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Negotiating the Role of Mother and Child's Right in a Feminist Perspective: Analysis of the Film *Ali dan Ratu Ratu Queens* (2021)

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Abstract

This research explores the negotiation of a mother's role and a child's rights through a feminist lens in the Indonesian film Ali dan Ratu Ratu Queens (2021), directed by Lucky Kuswandi. The study aims to examine how motherhood is portrayed in the context of migration, personal ambition, and maternal absence, and how these portrayals intersect with the child's right to love, care, and identity. By employing feminist film theory and narrative analysis, the research interrogates the tension between female autonomy and maternal responsibility. The character of Mia (Marissa Anita), a mother who leaves her son to pursue a career abroad, becomes a focal point in analyzing how the film presents alternative models of womanhood that diverge from traditional expectations. Simultaneously, the character of Ali (Iqbal Ramadhan), the abandoned son, offers insight into the emotional and psychological struggles a child faces in the absence of a parent. This study reveals how the film problematizes the idealization of motherhood and advocates for a more inclusive understanding of women's choices and children's needs. The findings suggest that Ali dan Ratu Ratu Queens provides a critical reflection on gender, care, and intergenerational negotiation within feminist discourse in contemporary Indonesian cinema.

Keywords: *motherhood, children's rights, feminist film analysis, gender roles*

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between mother and child has long been regarded as one of the most fundamental and intimate human bonds. Within cultural, social, and psychological frameworks, this bond often embodies themes of love, care, sacrifice, and emotional attachment. However, globalization, migration, and shifting gender roles have challenged the traditional notions of motherhood, creating spaces for negotiation between maternal responsibilities and individual aspirations. In this context, the rights of children to receive care and presence from their mothers frequently intersect with the mother's right to self-fulfillment and autonomy.

The film of *Ali and Ratu Ratu Queens* (2021) by Lucky Kuswandi offers a nuanced portrayal of the migrant family, expanding the concept beyond consanguineous relations to encompass socially constructed bonds shaped by migration, displacement, and transnational living. The narrative centers on Ali, an abandoned child, who travels to New York in search of his mother, Mia, who had migrated years earlier to pursue a career in singing. Mia's trajectory reflects a familiar migratory pattern wherein aspirations for socio-economic mobility are tempered by the structural realities of the host society, culminating in her employment in the service sector. This condition also affords Mia the right to fulfill her dream and exercise autonomy.

The film situates much of its action in Queens, a place where Mia lived previously and found her Indonesian friends. This place is also a borough characterized by high immigrant density, thereby foregrounding the spatial and socio-economic contexts that frame migrant lives. Within this setting, Ali encounters four Indonesian women—Party, Biyah, Ance, and Chinta—whose lived experiences encapsulate key features of migrant existence: occupational precarity, cultural retention, and mutual support networks. In this place, Ali finds his 'family' and understands the conflict his mother had with these four women, despite his conflict with Mia.

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The conflict between Mia and Ali in this film is rooted in the emotional and physical rupture caused by migration, and it unfolds as a complex interplay of abandonment, misunderstanding, and unmet expectations. Mia left Indonesia when Ali was still a child, initially to pursue her dream of becoming a singer in New York. However, her career aspirations did not materialize as planned, and she eventually settled into a modest, working-class life in Queens. From Ali's perspective, this departure was experienced as abandonment: his mother not only left the country but also became emotionally and physically absent during his formative years. Raised by his father, Ali grew up with an idealized image of Mia, imagining her as a glamorous and successful figure, only to have this image shattered when he met her in person.

The film resonates with wider sociocultural realities in Indonesia and beyond, where many women work as migrant laborers or professionals overseas, leading to family separation and reconfigured mother-child relationships. This phenomenon highlights a crucial intersection between feminist struggles for autonomy and children's rights discourses. Thus, this study situates *Ali dan Ratu Ratu Queens* as a cultural text through which feminist theories of motherhood and the concept of children's rights can be examined. By analyzing the film, this study aims to explore how narratives of maternal responsibility and children's rights are represented, challenged, and reimagined in the context of migration, gender, and family.

