THE REPRESENTATION OF FATHERHOOD IDENTITY ON NETFLIX CINEMA

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate how a man constructs his masculinity stereotype as a father and caregiver as represented in the original Netflix's Fatherhood. This research is qualitative with Stuart Hall's Perspectives of Representation as an approach. This perspective is to find the meaning of American fatherhood as represented in the film and to explore how the meaning of fatherhood significantly affects the global meaning of transnational communication in media. Qualitative means that a film as well as text is read from its language, image, and other aspects such as color, lighting, composition, articulation details, and role positions are taken consideration in finding meaning. The results of the study show that the fatherhood concept symbolizes ideal masculinity, anti-thesis of traditional masculinity, develops hybrid masculinity, rejects femininity as well as hegemonic masculinity, and pro-gender equality. In conclusion, the fatherhood concept inspires non-America films such as Indonesian and Indian films. This research proves that a film is made not only for economic aspects or a visual product that is intended to entertain the audience, but a film is a text that can be read, evaluated, and analyzed in depth through various approaches since a film represents a reality.

Keywords: *fatherhood, film, gender stereotype, original netflix, representation*

INTRODUCTION

The life of women with motherhood is considered something simple, undisputed, and taken for granted. While fatherhood is seen as problematic, it requires definition and other interventions to shape its visibility, direction, and dimensions (Miller, 2011; Doucet, 2013). The parameter of fatherhood, then, is less clearly delineated when placed next to the one that strongly and morally includes motherhood. But they are both shaped by the choices and constraints in which gender are lived and which are embedded in the domains of home and paid work. Miller's statement illustrates the complexity of studying fatherhood so that there is a need for a clear definition and perspective. Therefore, examining the construction of fatherhood and its

relationship to masculinity becomes important considering that identity is a social construction as well as the construction of femininity.

Gender is a popular issue that is being debated in society. Gender issues do not only talk about the complexity of the roles of man and woman, but more broadly include issues of sexual violence, racial discrimination, and culture. America as the center of the film industry often uses this popular issue as the theme of the story so that American films become so dominant and favorite by the wider community. The role of films in popular culture and society as Simonton stated is as motion pictures largely reflect prevailing cultural attitudes about gender roles, norms, attitudes, and expectations (Simonton, 2004). The film can be regarded as a fantasy world created as a cultural reflection, including a reflection of gender ideology in society. Therefore, the film becomes a material object that deserves to be used as a source of study, considering that films are not merely the result of fiction, but films are also a reflection of reality (Adi, 2011). The many depictions, interpretations, and performances of masculinity circulating in American films show the openness of possibilities, embracing of differences, and a series of important cultural interventions in discourses about masculinity. The representation of fatherhood as a new symbol of masculinity became a popular feature in American cinema. The ideal masculinity that has become a trend in the post-feminist era has become a paradigm for revising the stereotype of masculinity and becoming a social effect, and dominant in the culture. This proves that film is not merely a medium of entertainment, in a broader sense, the film is a medium that represents the values and ideology of a nation. The film provides at least a partial representation of the imagined, produced, and consumed cultural conditions. To find an audience, films must actively engage with the ever-changing social, political, and cultural contexts in which they are made; However, the interactional relationship between film and its broader cultural, social, and political context is frequently complex and conflicting. Therefore, this research is conducted to explore how film actively construct the meaning of fatherhood in American society today. This significantly important since the construction of fatherhood dynamically change as well as the construction of gender in society.

Netflix as a global film market is a strategic platform to examine global issues in the film industry, especially the issue of the domination of the American film industry

