

From Tradition to Empowerment: Gender Representation in the Film *Gadis Kretek* Through Barthes' Semiotic Approach

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ABSTRACT

*This research is motivated by the important role of film as a mass media in reflecting and shaping social perceptions of gender, especially in challenging and criticizing gender inequality that still exists in society. This study aims to analyze the representation of gender equality in the film *Gadis Kretek* using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. The semiotic approach is used to analyze visual, connotative, and mythological signs in the film, while feminist film theory is used to explore gender representation in the existing patriarchal context. The results of the study show that although the film presents empowered and independent female characters, there are still limitations inherent in the traditional role of women in society. This study also reveals that the film *Gadis Kretek* plays an important role in building social dialogue on gender equality, influencing public perception, and providing a new perspective in the study of feminism in Indonesian cinema.*

Keywords: Feminist Film Theory, *Gadis Kretek* Film, Representation of Gender Equality, Roland Barthes' Semiotics, Semiotic Analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

The topic of gender representation in media presentations, especially in film media, has become an important discourse field in the study of feminism and popular culture, including in Indonesia. Film in its existence in society, not only plays a role as a means of entertainment, but also becomes a reflective medium that records and shapes social reality, including issues regarding the dynamics of gender inequality. One of the films that has received public and academic attention is *Gadis Kretek* (2023). This film not only offers a historical narrative but also opens space for critical reading of the role and agency of women during patriarchal structures. This film tells the story of the main character named Dasiyah, who has character is depicted as a strong and independent individual, and as a representation of the hope for social transformation towards a more gender-equitable society.

Film as a visual-audio media has a strong ability to convey messages in depth. Not only entertainment, but film is also a means of cultural expression that can shape and reproduce social values (Askurifai, 2003; Mudjiono, 2011). Film is considered an effective form of mass communication because it has high visual appeal, making it easily accepted by various groups of society. In fact, watching films can influence an individual's social perception of an issue, including perceptions of the role and position of women (Kewilaa, 2024).

In the Indonesian context, cinema has great power in strengthening or challenging social constructions of women, depending on how female narratives and characters are presented within

the framework of local culture (Andriani, 2025). Research on the impact of film on social perception shows that media can shape or strengthen gender stereotypes. The visualization of women's roles in films not only represents reality, but also creates a structure of social knowledge that shapes the public's perspective on women's roles (Gunadi & Pribadi, 2022).

Meanwhile, women's involvement in film production opens space for alternative perspectives that challenge dominant masculine narratives. The representation of women in films is not only the result of dominant ideology but can also be the result of gender-conscious creative interventions, depending on the perspective used and the socio-cultural context that surrounds the process of production and consumption of meaning (Johnston, 2025).

In Indonesia, the social construction of women has historically been heavily influenced by the state ideology known as State Ibuism, namely a patriarchal understanding that positions women in a domestic framework as loyal, productive, and devoted wives and mothers to the state. In the Indonesian context, the narrative of "women's empowerment" is often mobilized to support the country's development agenda without dismantling the existing structures of gender inequality. This discourse tends to reduce women to objects of pseudo-participation in development, which ultimately normalizes domestic roles and limits women's agency in the public sphere (Hyunanda et al., 2021).

Gender representation in media cannot be separated from how sexual and gender identities are articulated in the contemporary media landscape. Current media shape experiences of gender and sexuality through complex representational practices, which not only reflect but can also challenge prevailing social norms (Scarcelli et al., 2021). Therefore, it is important to conduct a study on how contemporary Indonesian films frame the role of women, both as active subjects and passive objects in socio-cultural narratives.

The use of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory in this study provides a deep analytical dimension. Barthes (White, 2012) divides the meaning of signs into three layers: denotation (literal meaning), connotation (implied meaning), and myth (ideology attached to the meaning). Through this approach, symbols in the film such as clothing, gestures, domestic space, and women's economic activities can be read as ideological representations that shape gender discourse.

2. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach that aims to explore and understand gender representation in the Gadis Kretek film series. The focus of this study is the first episode which contains several key scenes that depict complex gender dynamics. The selection of this first episode was based on the presence of signs related to gender issues, which allows researchers to explore how the film conveys messages and perspectives on gender equality.

