The Performativity of Non-Heterosexual Subjects: A Textual Analysis of *Arisan! 2* (2011)

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Abstract

In Indonesia, homosexuality is still perceived as problems mostly related to "moral" decadency even though it has long been deep-rooted and practiced in many parts of the archipelago. In contemporary Indonesia, two opposing discourses have been voiced. Those opposing homosexuality have been actively promoting their objection to the growth of this alternative sexuality while others keep campaigning the countering discourses to include these non-heterosexual subjects. *Arisan 2* is Nia Dinata's film which portrays the life of non-heterosexual subjects in urban context. As a cultural product, a film is inseparable from certain dominant ideology. Through textual analysis and cultural studies perspective as well as Butler's performativity, the objective of this paper is to explore the performativity of the non-heterosexual characters in the film and how they negotiate their sexuality. This paper also aims to analyse how their sexualities are articulated within heteronormativity as the dominant ideology.

Keywords: representation, non-heterosexual subjects, sexuality, performativity

Introduction

In the contemporary Indonesia, the issue of the non-normative gender and sexuality has been popular after the downfall of Soeharto's New Order (1966-1998) (Murtagh, 2017). Since the rebirth of Indonesian movie industry, a number of movies have been screening the subjectivities of alternative sexualities particularly *gay* and *lesbian*. In addition, the *reformasi* era has become the starting point for the development of Q! Film Festival, the largest *gay* and *lesbian* films in Asia.

Film, as a cultural product, is considered as one of the most effective media to transmit and inculcate certain ideology. In addition, its potential has been marked and utilized by political parties to establish and preserve certain ideology (Strinati, 2005). Following this argument, it is concluded that a film is not a neutral medium and thorough analysis is needed to dismantle its hidden meaning. As a cultural product, movies are inseparable from a certain dominant discourse or ideology that has been deep-rooted in a certain society. Tambunan (2006) said that the hidden ideology can be revealed by analyzing the representation and consumption process (Tambunan, 2006). She also argued that by decoding the underlying meanings behind the representations, certain things articulated through the movies can be revealed.

As mentioned earlier, a number of films which portray the lives of sexual minorities have been screened in post New-Order. Even though, the themes of homosexuality can be found in many Indonesian films in this era, Nia Dinata's *Arisan!* (2003) was a huge success among those typical films. It tells a story about the everyday problems of the upper class members of *arisan* who deals with their personal struggles against the cosmopolitan back-drop of early 2000s Jakarta. The word

arisan refers to a social gathering, mostly among Indonesian women. In the past, it used to be held at the houses of members, but nowadays it is often held at a fancy restaurant or cafe. Besides social interaction among group members, it also involves informal credit or money-saving.

This film successfully won numerous national awards such as Citra awards for Best Film and Best Director at the Indonesian Film Festival (FFI) 2004 and MTV Indonesia Movie Awards. A number of academicians welcomed this film as a 'breakthrough' to approach gay subjectivities. Surprisingly, it is also the first film which displayed on-screen kiss of same-sex relationship in the largest Muslim majority country in the world after the downfall of Soeharto. The approval of the state's censorship institution to screen the gay scene kiss was an indication that there was a change in Indonesian film industry and it started an interesting entry in the history of Indonesian cinema which brought the issue of same-sex relationship (Munir, 2011).

Following the success of *Arisan!,* Nia Dinata later continued making its second sequel *Arisan 2* (2011). It is still about three close friends living in Jakarta, Sakti (Tora Sudiro), Meimei (Cut Mini Theo), and Andien (Aida Nurmala). They still like to meet up in *arisan*. In *Arisan!*, Sakti and Nino (Surya Saputra) were a gay couple, but in *Arisan 2* they broke up their relationship. Sakti is going out on a date with an old married gay, Gery (Pong Harjatmo) while Nino is dating a younger, fashionable, and effeminate gay man, Octa (Rio Dewanto). Unlike its first sequel which mainly portrayed the gay subjectivity through Sakti and Nino, *Arisan 2* presents more non-heterosexual characters such as lesbi subjects through Joy (Sarah Sechan) who works as a plastic surgeon and her financier, Ara (Atiqah Hasiholan). Suprisingly, at the end of the story, Joy and Gery are revealed as a married couple. They made an agreement to get married to hide their sexuality from public. Another character is Moli, a young woman working in a beach café and suffering from cancer. Moli is finally found to perform queer subjectivity at thend of the story and has an erotic desire to Memei.