and its development in this digital era. Crane (2014) states that cultural imperialism particularly the global influence of American media culture such as the film industry is a central theme in cultural studies. As already explained that Netflix's original films are not only produced in America, so there is a potential influence of American narratives on other films. This influence can give the effect of the emergence of a new world where American ideology is mixed with the ideology of the society where the film is produced. The adoption of American values in the film is possible. Netflix is a media for a global culture so that the interaction pattern has a context-less character, namely the pattern of American cultural communication that appears anywhere and anytime regardless of time and place. Through the films produced by Netflix, the global community can easily learn and be influenced by American culture. In this case, the film *Fatherhood* as original Netflix is considered a suitable material for expanding the construction of fatherhood in America and how this construction indirectly is a part of the pattern of transnational communication in the digital platform today.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The term fatherhood emerged along with various studies on the phenomena of men being involved and participating in taking care of children in western countries (Dermott, 2008; Miller, 2011). Fatherhood is a social term related to being a father culturally and involves rights, duties and responsibilities, and status along with the discourse of good fathers and bad fathers (Gallagher, 2004). Another perspective states that fatherhood is related to the issue of gender relations. That fathers and mothers represent experiences through stereotypical representations of masculinity and femininity and find clearer spaces of expression, and, consequently, the lives of parents and families are one of the main areas in which gender differences and inequalities can emerge. Therefore, the study of fatherhood is associated with the study of men and masculinity. This study gives a deeper meaning to the process of transitioning masculine identity in its involvement in being a parent as well as being a child caretaker. The main objective of this study is to explore potential changes in gender relations not only within the family but in society at large (Gallagher, 2004; Dermott, 2008; Miller, 2011; Prino et al., 2016; Ruspini & Crespi, 2016). A man who is involved in caring for children has two potentials that are practically applied, namely the

potential for emotional involvement and physical involvement (Carrigan et al., 1985; Connell, 2005).). Emotionally, the involvement of men in caring for children lightens the burden on women and expands options for women. On the other hand, the involvement of men provides the potential for men to show their masculinity differently, revising the idea of masculinity and femininity, especially the idea of inequality.

Research on gender, masculinity, or femininity in films has been widely studied. Research on masculinity and film rose sharply at the end of this decade, most studies linking film with Freudian or Lacanian theory then experienced the development of perspective toward feminist theory and queer theory (Butters Jr, 2014). Research conducted by Bainbridge and Yates (2005), Connell (2005), Greven (2009), Mara (2014) Armengol and Caraby (2014), Thompson and Bennett (2015), Giannini and Minervini (2017), McDonald (2018), and Carleton (2021) with various approaches and methods in exploring film as a medium, can provide a socio-cultural understanding of the construction of masculinity amid the dynamics and development of human culture. In this context, the authors position this paper as something different from the previous studies. If previous studies offer a different way of analyzing masculinity contained in the film, this study tries to see the film as a popular product of America and how this popular product dominates the world with narratives, assumptions, and perspectives of Americans. In this case, the perspective used is the perspective of a transnational study of American Studies. Lenz et al., (2011) state that the American study is transnational and has two meanings, namely the first American study which focuses on the meaning of "America". This requires outside perspectives and dialogue is crucial. Second, studies in American Studies reflect and deconstruct the intracultural and multicultural diversity and hybridity of American culture and transnational interactions and negotiations in a time of globalization and relocation. In this case, Rowe explains that the cultural hybridity that is built requires scholars to look at the various cultural influences involved in important social formations (Rowe, 2010). Traditional American studies focus on a single dominant culture assimilated into other immigrant cultures. More recent American studies have focused on the historically occurring cultural hybridity among the many cultures that make up the nation. Transnational American Studies is a study that does not only focus on the United States alone but involves a broader unit of

analysis such as studying the world system with models to discuss American society and culture and also understanding fully and critically America's role in the global system by various dimensions. In the context of popular culture such as film, the transnational study of American Studies is an approach used to view American films as a window to understanding American culture and its relationship with the cultures of other nations which are also constructed in the film. By positioning itself as a global film streaming service provider, Netflix is trying to promote America's multicultural culture to the world. Through Netflix, America offers a standard of cultural values as well as demonstrates the superiority of their culture despite the local cultural resistance.

METHOD

This research is qualitative because this research is focused to reveal the meaning of social phenomena. Therefore, a film is a medium for constructing concepts about human life. As a medium of communication, films represent certain messages in human life. Hall states that representation connects meaning and language with culture. Representation symbolizes a broad system of meaning. Representations are:

> Using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people.' You may well ask, 'Is that all?' Well, yes and no. Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It does involve the use of language, signs, and images that stand for or represent things (Hall, 2006).

