

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

In recent decades, women's empowerment has emerged as an important topic in discussions about gender inequality, reflecting ongoing efforts to challenge the patriarchal system and redefine women's roles in society. According to Kabeer (1999), empowerment is an act of acquiring the ability to choose from what was previously denied. This concept shows that empowerment arises in contexts where certain social structures limit women's capacity to determine their own life choices. These structures can be understood through the concept of patriarchy. According to Sylvia Walby (1990), patriarchy is a structured social system, which in practice means that men control, oppress, and exploit women. In a patriarchal system, women's access to resources, authority, and power in decision-making is severely limited. Therefore, empowerment is an important process to change this power imbalance.

In response to this power imbalance, the notion of women's empowerment emerged among feminists who have long challenged women's subordinate position in society. With the existence of the feminist movement, women can gradually fight for their rights. One of the most foundational contributions to this discourse comes from Simone de Beauvoir, whose seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949)

argues that women have been historically constructed as ‘the other’, defined not by their own subjectivity but in relation to men. As one of the most influential cultural industries in the world, Hollywood film has become a significant site where gender narratives are produced and perpetuated.

The Hollywood film industry still shows significant gender inequality, with women accounting for only about 30.9% of all speaking characters and often portrayed as sexual objects or supporting characters to men (Geena Davis Institute). These differences are even more pronounced in genres synonymous with masculinity, such as heist films. According to Hanich (2020), heist film is a film genre that focuses on a group of criminals who work in a planned and coordinated manner to carry out complex thefts, where the process of planning and executing the theft is central to the story. This genre of film mainly places men as masterminds, strategists, and leader, as seen in *Ocean’s trilogy*, *Ocean’s 11*, *Ocean’s 12*, and *Ocean’s 13*. *Ocean’s 8*, a spin-off of the trilogy, brings something different from the previous films.

The object of this study is *Ocean’s 8* (2018), a heist film directed by Gary Ross and produced by Warner Bros Pictures. As a spin-off of the previously male-dominated *Ocean’s* trilogy, the film presents an all-female cast led by Sandra Bullock as Debbie Ocean, the mastermind of this heist. The film makes a bold statement by taking a franchise previously dominated by men and casting a lineup of talented

actresses in key roles (Lemire, 2018). Commercially, the film grossed \$297.8 million worldwide, with 69% of its audience being women (D'Alessandro, 2018). Released in June 2018, just a few months after the #MeToo movement exploded in October 2017, the film served as a relevant cultural response to demands for more autonomous female representation on the big screen.

The study on the representation of women in Hollywood films has developed rapidly, covering topics such as female masculinity, resistance to patriarchal culture, and women's empowerment in films. However, studies specifically focusing on the representation of women's empowerment through female protagonists in the heist genre using Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory remain very limited. Therefore, this study examines the character of Debbie Ocean in *Ocean's 8* (2018) as a representation of women's empowerment within genre historically dominated by men.

1.2 Research Questions

The research questions that the writer brought up are shown below:

1. How do the intrinsic aspects shape Debbie Ocean's traits in *Ocean's 8* (2018)?
2. How is the representation of women's empowerment shown through the character of Debbie Ocean in *Ocean's 8* (2018)?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

Based on the research questions, there are two objectives of this study:

1. To analyze how the intrinsic aspects shape Debbie Ocean's traits in *Ocean's 8* (2018).
2. To examine the representation of women's empowerment shown through the character of Debbie Ocean in *Ocean's 8* (2018).

1.4 Scope of the Studies

This study focuses on the film *Ocean's 8* (2018), as its primary subject of study, with the character Debbie Ocean as the focus of analysis. This study covers two main frameworks: the film's intrinsic, which include character, setting, plot, themes, conflict, cinematography, and sound; and extrinsic aspects, which include Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory, the history of feminist movement, the social conditions of American women from 1960s to the present, and heist cases in the United States. This research does not examine other female characters in the film in depth, does not cover other films in the *Ocean's* franchise, and does not employ feminist theoretical framework beyond Beauvoir's primary analytical tool.

1.5 Previous Studies

The writer has conducted a comprehensive review of several studies that explore the object and topic of the study.

The first research is written by Dania Karimata Jauhar Qalbu from Sultan Agung Islamic University, entitled *A Depiction of Female Masculinity on Female Characters Reflected in the Hollywood Movie: Ocean's 8*. The author aims to understand how the female characters in *Ocean's 8* depict female masculinity and how this affects their relationships

with male characters. The research employs a qualitative approach and utilizes Judith Halberstam's theory of female masculinity and Peter Lehman's theory of masculinity. The findings indicate that the female characters in *Ocean's 8* embody female masculinity through their aggressive and dominant actions, as well as their outfits that resemble those of men. This portrayal of female masculinity empowers the characters to be independent in decision-making and pursue their goals without male domination.