THEORY

There are two theories utilized in this research: the feminist perspective in film and narrative theory

A. Feminist theory in film

Feminist film theory investigates how cinema represents gender, particularly through the roles, images, and experiences of women. It critiques patriarchal structures embedded in film, interrogates stereotypes, and analyzes how cinematic narratives reinforce or challenge dominant gender ideologies. Kaplan (1983) argues that feminist film theory examines both the construction of the female image on screen and the spectator's relationship to that image. In this view, there is a dynamic interplay between how women are represented in film and how audiences are positioned to perceive them. Kaplan further contends that the female image is shaped by patriarchal ideology, reducing women to the status of "the other." Consequently, female characters are often depicted in relation to male authority, occupying subordinate roles within the narrative. Women thus appear primarily as objects of representation, while men function as subjects of agency. Mulvey (1975) reinforces this critique through her concept of the "male gaze," which argues that mainstream cinema positions women as objects of visual pleasure for a presumed male spectator. Within this framework, female protagonists are typically confined to archetypal roles—such as mother, virgin, seductress, or victim—and are rarely granted narrative authority or genuine power. Together, Kaplan and Mulvey reveal how cinematic form and ideology work to sustain gender hierarchies within film.

Feminist film theory has developed through different critical stages, from early examinations of patriarchal representations to more nuanced debates in postfeminist discourse. Building on but also challenging these positions, McRobbie (2009) introduces the notion of postfeminist culture, which complicates the earlier frameworks. She argues that contemporary media simultaneously celebrate female independence while reinscribing traditional gender norms through consumption and spectacle. In this postfeminist context, female characters may be portrayed as independent subjects of the narrative, yet their empowerment is often commodified through "girl power" aesthetics and consumer culture. McRobbie thus revises the frameworks of Kaplan and Mulvey: while she acknowledges their insights into women's subordination and objectification, she demonstrates how media in a postfeminist era reframes female agency through market-driven ideals, creating a paradoxical mixture of empowerment and regulation.

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In the film Ali dan Ratu-ratu Queens, this theory is utilised to expose Mia as Ali's mother who leaves her family (husband and son) to reach her dream of being a singer. She is presented as an unconventional woman by ignoring her family for her unclear goal. She is considered a selfish mother since she celebrates her independence from taking care of her son. She is also free to serve her husband for a long time.

B. Narrative theory

Narrative theory in film studies examines how stories are structured, told, and received by audiences. It addresses the organization of events, the construction of characters, and the use of cinematic techniques to generate meaning, while also situating stories within ideology, culture, and identity. Bordwell and Thompson (2016, p. 79) distinguish between *story*—the chronological sequence of events—and *plot*, the arrangement and presentation of those events. Todorov (1977, p. 111) adds that narratives begin in equilibrium, disrupted by conflict, recognized, and resolved, leading to a new equilibrium. Conflict is therefore the essential motor of narrative progression, for without it no plot can unfold.

Characters function as agents of resolution, driving the story toward closure (Bordwell, 1985, p. 157). Propp (1968, p. 21) supports this by identifying character functions as stable and constant within the narrative structure. Narrative theory also explains the flow of information through restricted narration, in which the audience shares a character's limited perspective, and omniscient narration, where the audience knows more than the characters. From classical approaches (Todorov, Propp) to modern frameworks (Bordwell, postmodernism), narrative theory demonstrates that storytelling is both a cultural practice and a cinematic strategy. In this study, narrative theory is employed to analyze the conflict between Mia and her family and its effect on her son, Ali. It reveals how Ali negotiates his rights in the face of this conflict, and how the unresolved rupture in Mia's past shapes both her absence and the narrative trajectory of the film.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative method with a descriptive-analytical approach. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research emphasizes the exploration and interpretation of meaning within human experiences, texts, or cultural products rather than numerical measurement. Similarly, Moleong (2017) highlights that qualitative research seeks to understand phenomena holistically by prioritizing context and meaning. The descriptive-analytical approach in this study is used to describe the characterization in the narrative and then analyze it critically.

The research is designed as library research. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) explain that qualitative researchers often rely on documents and texts to construct meaning. In this study, the film *Ali dan Ratu-ratu Queens* serves as the primary source, while supporting data are drawn from scholarly books, journal articles, and other academic writings. This design is appropriate since the study does not involve fieldwork or empirical surveys but instead focuses on textual interpretation.

