SOCIAL CLASS AND GIRLHOOD EXPERIENCES IN SELECTED INDONESIAN CHILDREN'S STORIES

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Abstract: This study explores how socio-economic background shapes the representation of girlhood in selected Indonesian children's literature. Guided by Crenshaw's intersectionality theory, which views identity as shaped by overlapping social categories, this study applies qualitative textual analysis to two storybooks from the *Let's Read Asia* project, *Cepat Kering, Bunga Kemboja!* and *Bukan Halangan*. By using the close reading method, the analysis focuses on identifying scenes, expressions, and descriptions that construct different forms of resilience through different class contexts. The findings show that Ratih, a working-class girl, develops resilience and independence through financial hardship and self-sacrifice. On the other hand, Kapisa, the girl from a middle-class family, builds resilience through care, guidance, and access to information. These contrasting pathways demonstrate that social class strongly shapes the meaning of resilience and determines whether it is formed by necessity or through privilege. The study concludes that while both stories promote positive images of girls, they also risk normalizing inequality by presenting different class-based realities as equally admirable. These results highlight the importance of examining girlhood experiences at the intersection of gender, class, and age.

Keywords: *children's literature, class, gender, Indonesia, resilience*

INTRODUCTION

Children's literature has long played its role not only as a medium of entertainment but also as a cultural product that shapes how children are taught about identity, moral values, and their connection to society. Because of this role, children's stories often contain prescriptive elements that guide children in how they see themselves and others and in how they adopt certain moral values, behaviors, and also social norms (Casey et al., 2021; Kneeskern & Reeder, 2022; Pulimeno et al., 2020). Scholars have argued that books for young readers always convey ideology, whether explicit or implicit, as they present models of life that children are expected to learn from (Masjid et al., 2023; Pownall & Heflick, 2023). Among the values frequently emphasized are gender roles. Many societies frame girl characters with ideas of resilience, responsibility, and moral strength (Adukia et al., 2022; Vickery & Rodríguez, 2021). However, these ideals are never neutral. They are influenced and shaped by cultural traditions as well as social elements, such as social class, economy, religion, and politics. Recent studies confirm that class influences how girlhood is portrayed, which shows that stories reflect and reproduce social inequalities (Adam & Harper, 2023; Daly, 2017; Forest et al., 2015; Streib et al., 2017). For this reason, researchers have increasingly adopted intersectional approaches that combine age, gender, and class in analyzing children's literature (Adam, 2021; Adam & Harper, 2023).

In Indonesia, children's literature has historically served as a tool for moral and civic education. Stories are widely used in schools and families to promote constructive behavior, social harmony, and responsibility (Muassomah et al., 2020; Parlindungan et al., 2024; Yuswara, 2021). Reading activities with children are often framed as lessons in character building. Through these activities, children are expected to learn which behaviors are valued and rewarded and which are discouraged. While this tradition remains important, its focus on presenting life ideals often results in the neglect of real aspects of childhood experience, particularly those related to inequality. Studies highlight that female characters in Indonesian stories are often portrayed as moral exemplars, yet differences in social backgrounds that shape their experiences are rarely addressed (Hakim, 2020; Indriyani, 2024; Yuswara, 2021). Therefore, recent research has started to move beyond moral instruction to examine how children's stories

represent the realities of gender, power, and social systems (Adam & Harper, 2023; Casey et al., 2021; Daly, 2017).

This study seeks to address that gap by examining two contemporary Indonesian children's stories from the *Let's Read Asia* project: *Cepat Kering, Bunga Kemboja!* (Dry Quickly, Frangipani Flower!) (Rahayu & Zefanya, 2021) and *Bukan Halangan* (Not an Obstacle) (Widjati & Wahyu A, 2022). *Let's Read Asia* (https://www.letsreadasia.org/) is a digital library supported by The Asia Foundation that aims to improve children's access to quality reading materials across Asia. Many of its stories are translated into multiple languages and categorized thematically, including the "Mighty Girls" collection, which highlights strong female protagonists. The two stories analyzed here both belong to this collection and feature girl characters who demonstrate resilience, but in very different contexts. Ratih, in *Cepat Kering, Bunga Kemboja!*, comes from a working-class family and takes responsibility for her younger brother while facing financial hardship. Kapisa, in *Bukan Halangan*, comes from a middle-class background and faces the challenge of her first menstruation, supported by her family, teachers, and access to resources.

