

Normative Attitudes: A Convention in Two Indonesian Children's Films

Nia Nafisah¹, Joesana Tjahjani²
{n_nafisah@upi.edu, tjahjani.joesana@ui.ac.id}

¹ English Language and Literature Study Program, Faculty of Language and Literature Education, Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia

² Literature Department, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia

Abstract This article offers a critical reading of normative attitudes presented in two Indonesian children's films, *Serdadu Kumbang* (2008) and *Langit Biru* (2012). As a genre, children's film aims to promote values of family and immediate community which are inevitably social and culturally constructed. Nevertheless, little is known about how this feature is constructed in Indonesian context. Employing film genre analysis and disciplinary power theory from Foucault (1995), this study finds that the two films expose normative attitudes through the cinematic representations of child characters and their social interactions. In the forms of respectful and submissive characters, they indicate culturally specific attitudes in these two films. Further analysis reveals strong disciplinary power in the power relations between the protagonists and the adult characters. However, the normative attitudes dissuade the child characters from being independent and critical in many situations. As such, this construction implies the adult power and children's position in Indonesian society. The adults dominate children by imposing their wishes to have 'good children' while denying the children's capacity to think and act for themselves.

Keywords: *children's position, cultural specific, genre analysis, Indonesian children's film, normative attitudes,*

1. Introduction

Despite its small number in Indonesian film industry, children's film exists and is produced from time to time. Following a blockbuster *Petualangan Sherina* (1999), to date more than 68 children's films have been made since the Reformation or Post Soeharto era. This number is twice as much as the number of children's films made from Indonesia's Independence 1945 to 1998. It also implies a growing interest towards children both as subjects of their own and as audience. With this specific audience in mind, it is not surprising that the filmmakers aim for pedagogic and entertaining functions with the ideas of what children ought to see. In consequence, while they get considerable attention in the field of education (for example, [1], [2], and [3]), Indonesian children's films are overlooked by film criticism. This unfavorable situation is regrettable since children's films, as a matter of fact, can disclose children's position and voice in Indonesian society.

Children's film, like children's literature, therefore, relay values considered important so that children can learn and benefit when they grow up. Ref [4] asserts that children's film has five conventions which are likely universally present. First of all, children's film is the reaffirmation of family, kinship and community. Many films for children endorse family and school as socializing apparatuses so that they maintain the dominant ideology. Second, children's film foregrounds child, adolescent and teenage figures and their experiences with 'childlike' attributes such as innocence, goodness, and vulnerability. Third, it excludes eventual defeat of disruptive social elements, in which individuals or groups that violate social codes will be punished morally. Fourth, it minimizes 'adult' representation elements such as violence, sex, or pessimism which are thought to potentially upset children viewers. Finally, children's film usually ends with an emotionally uplifting, morally unambiguous and supportive of the social status quo. Nevertheless, the conventions are not prescriptive as some may not be present or subverted. Since society is dynamic, changing attitudes toward childhood affect how each convention is undertaken.

The pedagogic continuum in children's films confirms Foucault's theory on disciplinary power. Foucault argues that power is exercised in such a way that it is a form of governmentality or the ways of control which are not always repressive. Power is productive as it is reproduced by self-discipline because it works like a surveillance [5]. One always feels like being monitored in a subtle way so that s/he adjusts his/her behaviors according to the society's expectation. Many studies on power in children's literature are in fact a form of disciplinary to comply status quo (for example [6], [7], and [8]), especially in the characters' depiction in the institutions of family and community.

Much research on children's film emphasizes the explicit and implicit ideology which shapes the film. Some countries like post-Soviet Russia makes use of children's films, which are mostly adaptations from folklores and literature, to extend national ideology [9], as also the case which Noel Brown notices in some India, China, and some European countries [4]. Studies by [10], [11], and [12] on American films, especially those produced by Disney and Pixar, have stronghold of middle-class white supremacy; while [13] criticizes the objectification of girl characters in most Hollywood girl films in the last decade of twentieth century. The handful research on Indonesian children's film finds that the film is often a vehicle to convey patriarchal ideology [14] or nationalism and its complexities ([15], [16], and [17]). These studies point out the cultural contexts in which each was undertaken as well as concerns on how ideological imposition maintains status quo, which may deny alternative views of the world.