The description above explains that representation is an action or expression that can influence other people. By using language, cultural identity is constructed, interpreted, and accepted by the people who consume these cultural values. In understanding the text of the film, the reader has an important role in constructing the meaning. A film can choose and determine meaning itself, but the meaning is not something fixed so it can be constructed using a system of representations, concepts, and signs. Signs are things that symbolize, represent, or refer to objects, people, and events in the so-called 'real' world and imaginary things and the world of fantasy or abstract ideas which are not in a clear sense and are part of the material world (Hall, 2006). Therefore, the film as a material object in this study is considered as an object

that has a meaning that can be interpreted by the audience. In this case, the researcher builds an interpretation through a system of representations, concepts, and signs in the film. Meanwhile, the transnational study of American Studies perspective exploits the phenomena of mutual influence between America and the world community. American Studies is an attempt to understand America by looking beyond national boundaries as well as from an outside American point of view Therefore, understanding the various meanings of America and its culture is not enough just to look at the American side itself but also from the outside, domestic and foreign sides, or national and international sides that influence each other. The Transnational Perspective of American Studies is used to see how the hegemony and negotiation of American culture affect the construction of fatherhood and masculinity in other films produced by Netflix.

So, from the previous explanation, this research was conducted in several steps namely: 1) Examining the meaning of films through common-sense meaning (denotation and connotation) in the society where the film is produced; 2) Examining the meaning of films with a broader meaning or mythical level, namely linking these meanings to the motives or ideology of the community, involving the social and cultural context of the community in which the film was produced. Construct meaning with various sources and knowledge or provide intuitive interpretation of researchers based on their intellectual experience and scientific descriptions; 3) Examining the meaning of films by looking at the structure of the analyzed meaning and connecting it with other related meanings or comparing the meaning of signs with the same meaning in non-American films (intertextual).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The film Fatherhood is produced by Netflix and released in 2021. The film, starred by Kevin Hart, received a positive response from the audience. The film is based on the real-life story of Matthew Logelin whose wife died shortly after the birth of their daughter. Not only the sadness faced by Matt but also the challenges of new parents that he must go through as a single father. Quoted from https://top10.netflix.com/films, the film Fatherhood gained popularity by gaining 38.510,000 views over two weeks and made film to be at the top position for one week as the most-watched film by Netflix

viewers around the world. This proves that the film Fatherhood is liked by the global community and in the context of popular culture, cultural artifacts (film Fatherhood) that are liked by many people are artifacts that have a depiction of reality (truth-values) that is believed by the community (Adi, 2011). The film Fatherhood provides an illustration that currently masculinity is being redefined. Masculinity is considered something special but with a new look. Through the construction of 'fatherhood', masculinity is seen as an ideal, traditionally capable of sustaining a branching hierarchy of agency. The structure of 'fatherhood' represented is not only culturally negotiable but also an attractive and desirable conceptualization of masculinity. The film Fatherhood is like articulating masculinity with the term 'father' which is considered an appropriation of the equivalent term 'mother'. A black man is constructed as a multitasking father, an admirable domestic hero, and perhaps a 'super dad' who deserves to be adored.

Fatherhood as American Stereotype

a. Black Male Character as Stereotype

Patriarchy is the basic system that constructs the social system in American society. Patriarchy is a social system in which the needs, concerns, and desires of men are at the center. A father has authority over his wife and children which must be respected and followed. In more extreme cases, men are considered to 'own' women and children, and they materially control women's bodies and lives. However, in its development, the patriarchal system underwent various changes and had an impact on the evolution of the construction of masculinity. The film *Fatherhood* is an arena for the evolution of this masculinity. This film reflects how a man must have his authority as the breadwinner but has the attribute of femininity by showing his emotional side.

In the film *Fatherhood*, a black man must divide the focus of his life between taking care of his daughter and his work as a professional who has a high position in a company. In many film studies about black men, it is assumed that the stereotype of black men inherently is negative images and practices. A black man is also synonymous with rough and uneducated life. Furthermore, the phenomena of single parents in American society have undergone changes where usually women are the main actors. This phenomenon is mostly due to the wider visibility of women in all aspects, so divorce is also increasing. The *Fatherhood* film looks at the phenomena from the other side, with a black man as a protagonist. In *Fatherhood* film, the black character is

reconstructed into a man who is highly educated, successful in his career and work, and successful as a single parent. This reinforces the changing roles of men and women in the family. The change is a restructuring, especially in the definition of a father. One does not need a vagina just to be a good babysitter in the family. A man must accept that his role has been weakened, not only as the center, lover of a woman or his wife but also responsible for raising his children. Men do not play rigid gender roles, but they do whatever roles they believe in and want to play. Men have begun to accept the traditional stereotypes of women in their roles as working women accept the traditional stereotypes of men even though they realize that men are not women and women are not men.

