitate her lifestyle, signalling how female catfight under patriarchy becomes a cycle of imitation, sabotage, and internalized competition.



Figure 3. Regina shows up just as Cady and Aaron are in the room

Source: *Mean Girls* (2004), (Waters, 1:00:09)

The love triangle between Cady, Regina, and Aaron becomes one of the central tensions in *Mean Girls*, and it directly fuels the dynamics of female catfighting. The catfight between Cady and Regina is not only about personal dislike but also about competing for Aaron's affection, which the film frames as a symbolic prize. The image captures this conflict vividly: Cady and Aaron are shown in an intimate moment, only to be interrupted by Regina's sudden entrance. This visual composition reinforces the theme of catfight, as Regina's presence intrudes on what could have been Cady's victory, thus escalating the competition between them.

This catfight also reshapes how others perceive Cady. Aaron, who was initially the motivation behind many of her actions, eventually becomes disillusioned as he notices how much Cady has changed. Confronting her, he remarks, "*You are just like a clone of Regina*". This statement reveals the irony of Cady's transformation: in attempting to defeat Regina, she ends up replicating her manipulative behaviour and shallow values. What began as a strategy to undermine Regina ultimately strips Cady of her authenticity and distances her from her true self.

The consequences of this transformation are not only felt in her relationship with Aaron but also with her closest friends. Janis, who had trusted and supported Cady from the beginning, feels betrayed by her shift in character. Expressing her disappointment, Janis tells her, "*You're not pretending anymore. You're Plastic. Cold, shiny, hard Plastic*". Her words underline that Cady has fully internalized the very identity she once resisted. The competition with Regina, rooted in patriarchal logic that pits women against each other, not only damages female solidarity but also reshapes Cady into the very image of the rival she sought to overcome.

Thus, female catfighting in *Mean Girls* is not merely portrayed as a conflict between individuals, but as a cultural construction that represents how women are positioned to undermine one another in pursuit of social status and male validation. This destructive dynamic demonstrates that catfighting functions as a symbolic mechanism reinforcing patriarchal dominance, while simultaneously exposing the fragility of female solidarity within a social sphere defined by competition, manipulation, and gendered hierarchy.

4. CONCLUSION

The analysis of *Mean Girls* shows that female catfight is not only used as entertainment but also to keep patriarchal values alive. The conflict between Cady and Regina is not just about personal dislike, it is shaped by a system where men, represented by Aaron, become the prize that women compete for. Instead of showing female friendship or solidarity, the film

highlights how women are pushed to bring each other down through gossip, sabotage, and humiliation. This turns catfight into a spectacle that entertains audiences while also normalizing the idea that women are naturally competitive with one another.

Cady's character represents the journey of a girl who begins as an outsider, innocent, curious, and unfamiliar with high school rules, but slowly transforms into a copy of Regina. At first, Cady resists Regina's world, but as she becomes more involved with *The Plastics*, she learns to manipulate, lie, and sabotage just like Regina does. This transformation can be seen through the idea of the male gaze. Cady starts to change her appearance and behaviour to attract Aaron's attention and to look powerful in front of others. Her sense of identity is no longer based on who she really is, but on how others, especially men, see her. In this way, Cady shows how women can internalize patriarchal expectations and perform femininity for external approval rather than for themselves.

On the other hand, Regina is represented as the perfect example of a "queen bee." She is beautiful, powerful, and admired, but her position depends heavily on how others see her. Her power is built on image, her looks, her authority, and the way the school community constantly validates her status. Regina controls other girls by setting impossible standards and making them feel insecure, which forces them to compete rather than support one another. Together, Cady and Regina reveal two sides of the same culture: the outsider who learns to perform femininity through manipulation, and the insider who already controls it.

Aaron's role in this catfight makes the patriarchal influence even clearer. As the male figure, he is treated as the prize worth fighting for. Both Cady and Regina's actions are tied to his attention, which reduces their agency and places male validation at the centre of their catfight. The female catfight, therefore, is not only about the girls themselves, but also about showing how women are often defined in relation to men. The climax of the film happens when Cady breaks the Spring Fling crown. By calling it "just plastic," she exposes the emptiness of competing for power that is based on beauty, popularity, and male approval. This act becomes a turning point, where she realizes that true empowerment cannot be found in catfight or in copying Regina, but in breaking away from the false ideals of competition. Still, the film also suggests that these rivalries are deeply rooted in popular culture and are difficult to escape.

Overall, *Mean Girls* shows how the representation of Cady, Regina, and female catfighting reflects the contradictions of postfeminist culture. Cady represents the innocent girl who gets trapped in the cycle of competition, Regina represents the queen bee who embodies patriarchal ideals of beauty and control, and the catfight between them represents how popular culture turns catfight into entertainment. Women are shown as powerful and independent, but their choices remain limited by systems that still privilege appearance, popularity, and male desire. The film makes female catfight look funny and ultimately the empowerment presented in *Mean Girls* is superficial. The female characters are given space to be visible and central, but their agency is confined within the boundaries of appearance, competition, and desire for male validation. Instead of encouraging solidarity or collective resistance, the film reinforces the idea that power for women is individual, aesthetic, and consumable. By doing so, *Mean Girls* illustrates how film, as a popular cultural medium, can shape teenage girls' understanding of themselves, turning structural inequalities into personal dramas, and disguising patriarchal control under the surface of lighthearted entertainment.

In this research, the analysis focuses on how female catfight between the two central characters is represented, and whether this catfight serves as a form of empowerment or instead reinforces dominant patriarchal ideologies. The study also explores the ways in

which both characters are subjected to objectification, particularly through the concept of the male gaze, which positions women as objects of visual pleasure rather than autonomous subjects. By interrogating these aspects, this research aims to uncover how Mean Girls not only depicts conflict between women but also contributes to broader cultural narratives about femininity, beauty, and power in a postfeminist context.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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