Nevertheless, little is known in what ways the family and community's values are reaffirmed in Indonesian children's films. Family and community are the closest interaction a child experiences in life, so it follows that these institutions shape one's attitude and worldview. Analysis of narrative convention of a children's film is necessary to show how the child characters navigate their roles in institutions of family and community. Departing from these concerns, this article argues for critical reading on this first convention of children's films as they are presented in two Indonesian children's films, *Laskar Pelangi* [18] and *Langit Biru* [19]. Both films can be taken as representative of Indonesian society, which are rural- and urban-based societies. Taking a constructivist approach which emphasizes social construct, this study employed film genre analysis with emphasis on iconology and is framed within Foucault's theory of disciplinary power.

2. Research Method

The corpus of this research is two Indonesian children's films, *Laskar Pelangi* and *Langit Biru*, henceforth *LP* and *LB*. *LP* tells a story of ten rural children who struggle to get education in spite of their limited economic and social background. Lintang, who is a local genius from a fisherman family, is the main character as the story focuses on his effort to attend school more than the other children. On the other hand, *LB* is a story of Biru, a girl who navigates her life between private and school interaction in her puberty time. Unlike Lintang, Biru comes from an upper-middle class urban family which does not seem to have problem with access to education. Similar to genre of children's film, both films deal with child characters' socialization of family and community values.

As a text, film can be analyzed from its narrative and cinematography aspects. Employing a structuralism approach, a film is broken down into sequences to look at the patterns emerged [20]. According to [20], a film genre is recognized from its similar plot patterns and thematic implications, characteristic of film techniques, and iconography. A film genre analysis, thus identifies the features of a film to see how it fits into a particular genre. A discussion on some or all the features could point any innovation or modification which in turns reveal the culturally specific context of the film.

Instead of iconography, Joseph Zornado takes the genre analysis further by borrowing the term iconology. Iconology "signifies an approach to cultural and textual analysis that takes as its premises the belief that ideology manifests as social practice, and that culture and cultural forms –a culture's icons –tell a story" [21], p.3. As such, iconology in film genre analysis emphasizes not only the use of icons but also as understood in a particular culture, but also the how they are inscribed and practiced in that society. Furthermore, iconology represents the world as it really is because of familiar depictions of stories, while it actually it carries significant ideological function. Thus, the analysis of both films relies on the films' iconology in the discussion of the reaffirmation of family and community's values.

3. Results And Discussion

It is naturally believed that children should learn manners and are expected to obey parents or people in authority. According to [22], adults govern children based on their assumptions and beliefs about childhood, one of which is the ever popular theories from Locke and Rousseau. Both philosophers argue for the capacity of children to learn and think as well as adults' responsibility to direct them towards adopting values and morality. Moreover, in accordance to Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, parents or teachers' care, support, and guidance are some ways of enforcing the values and morality expected from children.

All the protagonists in both films show respects towards adults almost similarly which can be taken as culturally specific. Although Lintang in *LP* and Biru in *LB* are depicted to be outspoken, they know the limit of their power in the interaction with parents and teachers. Lintang is a thoughtful and clever child, so he is worried that his father goes fishing without a company:

Lintang : *Ayah akan melaut lagi hari ini? Sendirian?* (Are you going to fish again today, Dad? Alone?)

Ayah : *(busily collecting his fishing equipment)*

Lintang : *Aku tahu angin sedang bagus, Yah* (I know the wind is good today, Dad).

Ayah : *Sudah. Istirahatlah dulu. Biar besok tidak terlambat* (Never mind. Just take a rest so that you won't be late tomorrow).
(Riza, 2008, 01:36:20-01:36:56).

It can be seen that Lintang appeals his wish by saying he understands that a good wind is important, but the intention is that he does not want his father to leave. Father dismisses Lintang's request as unnecessary. The visual depiction of this scene shows Lintang in medium shot, shut his mouth tightly as if repressing his frustration, while watching from a distance his father busily getting his fishing equipment. Lintang's attitude is expected since as a child he knows that he cannot force his father to heed him. Respect for parents is shown by following a father's order and wish, even though it may be against the child's wish.