Although international scholarship has examined how social class shapes children's experiences in literature (Streib et al., 2017; Terrile, 2022), Indonesian research has largely focused on moral education, character building, and gender roles without addressing how socio-economic conditions influence representations of girlhood. The absence of class-based analysis leaves an important gap in understanding how children's literature may reproduce or normalize inequality. This study addresses this gap by analyzing two contemporary stories that feature girl protagonists placed in contrasting class contexts. These texts were selected because both appear in the Mighty Girls thematic collection but present significantly different socio-economic backgrounds, which makes them suitable for comparing how class shapes girlhood narratives.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Children's literature has been widely recognized as a vehicle for transferring social values and shaping young readers' understanding of the world. Politis (2022) asserts that narratives for children are never neutral; they are infused with ideologies

designed to teach both cultural values and moral frameworks (see also Adam & Harper, 2023; Hill & Jacobs, 2020). Similarly, in the Indonesian context, Setiyawan & Lestari (2020) emphasize that children's books operate as ideological texts that subtly instruct children on how to behave, think, and perceive others (see also Hakim, 2020; Nugraheni & Ristiyani, 2023; Parlindungan et al., 2024). This ideological nature makes children's literature an important site for examining how ideas about gender and class are constructed. In numerous contexts, female characters are depicted as embodiments of virtue and resilience, reinforcing dominant cultural beliefs about femininity (Diekman & Murnen, 2004; Kladaki & Mastrothanasis, 2022; Pownall & Heflick, 2023).

Recent scholarship has expanded these discussions by examining how social factors such as gender, age, and class intersect in shaping portrayals of girlhood (Forest et al., 2015; Gunn & Bennett, 2023; Streib et al., 2017; Vickery & Rodríguez, 2021). Intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw (1989, 1991), explains that social identities overlap and produce different experiences of inequality. Utilizing this framework in children's literature, girlhood cannot be comprehended exclusively through the lens of gender (Adam, 2021; Adam & Harper, 2023; Indriyani, 2024). Socioeconomic status and age play equally significant roles in shaping the moral expectations placed on girls. These dimensions influence how girl characters are valued, the type of challenges they encounter, and the resources they can access to overcome them. In numerous narratives, socioeconomic status influences the depiction of girlhood as either a realm of development and empowerment or one of adversity and sacrifice.

Resilience frequently appears as a central theme in global children's literature, which reflects a universal narrative goal to inspire children to achieve their full potential through mental strength and perseverance (Peterson et al., 2023). However, Terrile (2022) found that narratives often emphasize personal perseverance while neglecting the structural factors that create hardship. In this case, stories about poverty or struggle tend to romanticize suffering by celebrating children's endurance rather than questioning the social conditions that produce it (see also Hardstaff, 2019; Sergeev, 2025). This "moralization of resilience" is especially visible in depictions of working-class girls, who are frequently shown as noble for their sacrifices.

Responding to this limitation, scholars have begun to call for a broader, more socially responsible function of children's literature as not only a tool for moral

instruction but also a space to allow social reflection (Adam, 2021; Peterson et al., 2023). Gunn & Bennett (2023) emphasizes that stories can become an effective medium to cultivate social awareness and empathy when they represent diverse social realities rather than merely idealized norms. In her view, literature should invite young readers to question why inequality exists and how kindness and resilience may take different forms depending on one's circumstances. This shift suggests a movement from moral conformity toward critical engagement, positioning stories as mirrors of everyday life rather than moral textbooks. Such a perspective is essential in a country like Indonesia, where economic disparities shape access to education, digital literacy, and even reading materials. Similarly, Simpson & Cremin (2022) warn that when empowerment narratives are detached from class realities, they risk presenting resilience as a universal trait, masking inequalities behind the language of strength.