The focus of observation was on five main scenes in the first episode of the Gadis Kretek series. These five scenes were chosen because they are considered to represent significant gender issues in the context of the film where the scenes depict interactions between female and male characters, and how gender plays a role in shaping their social roles. The selection of these scenes

allows for the analysis of visual and narrative symbols that contain messages about gender and the role of women in a male-dominated world.

Roland Barthes' semiotic theory is used in this study as the main analytical framework in the form of three layers of meaning in a sign: denotation, connotation, and myth. In the context of Gadis Kretek, each scene is analyzed through these layers of meaning to understand how gender representation is formed in the film. Through this approach, this study aims to explore how patriarchal myths that depict women as objects in social narratives can be changed, and how women in this film are given space to become active and empowered subjects.

This study follows a critical paradigm, which focuses on how gender representation is shaped by and contributes to society's understanding of social, political, cultural, and economic values. In this case, feminist and semiotic theories are used to critique and challenge gender norms that exist in society to answer questions about how and why gender representation is carried out.

Data collection in this study was carried out through two main sources: primary data and secondary data. Primary data sources were obtained through structured interviews with informants relevant to the research topic, such as academics, semioticians, and women activists. This interview was designed to explore the informants' understanding of the signs in the film, as well as how they responded to gender equality issues that emerged in the story. Secondary data were obtained from literature relevant to the research topic, including scientific articles, books, and other related sources.

In this study, the informants were determined by the following criteria: 1) Academics; 2) Semiotics/gender experts; 3) Film observers/women's activists.

The following is the informant data in this study, as follows:

Narasumber	Keterangan
Irwan Zabonk S.Pd., M.Sn	Film Lecturer
Puput Sri Rahayu S.Kep	Female Activist
Musalmam Firman	Film Activist

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study selects five main scenes from the first episode of Gadis Kretek which are considered to have important messages related to gender representation. Each scene is analyzed using three layers of meaning in Roland Barthes' semiotic theory: denotation, connotation, and myth.

Feminist film theory proposed by Smelik (2007) provides a strong analytical framework for understanding gender representation in film. Messages in films often depict women as objects, which in feminist film theory is called the "male gaze". This is the concept of women in films being depicted through a male perspective. The male gaze makes women both visual

objects and narrative objects. Through the Barthes approach in analyzing five main scenes in the film *Gadis Kretek*, the researcher found that this film challenges existing patriarchal norms. This film depicts women as empowered subjects, not just as objects.

The following descriptions are the results and analysis for each selected scene:



Scene 1/ Picture 1: Dasiyah's Rejection of the Arranged Marriage

In this scene Dasiyah firmly rejects the arranged marriage arranged by her parents. In this scene, the connotation meaning that emerges is that women have the right to reject coercion from others in their lives. Dasiyah's character in rejecting the arranged marriage reflects women's freedom in choosing their path in life and as a symbol of women's empowerment that opposes patriarchal authority in society. Myth in this scene shows that women are independent figures and can drive change. The rejection of the main character Dasiyah in this film invites the audience to question the norms of gender roles that limit women to domestic and traditional roles and encourages changes in patriarchal power in society.

This shows as stated by Smelik (2007) that women can be subjects because women should be able to determine their own path, not as objects whose fate is decided by others. This positioning as a subject illustrates resistance to patriarchal structures that limit women's freedom and is in line with Smelik's view that films should depict women who have control over their lives.



Scene 2/ Picture 2: Dasiyah's Meeting with Soeraja at the Kretek Factory

In this scene, Dasiyah meets Soeraja, a man who recognizes Dasiyah's potential and gives her the opportunity to work at the kretek factory. This scene shows a respectful working relationship between the two in the industrial world.

At the connotation level, this scene shows that women can be given the opportunity to develop in the male-dominated industrial world. The interaction between Dasiyah and Soeraja

implies that women have the right to be seen as equals and have the capacity to compete in the professional world. There is an important connotation here that men do not always have to be the rulers or give orders in professional relationships with women.

The myth built in this scene is that women can be successful in the industrial world without having to depend on the traditional role of women as wives or housewives. This scene shows that the opportunity to develop professionally can be had by both women and men. In other words, women have the same rights as men to pursue a career.