Like its first sequel which portrayed the lived lives of gay men in urban culture, *Arisan 2!* presents more non-heterosexual characters such as gay, lesbi and queer in urban culture background. It also presents certain models of the homosexual subjectivities and representations that are linked to modernity where most of the characters are given more positive attributes. Starting from this depiction, this study is endeavoring to analyze how those non-heterosexual characters are represented in *Arisan 2!*.

Research Methodology

Taking a specific interest in minor sexualities, this study utilizes a cultural studies perspective and textual analysis as well as queer reading to reveal the representational images of non-heterosexual characters in *Arisan 2!* that are depicted within heteronormative as the dominant ideology in Indonesia. The cultural studies perspective is used here to examine the relation between power and culture. As suggested by Barker that cultural studies perspective to examine the cultural phenomenon and its relation to power (Barker, 2000). In its perspective, culture cannot be understood apart from other aspects of social life. Barker, Meg-John & Scheele, J (2016) said that "*continually engaging with the political, economic, erotic, social, and ideological, cultural studies entails the study of all relations between all the elements in a whole way of life*".

The queer reading and theories will be conducted in this study. Unlike the terms LGBT which refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender subjects as social category, the word 'queer' includes all non-heterosexual subjects or anti-social label in terms of sexuality. There is a variety of

definitions of queer theory which overlap one another. For instance, Gaunlett's interpretation would suggest that though queer theory is utilized as an approach to non-normative sexualities, it is not a theory of homosexuality. One main key point to fully understand what queer theory is that identity is seen a fluid entity which is a little more than a pile of social and cultural things that an individual has previously expressed or has been said. Queer theory also suggests that gender, like any other aspects of identity, is a performance. Moreover, it provocatively challenges the traditional view of masculinity and femininity which are said as a social construction built on the binary divide between men and women, which is also a social construction (Gauntlett, 2005).

Barker and Scheele are in agreement with Gaunlett's arguments saying that queer theories have multiple and different meanings. Furthermore, it has been criticized for being inaccessible and full of difficult words. In an attempt to make the word 'queer' understandable, they would define 'queer' as an umbrella term for people outside of the heterosexual norms, or for people who challenge the LGBT "mainstream". It can also be a way of challenging norms around gender and sexuality through different ways or thinking of acting (Barker, Meg-John & Scheele, 2016).

In this study, Butler's critical notion of gender within queer perspective will also be utilized. She argued that gender is only a performance, "*there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; ....identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results*"(Butler, 1990). In this sense, gender is seen as an entity which does not actually exist, but when it does, it is a result of repetition. There is no gender which informs one's behavior, but one's behavior is what we call our gender. Instead of saying that gender is a universal thing, it is suggested to see it as what we do at particular times. Therefore, gender or sexuality is an imitative structure, or a result of process of imitation, reiteration, and performativity. She then argued that if gender is a performance, it can be challenged or reinvented.

Using Butler's perspective on gender, it can be concluded that gender is socially constructed within power relation meaning that the patriarchal ideology as well as heteronormativity plays an integral role in preserving the traditional views of gender and disciplining the subjects. Following Foucault's argument, that in modern time sexuality is brought into discourse. Since the growth of the scientific study of sexuality in nineteenth century in the West, sexuality is seen as social and political issue. He then argued that the idea of sex as the inner 'truth' about the self spread through Western culture, when sex became a police matter, also rested at the core of the newly-emergent political and economic concern about 'population'(Foucault, 1998).