These studies collectively uncover two significant patterns. First, children's literature, both globally and in Indonesia, functions as a moral and ideological tool. Second, while gender has been widely studied, class remains an underexplored but crucial element in understanding how girlhood is shaped. Digital initiatives like *Let's Read Asia* have recently transformed the landscape of children's publishing in Indonesia. Supported by The Asia Foundation, *Let's Read Asia* distributes open-access stories across languages and themes and claims to promote narratives of strong female characters, for example, through its *Mighty Girls* collection. Although this initiative aims to reform reading culture and promote empowerment, few studies have critically examined how such digital projects frame class and privilege. Initiatives such as *Let's Read Asia,* in their efforts to promote inclusivity, have not fully addressed the intersection of gender and class in children's stories. This study builds upon these insights by comparing two stories from the *Mighty Girls* collection to explore how class differences produce contrasting portrayals of resilience and what these depictions reveal about the normalization of inequality in Indonesian children's literature.

METHOD

To explore how contrasting social contexts shape the representation of girlhood and resilience, this study employs a qualitative textual analysis of two stories from the *Let's Read Asia* collection: *Cepat Kering, Bunga Kemboja!* and *Bukan Halangan.*

Qualitative textual analysis is appropriate for this study because it focuses on how meaning is constructed through language, from lexical to syntactical levels, narrative structures, and character behaviors in literary texts (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the meaning investigated is the representation of young females' experiences of resilience within different socio-economic contexts. This approach allows the researcher to interpret how social realities, such as class and gender, are represented in children's stories.

This study applies a descriptive-interpretive design. The analysis describes the textual elements of the two stories and interprets how they communicate ideas about the relationship between resilience and social background. The goal is not to generalize findings but to uncover how different social conditions are reflected and reproduced through the narratives. As the primary data sources are in the form of digital picture books, both texts combine verbal narration and visual illustration. While the analysis focuses primarily on the textual elements, visual details are considered when they support or clarify the representation of girlhood and resilience. However, the study does not conduct a full multimodal visual analysis because it aims to examine socio-economic themes as constructed through narrative.

The research followed several stages. First, the researcher selected the data and reviewed the stories. The two stories were read several times to identify important scenes, dialogues, and descriptions that illustrate the girls' actions, emotions, and relationships. Second, key narrative elements were identified and categorized into themes. Passages related to responsibility, sacrifice, support, and empowerment were coded and grouped into broader thematic categories. Notes were taken on the settings and secondary characters to see how they affect the girl's resilience. Third, these themes were interpreted using intersectional and ideological frameworks from children's literature studies.

The analysis was conducted inductively, which means that the themes emerged from the texts rather than being predetermined. The data were analyzed using qualitative content and thematic interpretation. Each story was examined to find how resilience is expressed through the protagonists' behavior and speech. This analysis was guided by intersectional theory, which views gender, class, and age as interrelated factors that shape identity (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Gunn & Bennett, 2023). Finally, the

findings were compared and discussed in relation to previous research to highlight both similarities and new insights. This stage revealed differences between the working-class and middle-class contexts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings discussed in this section draw from a close reading of the two stories *Cepat Kering, Bunga Kemboja!* and *Bukan Halangan* to reveal how socio-economic background shapes the portrayal of girlhood and resilience. Each story presents a distinct form of strength: one forged through hardship, the other cultivated through support and privilege. The discussion frames these textual observations within the existing body of literature on gender and class in literary works. Interpretation of language, narrative structures, and character behaviors in the stories reveals how literature both mirrors and constructs children's understanding of social differences. By combining descriptive analysis with theoretical reflection, this section demonstrates how children's stories can simultaneously promote moral ideals and reproduce social inequalities.