Smelik (2007) emphasizes that feminist films should depict women in more equal relationships and give them space to show their agency in situations that are often dominated by men. In this scene, the interaction between Dasiyah and Soeraja not only shows that women can compete in the professional world, but also challenges the narrative that often positions women as objects or as parties who must depend on men. The myth that is built here is that women can be successful in the industrial world without being trapped in the traditional role of wife or housewife. This scene shows that opportunities for professional development are open to both genders, which is in line with Smelik's theory of women's empowerment in the professional world.



Scene 3/ Picture 2: Dasiyah Enters the Kretek World with Her Own Decision

Dasiyah, with confidence, enters the world of the kretek factory dominated by men, and she is determined to make the best kretek sauce that will bring success. This scene illustrates Dasiyah's determination in pursuing a career in an industry dominated by men.

At the connotation level, this scene shows women's empowerment, where Dasiyah makes an important decision to pursue a career in the kretek industry without relying on male or family influence. This connotation implies that women have the same ability and potential to succeed in a difficult world, and that they have the right to define their own roles in any industry.

The myth that develops from this scene is that women can enter the competitive professional world and gain recognition for their abilities, without having to be trapped in traditional gender roles. This scene promotes the narrative that success in the industrial or business world is not limited by gender.

Smelik (2007) argues that films should depict women as agents who have control over their decisions, rather than being trapped in roles that are already determined by society. This scene implies that women have the right to pursue their dreams, despite the obstacles they face in a male-dominated world.



Scene 4/Picture 4: Dasiyah Demanding Traditional Roles of Women

In this scene, Dasiyah opposes her family who wants her to stay at home and play the role of a housewife. This scene illustrates the pressure on women to continue to play their domestic roles.

At the connotative level, it shows the tension between the expectations of women as individuals and the expectations of families that are bound by societal norms. The connotation of this scene is that the struggle to gain equality often meets resistance from within the family itself.

The myth built in this scene is that although women are often constrained by social and family norms, they still have the right to fight against these pressures and pursue their freedom and ambitions. This scene illustrates that women should not be bound only to domestic roles and can take a more active role in society.

Smelik (2007) explains that feminist films must critique the narrow domestic roles often assigned to women. This scene illustrates that although women are often constrained by family expectations and social norms, they still have the right to pursue their own lives.



Scene 5:/Picture 5: Hope and Struggle

The ending of this episode depicts a woman struggling to achieve her dreams despite the many challenges she faces. This scene shows a tough attitude, not giving up and courage in facing obstacles.

The connotation of this scene is that women always have hope and opportunities to achieve their dreams without having to worry about the opposition in front of them. Women's struggle for gender equality is truly a long and challenging journey, but they must continue to move forward. The connotation reflected in this scene is that despite injustice, women must dare to fight for their ideals.

The myth formed through this scene is that women, even though they are faced with inequality and discrimination, can change their fate if they have strong determination and struggle. This myth raises the narrative of women's empowerment, where their struggle for equality is not only possible, but also necessary to change society's view of gender.

Smelik (2007) states that feminist films should depict women's struggles in achieving their goals despite being faced with inequality and discrimination. This scene depicts the myth of women's empowerment, that even though they are faced with great obstacles, they can still change their fate with determination and strong struggle. This creates a narrative that the struggle for gender equality is not only important but also necessary to change society's view of women's roles. Through this scene, the film shows that women's struggle is not only possible but also essential to achieving greater social change.

Women in Film and Their Impact on Social Perception

One important aspect in the analysis of gender representation is how films such as *Gadis Kretek* play a role in shaping society's social perception of women. This film, with the strong and empowered character of Dasiyah, introduces the representation of women not only as objects but also as subjects who have the rights and abilities to determine their fate. This reflects an important shift in the Indonesian film industry which is starting to be more open to more complex and diverse representations of women. According to Andriani (2025), Indonesian films now show a change in depicting women, from previously being positioned as objects in dominant narratives to active subjects who can play a role in changing existing social structures.

On the other hand, this film also shows the great challenges faced by women in their efforts to achieve gender equality. Although Dasiyah was able to break through patriarchal boundaries and achieve success in the *kretek* industry, she still faced pressure and resistance from her environment, especially in terms of domestic roles and family expectations. This is in line with Kewilaa's study (2024) which highlights how films such as *Gadis Kretek* represent gender injustice that still persists in society, especially in family relationships and social life. This also shows that despite empowerment efforts, the reality of gender inequality persists in many walks of life, including in women's personal and family lives.