The second research, written by Elyssa Michelle Day from the University of Nevada and entitled *Uncovering the Women in Ocean's 8: Understanding the Trends of the Women's Movement with the Portrayals of Women in Film*, utilizes an omnidirectional diachronic process of communication, gender theory, and male gaze theory. A textual approach was employed in this research. The findings in *Uncovering the Women in Ocean's 8* indicate that the film succeeded in reducing the sexual objectification of female characters, particularly through costume design and character traits. However, despite efforts to portray stronger women, some narrative elements and depictions of friendship in the film still reinforce existing gender stereotypes.

The third research, written by Haswari Zahra Demanty from Muhammadiyah Surakarta University entitled *Female Masculinity in Movie (Analysis Study of Semiotics in Ocean's Eight Movie)*, using semiotics analysis by Roland Barthes to analyze the data. Female Masculinity Theory

by Judith Halberstan and Masculinity Theory by Peter Lehman are used in this study. The aim of this study is to analyze how all the female characters in *Ocean's 8* shows the signification of female masculinity. The result of the study is that all of the female characters have more masculinity characters in the form of strength, aggressiveness, ability to lead, independency, rebellion and tomboy.

The fourth is article, written by Nabila Lismawati and Saffanah Ramadhania Zulfigar from Al Azhar University Indonesia entitled *The Reconstructed Portrayal of Feminism through Heroine Action in Film*, using the main theory of the Social Subject by E. Deidre Pribram and Patriarchy Theory by Gerda Lerner. These two theories are used to analyzed how films can be a medium to fight patriarchal thinking. The results of the analysis show that the four films studied, namely *The Hunger Gamer: Mockingjay Part I*, *Wonder Woman*, *Ocean's 8*, and *Enola Holmes*, have succeeded in reconstructing feminism and providing a new perspective on women to the audience. These films feature female heroes who break social stereotypes, showing that they are capable of being strong and independent figures, not just as supporting actors, by using various abilities, be it physical strength, intelligence, or courage.

The fifth research, written by Esme Fransen from Stockholm University and entitled *Big Dyke Energy?: Commodification and Queer Female Meaning-Making in the Reception of Ocean's 8* (Gary Ross, 2018). The aim of the study is to investigates the role of commodification in the

process of queer meaning-making in popular film through a reception study of the film *Ocean's 8*. Netnographic method used in this study, the researcher found that the ambiguity created by the film and its promotional materials allowed for the free flow of queer interpretations. This ambiguity actively interacted with existing audience fantasies, particularly those surrounding Cate Blanchett's lesbian character, and steered those interpretations in specific directions. This thesis concludes that the construction of queer meanings among female audiences is not a one-way street, but rather a complex and constant renegotiation between the commercial actors (film producers) and the audience.

The sixth research is a journal article written by Susilawati from University of Halu Oleo entitled *Symbolic Violence on Characters in Ocean's 8 Movie by Gary Ross*. Used symbolic violence theory by Pierre Bourdieu and descriptive qualitative method. The research results show that symbolic violence is influenced by the existence of adequate habitus and capital to form a dominant habitus and symbolic power, which generate symbolic violence. The forms of symbolic violence in this film include euphemisms and sensory mechanisms such as giving gifts, providing motivation and support, exploiting a person's weaknesses, and exploiting their position as a leader. All of these forms of symbolic violence are carried out by the main character, Debbie, as the team leader on the mission.

The seventh article, written by Herlina Sari Lubis and E. Ngestirosa Endang Woro Kasih (2025) from Rektorat Indonesia University, entitled

Women Empowerment of the Main Character Maleficent: Mistress of Evil (2019). Analyzed the representation of women's empowerment in the film *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil (2019)* using a qualitative descriptive method as well as women's empowerment theory by Madsen (2000) and Marxist feminism, as supported by Tong (2009), and Karl Marx. This study focuses on the characters of Maleficent and Aurora as women who symbolize their struggles to challenge the patriarchal structure represented by Queen Ingrith and the human kingdom. The result of this study shows that the film describes 3 main aspects of women's empowerment, that is, promoting gender equality through Aurora leadership, facing social inequality in the marriage institution related to power relations, and pushing the systemic change in the leadership concept based with empathy and justice, not with domination or violence. Overall, this study concludes that the film represents women's resistance towards traditional norms and offers the alternative of leadership that challenges the patriarchal structure.