Findings

The analysis of *Cepat Kering, Bunga Kemboja!,* and *Bukan Halangan* reveals that both stories depict girl protagonists who demonstrate resilience, yet their circumstances and motivations differ significantly. In *Cepat Kering, Bunga Kemboja!*, Ratih's experience reflects resilience developed through economic hardship. On the other hand, Kapisa, the girl protagonist in *Bukan Halangan*, demonstrates how resilience emerges from a supportive, privileged environment.

Ratih's family is portrayed as a modest working-class household that relies on daily labor and frugal living. Her father leaves for work every day, while Ratih stays home to look after her younger brother, Janu. There is no mention of a mother figure, suggesting that Ratih takes on adult responsibilities at an early age. Their economic limitation is implied through small details; for example, Ratih searching her pockets for money, realizing an ice cream is too expensive, and deciding to collect and sell frangipani flowers to the incense factory. These glimpses reveal a family that struggles to make ends meet while maintaining affection and mutual care.

Ratih's character shows early maturity, a strong sense of responsibility, and willingness to sacrifice. One scene highlights this when she prioritizes her younger brother's needs despite the limited money she earned from selling Frangipani flowers. Ratih chose to give him the treat instead of keeping it for herself. Her statement, *"Tak cukup uangnya. Ini untuk Janu saja."* (There's not enough money. This gift is for Janu only.) (Rahayu & Zefanya, 2021, p. 22) illustrates how she has learned to manage scarcity and put others' needs above her own.

Ratih is also depicted as resourceful and able to find solutions during difficult situations. When she learns that frangipani flowers can be sold for money, she immediately turns this information into an opportunity to help her brother. She said to Janu, *"Janu, ayo kita cari kemboja! Nanti kita beli es krim, ya!"* (Janu, let's collect Frangipani flowers. We will buy ice cream later, okay?) (Rahayu & Zefanya, 2021, p. 8). Conditions beyond her control repeatedly challenge her efforts, yet she persists instead of giving up. This pattern shows that Ratih's resilience and persistence emerge from having to navigate scarcity rather than from choice or encouragement.

Meanwhile, in *Bukan Halangan*, Kapisa's family is portrayed as a well-educated, middle-class household with access to comfort, guidance, and modern resources. Her environment reflects stability and support: her mother orders nutritious meals such as spinach and empal meat dishes, reminds her to take vitamins, and later calls to guide her through stretching exercises to relieve pain. The presence of a teacher who understands her situation, a brother who assists her with practical care, and a home equipped with internet access and medical supplies further illustrate the family's social position. Their lifestyle (e.g. balanced diet, digital literacy, and open communication) indicates that they prioritize health, education, and emotional well-being as Kapisa grows up. Unlike families that struggle for basic needs, hers can focus on self-care and growth. This portrayal situates Kapisa within an urban, resource-rich environment that allows her to experience adolescence with comfort and dignity, highlighting how privilege operates subtly through everyday acts of care and convenience.

Her physical and emotional adaptation to menstruation, a stage that marks her transition from childhood to early adolescence, reflects Kapisa's challenges. The story opens with scenes of discomfort and hesitation. She admits, *"Bergerak sambil memakai pembalut benar-benar tidak nyaman"* (Moving while wearing pads is very

uncomfortable), expressing a blend of confusion and embarrassment that many girls face when encountering menstruation for the first time. This moment is significant because it normalizes a private, often stigmatized experience within a supportive environment. Rather than isolating her, the narrative shows how her surroundings (e.g. family, school, and peers) collectively provide reassurance and acceptance. The story subtly challenges cultural taboos surrounding menstruation by depicting it as a manageable and natural experience rather than a source of shame.