Tradition and Modernity

The main theme in *Gadis Kretek* is the tension between tradition and modernity, a theme that often appears in Indonesia. Women must struggle to find their identity in the context of strong cultural traditions, but at the same time must face the changing times that demand equality.

As mentioned by Smelik (2007), feminist films often depict resistance to patriarchal structures rooted in society and how women's roles are often limited by traditional views that consider them as weak subjects or dependent on men.

This tension also reflects how women, like Dasiyah, try to combine traditional values with modern ideals that focus more on equality and empowerment. Here, *Gadis Kretek* successfully depicts that despite strict social limitations, women can still find ways to achieve success and empowerment, although this process is often full of obstacles. Through Dasiyah's character, this film invites the audience to question whether tradition is a barrier or whether tradition can be a force in fighting gender injustice.

Reinterpreting Gender Myths in Indonesian Society

In the myth layer, Barthes argues that signs in films often serve to reinforce or deconstruct existing ideologies. In *Gadis Kretek*, myths related to women's traditional roles are depicted in a touching and critical way. For example, in the scene where Dasiyah refuses an arranged marriage, the film not only shows women who dare to challenge social norms, but also provides a broader message about women's rights to make their own life choices, without being subject to expectations set by family or society. This is in line with Barthes' theory of how media and film can produce or change social myths, which in this case criticizes the myth that women only have domestic roles and should not make major decisions in their lives.

Gender myths that exist in Indonesian society, such as women who are only seen as housewives or objects to satisfy men's needs, continue to be criticized in *Gadis Kretek*. In this case, the film offers a more progressive narrative about women, who not only fight for equality in the workplace, but also fight for personal freedom from social constructions that restrict them. The power of this myth is not only reflected in Dasiyah's character, but also in how the film presents a social environment that does not always support women in fighting for their freedom.

The Role of Film in Women's Empowerment

As mentioned by Smelik (2007), film is not only a place where women are depicted, but also a tool for women's empowerment itself. *Gadis Kretek* not only shows women's resistance to traditional roles that have long existed, but also provides space for the audience, especially women, to see their potential as agents of change in society. This film opens space for women to see themselves as individuals who can play an active role in social, economic, and political life.

This study is in line with the findings of Kewilaa (2024) which shows that the representation of women in films can influence society's perspective on women. Through the character of Dasiyah, who decides to enter the kretek industry and dares to challenge patriarchal norms, this film provides a concrete example of how women can fight for their rights to achieve success, not only in their careers, but also in shaping their own future.

4. CONCLUSION

a. Representation of Gender Equality in *Gadis Kretek*

This study reveals that the film *Gadis Kretek* successfully depicts the representation of gender equality through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. The film explicitly presents women, especially the character Dasiyah, in positions of power that are not limited to traditional female roles. This aims to challenge existing gender stereotypes and fight for gender equality in society.

b. Denotative, Connotative, and Mythical Meanings

This film denotatively shows women who have important positions and authority in a social context that is usually dominated by men. Connotatively, this film reveals the fact that gender inequality is still relevant issue that women must face in various aspects of life, including in the household and the workplace. In the myth layer, this film deconstructs traditional myths about gender roles. This film implicitly criticizes existing patriarchal norms and provides a new perspective on feminism, by showing that women have the ability to fight inequality and change their destiny.

c. Changes in Women's Representation

The film *Gadis Kretek* has a significant impact in introducing changes in women's representation, by presenting women as active, independent subjects, and having the ability to change traditional roles that are usually seen as domestic tasks. This understanding emphasizes how films can be a tool to change society's views on the position of women in broader social and economic life.

d. Social Awareness and Criticism of Patriarchy

Although *Gadis Kretek* presents strong and brave female characters, the film also depicts the gaps that still exist in terms of gender equality, especially in patriarchal family and community structures. This emphasizes that despite changes and empowerment, the journey towards gender equality is still full of obstacles that require further struggle, both at the individual, family, and community levels.

e. The Role of Film in Building Dialogue on Gender

As part of popular culture, this film not only functions as entertainment, but also as a social educational space that challenges traditional values and promotes the idea of gender equality in a broader context.

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