As in the film *Fatherhood*, the character of Matthew Logelin (Kevin Hart) represents how a man must learn how to adapt to the changes. Men traditionally try to avoid anything related to femininity, but Matthew Logelin must face a complicated situation when his wife dies, and he must take care of his baby child. The masculine stereotype which is traditionally the antithesis of femininity is invisible. The character of Matthew Logelin with all his resources has decided to take care of his daughter without the help of a woman. In the post-structural concept, the character of Matthew Logelin is doing gender where his involvement in parenting is a manifestation of his performativity, which is an action that actively confirms his identity as a caretaker as well as a breadwinner. This also proves that identity is not something final, identity is a process that refers to the internal-external dialectic in which a person's identity is strongly influenced by the way he sees himself and how he is seen by others. The implication is that identity is not only obtained individually or independently but is a unity, differences in the social environment also contribute to constructing identity.

b. The Troubled Family: Father and Absent Moms

Being a single parent is not an easy thing to do, especially when faced with the complexities of nurturing and educating children. The pressure due to changes in men's positions and roles causes the pattern of the existence of masculinity during social life to change. These changes are also inseparable from the ability of men capacity to adjust to the limitations of gender stereotypes that exist in the social environment. The stereotype of men as the breadwinner of the family is opposed to raising children and taking care of the household which is attached to the role of women.

The character of Matthew Logelin constructs his identity and voluntarily plays the role of a babysitter without wanting to hire a nanny or leave her daughter in daycare. For Matthew Logelin, it was a form of responsibility towards his child and his wife who had died. This explains that masculinity is not a biological construction but rather a cultural construction that is produced and practiced. A man emphasizes his hegemony more than his emotional side due to social demands, but on the other hand, a man will transform to be more emotional when they must face the complexities of the household and the complexity of taking care of and raising children. In the end, gender is not a biologically defined role but is produced and reproduced by certain social environments and individuals.

In another situation, Matthew Logelin must conform to the reality that he is a father and should behave as a father. A Father is a symbol of masculinity who plays a hegemonic role in a family. Nevertheless, Matthew Logelin still tries to instruct his masculinity as a special social relationship, and its significance is shrouded in the constitution as something universal, axiomatic, and neutral. The character of Matthew Logelin tries to put his dominance of masculinity as an acceptable character, not only through social relations and cultural media but also through habits and practices of everyday experience. Hegemony and dominance are patterns of masculine behavior that have been tied to everyday life so that they do not need justification. This can be seen from the pattern of relationships between fathers and their children. Even though Matthew Logelin managed to raise his child, the father figure still cannot replace the mother figure. How Matthew Logelin experienced various obstacles, especially when he had to give his daughter healthy food such as milk, then put on diapers, clothes, and pants properly. The climax was when Matthew Logelin could not calm down and put his child to sleep at night which affected to work activities the next day. The masculinity in Matthew Logelin begins to show when he feels frustrated that he vents his emotions, gets angry, slams objects near him, and says harsh words. This confirms that there is a deficiency in a man which naturally shows that the stereotype of the best babysitters is father and mother. There is a negotiation of roles between father and mother to determine how the family should be built and the existing gender pattern should be produced. The ideal family is a family that can share the central elements that support strengthening the relationships that exist within the family. Gender roles are not

to prioritize father or mother, but to strengthen each other so that the ideal family can be realized. This was not obtained by Matthew Logelin because of the absence of a woman as the mother of his daughter.