As the narrative develops, Kapisa's confidence grows through the warmth and attentiveness of her family and community. Her mother plays a nurturing role, preparing nutritious meals such as spinach and empal meat to help restore her strength. Her teacher allows her to take rest during dance practice, showing sensitivity to her physical needs. Her brother also participates in this circle of care, offering moral support with the words, *"Semangat, Kapisa! Kamu pasti bisa."* (Let's go, Kapisa! You can do it.) These gestures collectively demonstrate that Kapisa's resilience does not arise from hardship or deprivation but from the emotional safety and understanding that surround her. In addition, Kapisa takes initiative by using digital tools to expand her knowledge: *"Kapisa membuka internet. Dia ingin tahu lebih banyak tentang haid."* (Kapisa opened the internet. She wanted to learn more about menstruation.) This act of self-directed learning marks her as a confident and resourceful learner, supported by access to technology, a privilege not all children share. Together, these elements illustrate that her ability to cope with change and uncertainty is shaped by her socio-economic context, where education, health, and digital literacy are within reach.

The findings indicate that both Ratih and Kapisa are represented as strong, capable girls, but their forms of strength differ. Self-sacrifice and economic struggle shape Ratih's resilience, while comfort, care, and education support Kapisa's. This contrast reflects how social class mediates the way resilience and girlhood are constructed in children's literature. In addition to narrative content, the visual and stylistic elements of the two stories also communicate class difference. In *Cepat Kering, Bunga Kemboja!* (*Dry Quickly, Frangipani Flower!*), the illustrations use muted colors and rural backdrops (e.g. small wooden houses, worn sandals, and uneven paths) to reflect modest living conditions. Ratih and Janu's clothing is plain, reinforcing their connection to everyday working-class life. By contrast, *Bukan Halangan* (*Not an*

Obstacle) features clean domestic interiors, tidy school uniforms, and bright color palettes that signify safety and modernity. Kapisa's world is visually ordered and resource-rich, suggesting comfort and stability. Through these artistic contrasts, the stories subtly frame inequality not only through plot but also through imagery. Such visual cues strengthen the ideological divide between scarcity and abundance, reminding readers that material settings shape the moral and emotional tone of children's experiences.

Discussion

The comparison between Ratih and Kapisa demonstrates how children's literature mirrors social structures that influence young girls' lives. Ratih's narrative reflects what Terrile (2022) identifies as a 'privileged view' of home and class that normalises working-class hardship without fully interrogating its conditions. In this framing, poverty becomes a backdrop for moral growth rather than a structural reality. The repeated portrayal of sacrifice in Ratih's story turns economic struggle into a lesson about virtue, aligning with the observation in recent Indonesian scholarship that children's stories often glorify patience and resilience but without interrogating the social elements that shape those attitudes (Indriyani, 2024). Ratih's resilience, in this case, is admirable but also normalized. Her struggles are seen as a part that defines her strength.

In contrast, Kapisa's story shows how social and economic advantages shape ideas about empowerment. Her family has enough resources, information, and care to help her deal with problems calmly and confidently. This situation builds what can be called 'privileged resilience,' referring to strength that grows with help and support, not through hardship alone. Studies show that children from middle-class families are often described as clever and independent because they already have access to education, guidance, and social connections that help them succeed (Sullivan, 2001). Kapisa's experience reflects how girls are celebrated for confidence and success, but little attention is paid to the class privilege that makes such success possible. As Terrile (2022) points out, many picture books present a comfortable, middle-class world as normal, which can hide the real challenges faced by poorer children. When children's stories, and even the adults who guide their reading, ignore these differences, they risk

teaching that inequality is natural instead of something that needs to change (Streib et al., 2017).

Placing both narratives side by side reveals a broader cultural pattern. *Let's Read Asia* presents both characters under the same "Mighty Girls" theme, suggesting equality in resilience. However, by doing so, the collection risks erasing the class-based inequalities that shape each girl's experience. This echoes Adam's (2021) and Crenshaw's (1989) critique that empowerment narratives often assume universal accessibility, masking structural barriers behind stories of individual strength.