The textual analysis is also used here to unearth the underlying meanings of the representations of homosexual subjectivities. This study also looks into the cinematic elements such as the dialog, the characterization, and the contextual setting to fully understand how the homosexual characters are portrayed in the film. The scope of this study is limited only to the non-heterosexual central characters, more specifically to the representational depictions that this study aims to highlight.

Analysis and Discussion

The Cinematic Portrayal of Non-Heterosexual Subjectivities in the Post-New Order

In the contemporary Indonesia, many Indonesian cinemas highlight the lived lives of homosexual subjectivities. A number of films which contain the same-sex relationship have been screened, such as *Kuldesak*, *Arisan!*, *Janji Joni*, *Cokelat Stroberi*, and so forth. Unlike many films

during the homophobic New Order era where homosexuality is often represented in mostly negative ways, the homosexual subjectivities gain more complex and various representations, particularly in the reform era, the *gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities are often linked to Western culture and modernity.

One of the most popular related films is Ni *Dinata's Arisan!* (2003) where the gay subjectivities gain more positive images. Murtagh stated that the construction of gay male sexuality in the first sequel of *Arisan!* is much influenced by the Western neoliberal notions of domesticated and depoliticizied privacy (Murtagh, 2016). Specifically, the *gay* subjects are often associated with attainment of modernity such as having the right clothes, car, and so on. He then added that it is going to be easier for socially and economically independent *gay* men to survive and be socially acceptable in Indonesia. This notion confirms a model of being which shares remarkable similarities with certain increasingly vocal Western construction of subjectivity. Guild argued that systematically and thematically, *Arisan!* echoes one of the most popular American films, Sex and the City, as well-heeled socialites gossip and discuss their love lives (Guild, 2019).

The idea of Western culture and modernity that is often associated with cinematic *gay* construction in the contemporary Indonesian films is basically an act of separating themselves from local alternate sexualities that are often considered as marginalized subjects that are close to poverty, such as *waria*. Maimunah argued that *waria* is often marginalized as the second-class citizen in Indonesian films that screened sexual minorities during Soeharto's New Order as under his militaristic leadership heterosexuality was constructed as the 'right sexuality' (Munir, 2014). Her argument is strengthened by Murtagh that homosexual subjects were depicted in the Indonesian cinemas as subjects that had irrational and dangerous behaviors. This can be concluded as the ideally positive construction of the vast Indonesian majority where the subjectivities are based around wealth, opulence, and a freedom to consume.

Through the reception study, Murtgah (2016) suggested that in *Arisan!* it is visible to say that the construction of *gay* identities in this film does not have something to do with local alternate sexualities. The general consensus explained that the *gay* lives depicted in the film were very different from them as the *gay, lebsi*, and *waria* identified Indonesians. From his argument it is concluded that most of local non-heterosexual subjects are related to low-class social background so that they are excluded due to inability to the constructions of gay identities offered in the film. Starting from this point, this study aims to again look at the construction of non-heterosexual subjects in *Arisan! 2*.

Gay Subjectivity, Modernity, and Western Culture

The construction of non-heterosexual subjectivities in *Arisan! 2* resonates with the one in its first sequel. The gay characters through Sakti, Nino, and Octa are given attributes that are linked to modernity and Western cultures. Sakti and Nino are modern gay men who are financially independent and have good career jobs. Sakti is an architect who is also a member of an exclusive *arisan* and Nino is a movie director. They have expensive belongings such as clothes, car, cell phones, and many more. As a director, Nino is very confident; he doesn't even care about the backlash from conservative society who rejects his film which screens homosexuality issue. Meanwhile, Octa is represented as a young gay man who works in an office and is very active and very up-to-date in his *Twitter* and aware of his physical appearance. Three of them often are often set in modern places such as a gallery, a restaurant, a café, a private party, and an expensive holiday spot such as Lombok. Additionally, all of them are able to speak English. In short, all those

attributes can be interpreted as a sign of modernity that is linked to gay lives these days. Another gay man is Gery who is Sakti's boyfriend. He is characterized as a married, wealthy, and manly man who is running his own business. He has strong voice and father characteristics. It is proven by Sakti's statement saying that "*Mas Gery kan laki banget* (Gery is so manly)".