c. Gender Roles Stereotype

Social roles in the context of gender show that men and women act in different ways because they act according to social roles which are generally separated by sex. This difference often occurs because, in the context of gender, each situation is different and requires different skills. Roles are exclusively social because approving or rejecting roles is the result of social interaction and negotiation within the structure of society. Therefore, gender roles are behaviors that are not internalized because either intentionally or unintentionally they are always adapted to certain social situations. This is the basis for every human being to meet needs in different contexts. In the film *Fatherhood*, the character of Matthew Logelin represents how humans must be related to the circumstance or the situations that befall their lives. Losing a wife during childbirth made him change his orientation from masculine nature (a father) to a hybrid nature (a father and mother) which is socially binary and contradictory. The character of Matthew Logelin constructs himself according to the necessary needs by looking at social norms both descriptively and injunctively. Descriptively is Matthew Logelin's way to remain a man according to existing social norms, while injunctive is to see how a woman or mother behaves in taking care of children. These descriptive and injunctive norms work together in keeping Matthew Logelin's character from always behaving according to the gender roles played to avoid deviations and of course, it will produce unpleasant consequences if deviations occur.

On the other hand, Maddy (Melody Hurd), Matt's daughter, offers gender expressions that are descriptively formed because of her desire. For example, Maddy is more comfortable wearing long pants like a boy than wearing a skirt uniform at school or Maddy is more interested in buying boys' underwear than girls' underwear. Through this scene, this film tries to give a message to the audience that gender and its expression are a result of construction where Maddy, who is a woman, is more interested in styles that are traditionally male styles. Matt as a father has an open mind so that whatever his daughter does, he always supports it without justifying the child's

behavior. This film asserts that the body is an authority, having unlimited preferences by choosing its expression as desired.

Fatherhood as Transnational Communication

Transnational communication is a natural phenomenon, especially on digital platforms where all events are recorded and accessible to the global community. The presence of the Netflix platform explains how these transnational communication patterns are interwoven. Netflix provides a global-based content service where all content can be enjoyed by fans around the world. In addition, Netflix's original programs are a new pattern in accommodating cultural hybridity. Netflix provides movie streaming services not only from America as the country of origin of Netflix but also produces non-American films so the potential for transnational communication through films is very possible. In the film industry, America is the ruler of the most popular box-office films around the world. It is not surprising that the popular issues brought by American films influence the development of issues in non-American films. The concept of fatherhood provides a lot of inspiration for non-American films. *Ali & Ratu-Ratu Queen* is a Netflix original film that adopts the issue of fatherhood and masculinity as in the film *Fatherhood*. Although it doesn't specifically show the relationship between father and son, the beginning of the story shows how Ali's father struggled to raise Ali after his mother left for America with the reason of wanting to achieve her dream as a singer. The film *Ali & Ratu-Ratu Queens* also emphasizes how America is a country with unlimited resources capable of attracting outsiders to study in America. At the end of the story, Ali finally lives in America to continue his education and is then followed by his nephew. The gender expression represented by Ance (Tika Panggabean) and Biyah (Asri Pramawati) is a model for Maddy's gender expression in the film *Fatherhood*. Ance and Biyah are women but look more 'boyish which is close to the expression of the male gender. The patterns of equality of representation in this film are referred to as American transnational communication, where America in this case Netflix has the potential to pressure other countries' production houses to make films to equate perceptions, negotiate perceptions, simplify perceptions, or even more radically eliminating local perceptions (Indonesian) in terms of this gender expression. This also shows that cultural hybridity in the Netflix platform that is built requires that various cultural influences be involved in important social formations, namely the

representation of gender expression that is framed in the construction of masculinity and fatherhood, and ideal family values.

Discussion

From the finding of the research, it can be drawn that parents and caregivers are the most important providers of nurturing care for children, and not only women have taken the role of principal caregivers, but men as a father are also the center of the parenting role. In the last decade, men's involvement as caregivers has increased along with the development of gender role stereotypes particularly, in western culture. Globally, dominant restrictive gender norms not only discourage men from becoming more actively involved in caregiving and domestic responsibilities, but also justify men's violence and control over both women and children (Heise et al., 2019). Film *Fatherhood* emphasizes the concept of male engagement as fathers to encompass their active participation in protecting and promoting the health, well-being, and development of their partners and

children. It also involves them being emotionally connected with their children and partners (even when they may not be living together), including through emotional, physical, and financial support. It also means that men take joint responsibility with their partners for the workload.