Meanwhile, despite the display of affection, Biru in LB is always cautious when communicating with her father. Along with her requests, for instance asking for a camcorder, she has body language that suggests she is a little bit embarrassed because she intrudes Daniel's, her father, time. Biru stands on the end of the room, about two or three meters away from her father when she makes the request, and she only moves closer after her father sounds positive about it (LB, 2012, 00:26:39-00:27:32). Biru also chooses her words carefully so that she does not sound demanding ("*Yaa... kalau gak boleh gak apa-apa sih* (Yeah... if you mind, then it's okay)") and is ready to leave before her father pursues why she wants to borrow his camera. Even though LB tries to portray the close relationship between the father and the child, it does not completely shake off the acceptable norm of distance between them.

Those two instances of respect are culturally specific iconology. The cultural icon presented is the manner and distance between children and parents to maintain respect. In the interaction between parents and children, both protagonists understand the hierarchical position of parents and children. It is good manner to not bother parents more than necessary. It is also good manner for children not to force their wish. Both protagonists negotiate their wish by indirectly expressing what they want. Moreover, respect is shown by maintaining distance of interaction. Although [23] believes that Indonesians have a group bonding which enables the people to have a close proximity in a group of mostly peers (p. 167), it is different where hierarchy is expected like in the institution of family. The children retain an acceptable distance in which they will not move until the parents indicate it. Even Biru receives hugs when she sees that her father expects it. The norm is applicable both in rural and urban, traditional and modern families, which indicates self-discipline on the children's part.

Entailing in the form of respect is the act of submission. In scene after Biru's presentation, Biru gets advice from Daniel, his father. Biru's presentation is a backfire. She intends it to show Bruno the bully's soft side, but Bruno feels ashamed about it and so he is absent from school. Daniel verbally tells Biru that she is wrong to reveals one's private life without the person's consent. By doing so, Daniel governs Biru on what it is to be a good child. The advice is good and correct so that there is no other choice than taking it. The subsequent scene shows that on learning Bruno's absence, Biru and her friends apologize to Bruno's mother for making him uncomfortable. In almost similar fashion, Pak Harfan and Bu Mus, the teachers in LP, inspire the children to do well. From pedagogic perspective, both teachers display a student-centered approach, which facilitates learning such as by appreciating the children's efforts to learn, such as giving words of encouragements, and by being there for them. Consequently, the children put trust in them and follow the teachers' wish and direction without fail. They are shown to be able to carry out assignments given to them, ranging from class exercises to representing the school in local competitions, successfully. Displaying submissive children in relations to parents and teachers is also cultural icon, which is often

portrayed in school textbooks or even advertisements. Furthermore, the cases show the child characters have self-discipline and submit to the adult's power without they are forced to do so.

The respecting and submitting to adults' wish appear frequently as the accepted norms in LP and LB. As Foucault says, "combining hierarchical surveillance with normalizing judgment, constituting the individual as effect and object of power, as effect of object of knowledge" (p. 192), the form of discipline materializes through the adult characters' care and guidance. Discipline is productive because it demands the child characters' active participation and efforts. More specifically, the father figure in LB exercises his disciplinary technique through checking and guiding his daughter in more than one scenes. Despite different social backgrounds, the protagonists of both films have similar manner and understanding of how to act as good children. As a result, the power relation between the child character and adult character is preserved, in which the dominant power exercise is obviously the adult characters. In other words, if the tenet of children's fiction is the examination of power position [24], then these two films affirms the existing order of power.

In terms of affirmation to family and community values, this finding also reveal the cultural context of children's film genre. Unlike the protagonists in some similar themes Hollywood movies like *A Little Princess* (1995), *Matilda* (1996), or the *Harry Potter* series (2001-2011), LP and LB's protagonists are in harmony in the interaction with their families and teachers. Parents and teachers are often subject of ridicules or incompetence to explore children's agency and power in children's fiction (such as [6] and [7]), but no such figures of authority can be found in LP and LB. They are wise and competent so that the children are guided well. Albeit the portrayal of approachable and cool figures of power, this finding supports [16] who argues the figure of power –father and teachers – is necessary to ensure children as 'trainee citizens.' They are constructed to be good citizens with adult values, as in this case respect and submission towards figures of authority.