Despite this risk, these stories also offer pedagogical potential. As Adam & Harper (2023) and Peterson et al. (2023) argue, children's literature can serve as a medium for developing social awareness when accompanied by critical discussion. Teachers can use stories like Ratih's and Kapisa's to encourage students to think critically about fairness, privilege, and access. Asking kids why Ratih has to give up something or why Kapisa gets more help makes them think about bigger social problems. In this way, literature can serve a higher purpose by moving beyond moral education toward fostering empathy and understanding of difference (Monoyiou & Symeonidou, 2016; Salih, 2023).

This study therefore provides two major insights. First, the portrayal of resilience in Indonesian children's literature is classed: it is formed either through necessity or through privilege. Second, digital platforms like *Let's Read Asia* have the capacity to shape children's social imagination. By framing both working-class and middle-class girls as equally strong without acknowledging inequality, they unintentionally normalize socio-economic disparity. However, with critical mediation in educational contexts, these same stories can help children recognize and question inequality rather than accept it as natural.

At a broader level, these patterns also reveal how digital initiatives such as *Let's Read Asia* frame the idea of empowerment. By grouping diverse stories under universal themes like "Mighty Girls," the platform promotes inclusivity but also risks flattening cultural and class distinctions. The project's goal of providing accessible reading materials across Asia reflects a genuine commitment to literacy equity. Nevertheless, its emphasis on motivational and success-oriented narratives can unintentionally standardize what "strength" means for girls from different social backgrounds. While

Ratih's and Kapisa's stories both encourage courage and confidence, the platform's curatorial design tends to equalize their experiences, overlooking the structural disparities that shape them. A critical reading of these texts therefore suggests that they require localized interpretation, where teachers and parents guide children to see empowerment not as a uniform ideal but as something rooted in real, diverse life conditions.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusion

This study concludes that socio-economic background has a major influence on how girlhood and resilience are represented in Indonesian children's literature. Through close reading of *Cepat Kering, Bunga Kemboja!* and *Bukan Halangan*, the analysis reveals that each narrative constructs different pathways of resilience: one defined by necessity and self-sacrifice, and the other nurtured through privilege and support. Ratih's experience reflects a form of resilience as survival and moral duty shaped by scarcity, while Kapisa's experience illustrates resilience that grows within a supportive and privileged environment. Although both characters are portrayed as "mighty girls," their stories demonstrate that empowerment is unevenly distributed across social classes and closely tied to material conditions.

This study primarily contributes by demonstrating that we cannot understand gendered representations of strength in Indonesian children's stories without considering their class context. By integrating intersectional thinking with textual analysis, this research highlights how children's literature can reflect and sometimes normalize socio-economic inequality. Acknowledging this dynamic helps broaden current discussions about girlhood and provides a clearer understanding of how literary texts shape children's views about fairness, responsibility, and social difference.

Suggestions

Based on these findings, several practical and academic recommendations can be proposed. First, teachers and educators are encouraged to use children's stories such as *Cepat Kering, Bunga Kemboja!,* and *Bukan Halangan* to guide discussions about empathy, fairness, and the different circumstances that shape children's lives. Classroom activities may include asking students to reflect on why the two girls face

challenges differently and how socio-economic background influences their choices. Such activities can help develop critical awareness rather than simple moral lessons.

Second, digital platforms such as *Let's Read Asia* may consider expanding their thematic collections by including stories that more directly acknowledge social diversity and structural inequality. Curating a wider range of class experiences will allow young readers to understand that strength emerges from different life situations and is shaped by both opportunities and constraints. Third, future researchers may extend this study by examining a larger corpus of children's stories or by including reader-response data to explore how children interpret these representations. Including children's perspectives would make it possible to determine whether narratives of resilience reinforce or challenge existing ideas about class and gender.

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