According to (Vlahovicova et al., 2022), positive male engagement can also contribute to not only their children but also their female partner's emotional well-being, help redress gender inequitable relationships, and power imbalances in decision-making within the household, and is essential for women's participation in the public sphere. Film *Fatherhood* then represents this kind of engagement even though the inequality still maintains depicted particularly in the case of the relationship between Logellin and Swan (Loggelin's girlfriend). Logelin blames Swan for her presence in his life because she interferes with Loggelin's relationship with his daughter, Melody. Swan is considered to make Logelin complacent so that Melody is forgotten. Loggelin then left Swan just like that and made Swan hurt.

The scene above proves that men still have more choices than women. Men regulate relationships with women. although this *Fatherhood* film offers more messages about inclusive gender, the dominance of domination is still felt and is still being shown. According to (Bainbridge & Yates, 2005), from a contemporary perspective,

American film such as *Fatherhood*, provides a gap to open a new counter-hegemonic space that has the potential to form a fluid and less defensive masculinity. It is different from the 70s or 90s era. The main characters in American films have involved black people, but their existence has not been separated from the general stereotype in American society (especially white people). Black characters who regularly appear in American films are a representation of marginalized groups and criminals, particularly in actions film (Adi, 2011). Films from the 60s to 90s have a tradition of depicting violence against women and limiting the role of women concerning the role of male protagonists. In today's film developments, masculine ambiguity is often represented so that its construction can only be understood through in-depth study. Understanding masculinity means understanding the values that exist in each of its constructions and showing the arena of contestation for the presence of masculinity. The film *Fatherhood* explains how ambiguity is constructed. The male character in the film Fatherhood constructs the negative masculinity that has been stereotyped on black people through its positive side. The male character is described as a person who can play various roles at once, namely being a father as well as being a mother for his child. This shows that the problem of masculinity is still a complex thing that is depicted in today's films.

Research on masculinity and film rose sharply at the end of this decade, most studies linking film with Freudian or Lacanian theory then experienced the development of perspective toward feminist theory and queer theory. This research sees the film as a popular product of America and how this popular product dominates the world with narratives, assumptions, and perspectives of Americans. Several previous studies emphasized the construction of fatherhood identity in the film without relating it to America as the producer of the film. Since the film is the depiction of truth-reality, this research connected to the 'here and now' specifically what American perspective on fatherhood construction and how the statement correlates to the fatherhood construction in the film.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusions

As the result of the study, Film *Fatherhood* produced a new stereotype of ideal masculinity, anti-thesis of traditional masculinity, develops hybrid masculinity, rejects

femininity as well as hegemonic masculinity, and pro-gender equality in the body of a black man who was traditionally close to the crimes, violence, sexual abuse, lower class, uneducated person and another negative behavior. Furthermore, the fatherhood concept in the film inspires non-America films such as Indonesian films. The many depictions, interpretations, and performances of masculinity circulating in American films show the openness of possibilities, embracing of differences, and a series of important cultural interventions in discourses about masculinity. The representation of fatherhood as a new symbol of masculinity became a popular feature in American cinema. The ideal masculinity that has become a trend in the post-feminist era has become a paradigm for revising the stereotype of masculinity and becoming a social effect, and dominant in the culture. This proves that film is not merely a medium of entertainment, in a broader sense, the film is a medium that represents the values and ideology of a nation. The film provides at least a partial representation of the imagined, produced, and consumed cultural conditions. To find an audience, films must actively engage with the ever-changing social, political, and cultural contexts in which they are made; However, the interactional relationship between film and its broader cultural, social, and political context is frequently complex and conflicting.

Suggestions

This study focuses on masculinity represented in the *Fatherhood* film produced by Netflix. As a social construction, masculinity as well femininity is dynamic construction that changes every time, and it depends on geographical and cultural aspects. Therefore, the study only in one area (America) is not sufficient to understand the global character of the fatherhood and masculinity stereotype. This research only expands the concept of fatherhood and masculinity in American film, so the next study should include another film from a different area. It can be conducted as a comparative study or transnational study that widely covers all issues of gender particularly fatherhood and masculinity issues.

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