However, this construction is not without risks. The protagonists in both films are ideal children to certain degree. Even though Lintang is poor, he is very smart, diligent, and responsible. He is mature for his age so that he is able to manage most of difficult situation in his life calmly, including when his father is missing on the sea. He writes a letter to Bu Mus, telling her that he has to drop out school because he has to take care of his family. On the other hand, Biru is economically secured as she is a daughter of a pilot in a national airlines. She is a tomboyish girl who is smart, cheerful, and loyal. Although sometimes Biru is quick-tempered, she is sincere. When she makes mistakes, she has good intention to correct them accordingly. First, Biru apologizes to her father after realizing she disobeys her father's rule; second, she intends to apologize to Bruno, whom she has made uncomfortable because of her group's exposure of his personal life in public. Most importantly, the children behave in good manner as expected by the society. This characterization uncovers the wish of adults about children. It relays the society's expectation about good children, which is to be cheerful, brave, diligent, and responsible. It does not give much room for weakness, such as quick-tempered or impatient, because weak traits are either rarely shown or quickly checked by adults. This characterization also show the text's position about children: they are the object of adult's desire. Consequently, there is little understanding on the nature of children, while children are subjects whose agency should be appreciated.

In addition, the submissive construction implies uncritical characters. In moments of crisis or conflicts, the child characters are able to overcome the problems quite smoothly, if not easily. Lintang, for example, always has an answer to his friends' problems so that they manage to carry out school tasks' easily. So does Biru as she overcomes both her problems and her friends' problems because of either her own understanding or through her father's

help. The ease the characters have may end the story well where everyone is happy just like the genre entails. The conflicts in narrative usually serves as means to show the character's growth, even in children's film. Unfortunately, LP and LB show quick-paced crisis one over another without giving much opportunity for their protagonists to reflect from their experiences. The feeling and thought of children after each crisis is depicted too short compares to the succession of crises. Moreover, some solutions are either hinted by adults or solved altogether by adult, like the episode of Biru's first period in which father is ready with all the answers. As such, this lack of depth in solving crisis suggests false confidence and false independence. Children in both films are active in their actions, but their actions are guided directly and indirectly by the adults [25].

4. Conclusion

This paper argues that normative attitudes is part of reaffirmation of family and community values in two Indonesian children's films, *Laskar Pelangi* and *Langit Biru*. More specifically, the normative attitudes are constructed in forms of respect for and submission to parents and teachers as figures of authority. In line with the proposition that children's fiction is the site for examination of power position, the normative attitudes maintains the affirmation of existing order of power, in which adult dominates children. In this realm, children are disciplined to be good children through the care and support of the respected and wise adults. Underlying this construction is adult power and children's position in Indonesian society. The child characterization is the adult's desire of what constitute good children. In so doing, it reveals that children's position is the object of adult desire. Furthermore, this construction implies children are not in the position to take part in social life as they are passive agents although actively doing things in the story. Therefore, the findings of this study imply two things. First, as children's fiction is pedagogic in nature, the aspect is strongly shown in the two films through the respect for and submission to adult authority. Indonesian children's films place children as adults-to-be who should maintain the norms unconditionally. Second, in regards to concern that children should be respected as human being, the construction needs a more critical evaluation. The construction does not give much consideration for children to be able to overcome the challenges more independently. Despite the wish to present children models of good behavior and manner as part of Indonesian culture, it is similarly important to impart notion that children have opportunities to use their capacity to think and act on their own without depending too much on adult's thorough supervision. Children's fiction, including film, should empower children although it is difficult in real life as adults are not always present to guide them. Therefore, it is high time to start taking Indonesian children's film, and Indonesian children's fiction in general, seriously to decide what position children have in Indonesian society.

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