**[Plastic pollution](https://www.dawn.com/news/1767581/plastic-pollution)**

[Zarrar Khuhro](https://www.dawn.com/authors/1915/zarrar-khuhro) Published July 31, 2023

WHERE would we be without the Outrage Machine and its conjoined twin, the Hype Engine? How would we know what to praise and what to condemn if not for the countless articles and social media posts, full of hysteria and hyperbole, telling us what to think? What would we do with our barely suppressed rage and fear if we didn’t have blockbuster films to direct them at? The latest targets are Barbie and Oppenheimer, two films as different as pink and black that released simultaneously a few weeks back and, like the shockwave from the detonation of an atomic bomb, we could see the outrage coming long before it hit us. “Barbie bombs innocent families with feminist propaganda,” screams one YouTuber. Ben Shapiro, a poster boy for incels, labels it “one of the most woke movies” he’s ever seen and began his 43-minute rant/ review/ mental breakdown on the movie by burning about $70 worth of Barbie dolls on camera.

US congressman Matt Gaetz, despite attending the premiere decked out in pink along with his wife, also decided to capitalise on this latest blow to American manhood and civilisation, by calling for a boycott of the film. His wife complained that the film did not address the notions of faith and family which, as we know, every film about an iconic plastic girl’s toy must naturally do. Apropos of nothing, Gaetz himself was recently under investigation for alleged sex trafficking.

Interestingly, while the Barbie doll itself has been the subject of much feminist ire over the decades for allegedly creating unrealistic expectations and possibly body dysmorphia, the only real opposition to the movie from those circles came from the radical feminist group Femen, which is mostly known for stripping down at protests. Here, a few femen activists in various stages of undress, nailed a Barbie doll to a cross and set it on fire while shouting “life in plastic is not fantastic”, in an allusion to the catchy 1997 Barbie Girl song by Aqua. But, by and large, the feminist movement seems to have moved on from hating Barbies, and thankfully so, because as lead actress Margot Robbie said in response to all the hysteria: “She’s a doll. She’s a plastic doll.” Essentially, the film provided yet another battleground for the interminable culture wars of America, the talking points and tropes of which too many of us in Pakistan have wittingly or unwittingly adopted without any care for context. You see people sharing Shapiro videos without realising that the man is in it to cash in on the huge, and hugely gullible, right-wing American market and sharing Andrew Tate quotes without realising or caring that he too is a grifter par excellence, who profits from exploiting, if not manufacturing, Western cultural divides.

Outrage on a trending topic translates into views and clicks (and possibly votes) which in turn translate into hard, cold cash. The bigger the topic, the greater the cash fl ow and given that Barbie has grossed more than $400 million worldwide, there’s a lot of residual outrage to cash in on.

‘She’s a doll. She’s a plastic doll.’

On the flip side, our more ‘progressive’ elements also seem to copy-paste America’s unique cultural issues onto our own, and so ancient ethnic divides are explained on the basis of American critical race theory, and our own long and varied history of women’s movements, or indeed transgenderism, is largely ignored or else suborned to Western views on the issue, down to copying the very language of those debates. The irony here is that both ‘sides’ will simultaneously (rightly) crib and complain about America’s cultural dominance, but at the same time import some very specifically American cultural debates, down to aping their very language.

Barbie also caused a minor diplomatic incident by displaying a map depicting China’s nine-dash line (its claims in the South China Sea) which caused Vietnam to ban the film, which makes it the only place, other than our own Punjab province to have banned Barbie. Though in Vietnam’s case we at least know why. The addition of the line, which is on-screen for a split second, also led Republican Mike Gallagher to declare that “the fact that a cartoonish, crayon-scribbled map seems to go out of its way to depict the PRC’s unlawful territorial claims illustrates the pressure that Hollywood is under to please CCP censors”.

He may have a point, as China is now nearly a $5 billion market for films, and Hollywood does indeed try to cater to that market, knowing that it is critical when it comes to ensuring a film’s international box office success. Note also that when Walt Disney pictures released Zootopia in China, they added a Panda character to cater to that market. Many other similar examples can be found.

Finally, while the movie is a fun watch, the real plastic pollution is the discourse surrounding it.

*The writer is a journalist.*

**Twitter:** [**@zarrarkhuhro**](https://twitter.com/ZarrarKhuhro)

*Published in Dawn, July 31st, 2023*