The primary data of this research is the film *Ali dan Ratu-ratu Queens*, particularly the characterization and narrative structure. Secondary data includes books, journal articles, and other scholarly resources that provide theoretical frameworks and critical perspectives relevant to film and literary studies. These secondary sources serve to strengthen the analysis and ensure a solid academic grounding.

Data are collected through close reading and repeated viewing of the film. Key elements such as dialogues, character behavior, and narrative patterns are identified and recorded. As suggested by Creswell (2018), qualitative data collection involves a process of coding, categorizing, and interpreting meaning from the selected material. To support the analysis, secondary literature from books, journals, and academic databases is also gathered.

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DISCUSSION

Mia's Character as a Mother

Mia is portrayed as a complex and conflicted character whose decisions shape the trajectory of the film's narrative. She is introduced as a woman who once pursued her dream of building a life in New York, leaving behind her young son, Ali, and her husband in Indonesia. This choice immediately situates her in a morally ambiguous position—torn between personal ambition and maternal responsibility.

Mia's character reflects the struggles of many migrant women: she seeks independence, opportunity, and self-fulfillment abroad, but at the cost of separation from her child. Through cinematic visualization, Mia is often framed in medium or distant shots, dressed in elegant attire, and placed within ordered urban setting exhibits her independence and success, yet also underscores the emotional distance from her son. When Ali later comes to New York in search of her, Mia is confronted with the consequences of her absence. Her interactions with Ali reveal both her affection as a mother and her inability to fully reclaim that role after years of distance.



Figure 1. Mia's presentation in cinematic visualization

Emotionally, Mia is layered. She embodies guilt, hesitation, and vulnerability, yet also determination and survival. She is not a one-dimensional figure of neglect but a representation of a woman navigating conflicting roles: as a mother, as an individual with her own aspirations, and as a migrant facing cultural and economic challenges. In narrative terms, Mia functions as both the source of conflict—her absence triggers Ali's search—and as a key to resolution, since the story revolves around Ali's attempt to understand and reconcile with her choices. Ultimately, Mia is depicted as a flawed but deeply human character. She is neither idealized nor demonized, but shown within the complexity of migrant motherhood, where love, sacrifice, and absence coexist in painful tension.

Mia's Action as a Feminist

Through the lens of feminist film theory, Mia embodies the contradictory positions of women in cinema. In line with Kaplan's argument, Mia's image is constructed through patriarchal ideology: she is defined primarily in relation to men—first as the absent wife, then as the estranged mother whose choices destabilize her family. Her characterization reflects how women are often positioned as subordinate within the narrative; their value is measured through their domestic roles.

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Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" also helps explain Mia's portrayal. Although she is not overtly sexualized, her image is framed through the expectations of others—Ali, her family, and society—who judge her for leaving home. She becomes an object of judgment rather than a fully autonomous subject. This reinforces Mulvey's claim that women in cinema are often positioned for others' perception, rather than for their own agency.

However, Mia can also be read through McRobbie's notion of postfeminist culture. She represents female independence and the pursuit of self-fulfillment abroad, resisting the traditional image of the self-sacrificing mother. Yet, her independence is not free from contradiction: her absence is framed as abandonment, and her empowerment is intertwined with loss, guilt, and social disapproval. This tension reflects postfeminism's paradox, in which women are celebrated for their autonomy but simultaneously disciplined by cultural expectations of femininity and motherhood.

In this sense, Mia's character resists simple categorization. She is not merely a victim of patriarchy, nor purely an empowered woman. Instead, she embodies the complexity of migrant motherhood in postfeminist culture—navigating personal aspiration, structural constraint, and emotional consequence.

From a feminist perspective, Mia's characterization reflects the struggles of women negotiating independence and maternal responsibility. She seeks personal freedom and opportunity in New York, a decision aligned with postfeminist ideals of female autonomy (McRobbie, 2009). However, her independence is framed through guilt and social judgment, showing the persistence of patriarchal norms that measure a woman's worth by her role as a mother (Kaplan, 1983). Mia's absence disrupts the "equilibrium" of Ali's childhood, positioning her as both a source of empowerment and conflict.