The eighth article, written by Chintya Aulia Rahmawati from Surabaya University, entitled *Women's Empowerment Through Barbie (2023)*. Analyzed the representation of women's empowerment in the film *Barbie (2023)* using a feminist approach and a qualitative descriptive method. This study focuses on how the character of Barbie represents women's struggles in facing social standards and gender construction that limited the identity and women's roles. The result of this study shows that the film represents women's empowerment through self-awareness, freedom

to choose identity, and criticism towards social system that restricts women. Thus, this film is seen as a form of reflection and resistance against traditional gender norms.

The ninth research, written by Lucrezia Motti from Utrecht University entitled *Feminist Representations in Contemporary Media: An Analysis of Audio-Visual Contents*, employs feminist film theory and feminist theory, utilizing the Neo-Formalist Film Analysis method. The research findings are that the H&M advertisement, the documentary series *Vagina Dispatches*, and the independent film *The Love Witch* have different approaches in feminist representation. The H&M advertisement and *Vagina Dispatches* have similarities in terms of feminist sensitivity that focuses on diversity, while *The Love Witch* is the only content that specifically discusses gender identity. This finding concludes that although the issue of diversity has become part of the feminist discourse in mainstream media, discussions about the nature of gender are still limited to a more specific audience.

The last research is an article, written by Martha Easton from Michigan University and entitled *Feminism*, discusses the complex history and evolution of feminist theory, particularly in the context of art history, with a focus on how feminism has reshaped the field of medieval art studies. The author aims to highlight the importance of feminist thought in challenging traditional views on gender, representation, and power dynamics in both historical and contemporary contexts.

The difference between this study and previous studies is that this study focuses on analyzing the main character, Debbie Ocean, using feminist theory. This study also focuses on how women's empowerment is represented by Debbie in this heist film, a genre typically dominated by men. Meanwhile, previous studies analyzed more than one character or even all the female characters in the film.

1.6 Research Method

1.6.1 Types of Research

This study applied a qualitative descriptive method with library research to collect relevant data and information, which will serve as a reliable source for analysis. According to Creswell (2016), qualitative descriptive is a method used to explore and understand the meaning of individuals or groups related to social or human problems. According to George (2008), library research is a research process that utilizes documented and archived evidence or data, such as books, archives, journals, and documents, which researchers then locate, evaluate, and use in their research.

1.6.2 Research Approach

In this study, the writer used narrative elements as an objective approach to examine the intrinsic elements, including the character and characterization, plot, theme, conflict, setting, cinematography, and sound. According to M.H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953), objective approach “explain[s] the work by considering it in isolation, as an autonomous whole” (Abrams, 1953, p. 7),

with its meaning and value determined solely by its internal structure, independent of the author's background, the reader's response, or the external world. For the extrinsic element, the writer used the feminist theory by Simone de Beauvoir.

1.6.3 Data Source

The writer used the data in this study from excerpts of dialogue and scenes in the film *Ocean's 8* (2018), which display the characterization of Debbie Ocean and are relevant to be analyzed in the context of the representation of women's empowerment. The primary data source of this study is the film *Ocean's 8* (2018) as the main object of study, while the secondary data sources are in the form of thesis, articles, journals, and books that support the analysis by providing a theoretical basis and strengthening the interpretation of the data.

1.6.4 Method of Data Collection

The first step taken by the writer was to watch the film *Ocean's 8* repeatedly to understand the plot, characters, and dialogue between characters. The second step was to identify and capture the scenes and dialogues that display the characterization of Debbie Ocean. The third step was to transcribe and classify the data according to the formulation of the research questions. The fourth step was to analyze the important data, then connect it with the theoretical framework. The final step was to draw conclusions based on the results of the analysis to answer the formulation of the research questions.

1.7 Organization of the Writing

There are several chapters in this study, explained below:

1.7.1 Chapter I

In this chapter, the writer explains the background of the study, research questions, objectives of the study, previous studies, scope of the study, research method, and the writing organization of the study that the writer is conducting.

1.7.2 Chapter II

This chapter presents the theoretical framework, which consist of the intrinsic elements of the film including character, setting, plot, theme, and conflict, as well as cinematography and sound based on theories of Abrams and Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith.

1.7.3 Chapter III

This chapter presents the extrinsic theoretical framework of the study. It explains Simone de Beauvoir's theory of feminism, the history of the feminist movement, the social condition of women in the United States from the 1960s to the present, and the heist cases in the United States.

1.7.4 Chapter IV

The fourth chapter presents the results and discussion, which analyzes both the intrinsic and extrinsic theoretical frameworks in relation to the research questions.

1.7.5 Chapter V

The final chapter presents the conclusion based on the findings of the study.