Ali's Existence

Ali, on the other hand, is depicted as the emotional center of the narrative. His journey to New York is not merely geographical but symbolic—an attempt to reclaim his right to maternal love and recognition. In the cinematic visualization, Ali is frequently visualized in wide shots and open spaces, emphasizing his vulnerability and sense of isolation. The camera often aligns with his gaze when looking at Mia, reinforcing the perception of her as both admired and inaccessible. Mia's interactions are portrayed with slower pacing and longer pauses, reflecting estrangement, while Ali's encounters with the surrogate "Queens" are lively and quickly cut, suggesting warmth and belonging. Through these cinematic strategies, the film visualizes the negotiation between Mia's pursuit of selfhood and Ali's longing for maternal presence, illustrating Monaco's view that film communicates meaning through its visual language (2009). While patriarchal and cultural expectations constrain Mia, Ali embodies the vulnerability of the child who suffers from those constraints. His perspective situates Mia as an object of judgment, echoing Mulvey's insight into how women are positioned for others' perception. Ali becomes both a spectator and a participant in Mia's narrative, interpreting her absence as a betrayal but also seeking reconciliation.

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Figure 2. Ali in his vulnerability

Together, Mia and Ali illustrate the intersection of gender, family, and migration. Mia's choices highlight the burden placed on women to reconcile selfhood with maternal duty, while Ali's response reveals the intergenerational consequences of these tensions. Their conflict underscores that narratives of motherhood in cinema are never isolated from structures of power: women's independence is often framed as abandonment, and children's rights are constructed through expectations of maternal sacrifice.

From the perspective of narrative theory, the relationship between Mia and Ali follows a classical structure of equilibrium, disruption, and attempted resolution. According to Todorov, narratives begin with an initial equilibrium that is disturbed, producing conflict and driving the story forward until a new equilibrium is established. In this film, the initial equilibrium is broken when Mia leaves Ali behind in Indonesia to pursue her life in New York. This absence creates the central disruption that motivates Ali's journey and sets the narrative in motion.

Propp's notion of character functions also clarifies their roles. Mia, though a mother, functions as both the absent figure (whose departure generates conflict) and the object of Ali's quest (the one he seeks). Ali, in turn, fulfills the role of the seeker-hero, driven to resolve the narrative tension created by his mother's absence. Their interaction reflects Propp's principle that characters are defined less by their individuality than by their narrative function.

Bordwell emphasizes how plot structures control the flow of information. In *Ali dan Ratu Ratu Queens*, restricted narration aligns the audience with Ali's perspective: viewers uncover Mia's choices and struggles largely through his search, sharing his limited knowledge and emotional journey. At the same time, moments of omniscient narration offer glimpses into Mia's life, complicating her image and preventing her from being reduced to a one-dimensional "absent mother."

Thus, narrative theory highlights that Mia and Ali's conflict is not merely personal but structural. Mia's absence functions as the disruption, Ali's journey as the quest, and their confrontation in New York as the attempted resolution. Yet the resolution is incomplete: the film ends not with perfect reconciliation but with recognition of the enduring tension between individual freedom and familial responsibility. In this sense, the narrative illustrates that equilibrium in stories of migrant families is fragile, constantly negotiated, and never fully restored.

The conflict between Mia and Ali in *Ali dan Ratu Ratu Queens* can be best understood through the intersection of feminist film theory and narrative theory. At the narrative level, Todorov's model of equilibrium, disruption, and resolution structures their relationship. The

initial equilibrium—Ali's childhood stability—is disrupted when Mia leaves to pursue her life abroad. This absence functions as the central disruption, motivating Ali's journey to New York. His quest to reunite with his mother represents the narrative progression toward resolution, though the ending reveals only partial reconciliation, signaling that equilibrium in migrant family stories remains fragile and unsettled.

From Propp's perspective, Mia embodies dual functions: she is the absent figure who generates the disruption and simultaneously the object of Ali's quest. Ali, meanwhile, fulfills the role of the seeker-hero, driven by the desire to reclaim maternal love and recognition. Bordwell's insights into narration further clarify how the story is told: restricted narration aligns viewers with Ali's perspective, allowing audiences to share his longing, anger, and disappointment. Yet brief omniscient glimpses into Mia's life complicate her portrayal, resisting a simplistic image of abandonment.

Mia's Feminism and Ali's Right

Feminist film theory deepens this structural reading by situating Mia's character within patriarchal and postfeminist frameworks. Kaplan argues that cinema often constructs women as subordinate and defined through men; Mia's identity as a mother is judged through her absence, marking her as a transgressor of maternal duty. Mulvey's notion of the male gaze resonates in Ali's perspective, as Mia becomes an object of judgment—scrutinized not as a free subject but as a mother who failed her expected role. At the same time, McRobbie's analysis of postfeminist culture illuminates Mia's independence: she embodies the paradox of a woman pursuing autonomy abroad, celebrated for her strength yet condemned for deviating from traditional femininity.

By weaving narrative theory with feminist critique, Mia and Ali's conflict emerges not just as a mother–son struggle but as a cinematic articulation of gender, power, and migration. Structurally, Mia's absence fuels the plot; ideologically, it exposes the cultural contradictions surrounding motherhood and independence. Ali's quest embodies the child's right to maternal presence, while Mia's choices highlight the pressures women face in negotiating between selfhood and family. Their unresolved resolution reflects the broader reality that in narratives of migration, gendered roles and familial bonds are sites of tension that can rarely return to a neat equilibrium.

The conflict between Mia and Ali follows the classical model of narrative structure. The narratives move from an initial equilibrium through disruption toward resolution. In this film, the equilibrium of Ali's childhood is disrupted when Mia leaves Indonesia to pursue her life in New York. This absence becomes the central narrative disturbance, propelling Ali's journey. His decision to travel to New York represents the hero's quest for restoration. However, the film concludes with only partial reconciliation, highlighting the fragility of equilibrium in migrant family narratives.

Feminist Perspectives: Motherhood and Representation

Feminist film theory situates Mia's characterization within broader gendered frameworks. Kaplan argues that cinema often constructs women through patriarchal ideology, reducing them to subordinate roles. Mia's independence, framed as maternal absence, is judged against patriarchal expectations of motherhood. In Ali's perspective, she becomes an object of scrutiny, resonating with Mulvey's concept of the gaze, where women are positioned to be looked at rather than recognized as autonomous subjects.

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Yet Mia also embodies contradictions associated with postfeminist culture. As McRobbie notes, postfeminism celebrates female independence while reinscribing traditional norms through spectacle and consumption. Mia's decision to pursue her life abroad can be read as empowerment, but the narrative frames this choice through guilt and conflict, exposing how women's selfhood is constantly negotiated against maternal duty.

Bringing narrative and feminist perspectives together reveals that Mia and Ali's conflict is not merely a personal struggle but a cinematic articulation of gender, power, and migration. Structurally, Mia's absence fuels the disruption that drives the story; ideologically, it reflects cultural contradictions surrounding motherhood and independence. Ali's journey represents the child's right to maternal presence, while Mia's choices highlight the pressures women face when balancing autonomy and family responsibilities.

The resolution is deliberately incomplete, suggesting that equilibrium in stories of migrant families is never fully restored. Instead, the film underscores the tension between individual freedom and collective obligation, showing how gendered expectations shape both the structure and meaning of the narrative.

CONCLUSION

The film *Ali dan Ratu Ratu Queens* (2021) highlights the complexity of a mother–child relationship within the context of migration and gendered responsibilities. Through Mia's decision to pursue work and life abroad, the narrative exposes the tension between a mother's right to self-fulfillment and independence and a child's right to care, presence, and emotional security. From a feminist perspective, Mia's choice can be read as a form of agency—breaking away from traditional domestic expectations of women as solely caregivers. However, this agency is negotiated at the expense of Ali's childhood experiences, demonstrating how patriarchal structures and global labor migration often force women into difficult trade-offs.

The film also emphasizes that motherhood is not a fixed or singular identity; it is shaped by socio-economic demands, cultural values, and personal aspirations. Feminist theory helps us see Mia not only as a mother but also as a woman negotiating her multiple roles. At the same time, the child's right to love, attention, and care remains central, reminding us of the ethical dimension of parenting. Ultimately, the film portrays the migrant mother's dilemma as a shared social issue rather than an individual failure, calling for a more inclusive understanding of gender roles, family, and child rights in transnational contexts.

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