By adopting the concept of heterosexual masculinity, the positive images attributed to gay characters are strengthened through Nino and Gery. As an established out gay man, Nino's look is very masculine and manly. He has macho physical appearance with his beard and clean and beefy body. Unlike any local gay men mostly looking feminine and having high pitch voice, he is represented as a cool, quiet, and patient man. Similar to Nino and any heterosexual men, Sakti's boyfriend, Gery, is also depicted as a wealthy, nice-looking, charismatic, and fatherly man. Additionally, he has strong manly voice that strengthens his masculine quality. Through Nino and Gery's representations in this film, it can be inferred that these characters adopt the heterosexual concept of masculinity.

Kurniawan argued that in Indonesian gay culture, the image of father (older men) and 'bear' gay is sexually idealized through social media platform, *path* (Kurniawan, 2018). Unlike local effeminate gay men and *waria* that are often insulted and considered as jokes, these figures often receive positive compliments and are often sexually admired for their masculine look. Furthermore, in terms of sexual preferences, they are often sexually expected as a '*top*' (a man who penetrates his sexual partner in terms of anal sexual intercourse). While the image of bear gay men are adored for their masculine physical appearance, the figure of a father is idealized for his maturity as he is expected to be able to take care and protect his sexual partner. It is important to note that these idealized figures resemble to the heterosexual concept of masculinity where men are given more positive attributes than women. They are socially constructed as powerful and physically strong subjects.

Even though Sakti and Octa are as not as 'masculine' as Nino and Gery in terms of their traits, their physical appearance has no different with heterosexual men. Sakti is well-shaped and look very masculine in public places, his feminine is only revealed in private places when having scene with his boyfriend, Gery. Meanwhile, Octa combines feminine and masculine attributes. Though he is quite effeminate and a little bit spoiled in his speaking gestures, but his physical appearance is not too effeminate.

It is also interesting to note that in this film that gay men are very close to women. All gay men in this film are very close to heterosexual women. It is almost not found in all movies scenes that they are having no intense contact with heterosexual men. In *arisan* gang, Sakti is Mei Mei and Andin's close friend. Besides that Nino also knows them very well as Sakti's ex-boyfriend while Octa is depicted as a young gay man who adores Andien's beauty and glamorously fancy clothes.

From this critical reading, it can be concluded that patriarchal ideology is very dominant. Gay men are depicted to be women's close friend. That gay men are very close to heterosexual women has been noted by Hendri Yulius. In his book *coming out* (2015), he argues that why gay men and heterosexual women are very close to each other is because they share similar experiences as marginalized subjects. In patriarchal ideology, they are socially and culturally oppressed because of their sexuality. Furthermore, they are often deemed as second-class citizens. By using Freud's idea, he explained that since she has no penis, a woman is perceived as an incomplete and passive subject (Yulius, 2015). It is clear in the film that Sakti has a very close friendship with Meimei whose marriage ended up in divorce because of her infertility and now she has to undergo some

sort of alternative therapy for cancer. Similar to Meimei, Andien is a wealthy widow of two twin daughters whose husband had an affair with other woman before he died.

The New Construction of Lesbi

What is interesting to note in *Arisan!2* is the images of lesbi characters. Unlike the negative representations in the New Order, lesbi is also represented as subjects that are associated with modernity such as having a successful career as surgery doctor and accountant.. Like gay men, in this film their physical appearance is depicted as any 'normal' high-class women who construct the patriarchal concept of beauty standard. They wear expensive jewelry, make-up, and expensive women and have Botox. They are also economically independent.

The portrayal of lesbi in Indonesian cinemas is multiple. Murtgah (2016) argued that in the New Order period, women become lesbi for lack of men, or because men do not perform the right kind of masculinity. It is interesting to note that lesbi is always related to heterosexual men. The man's failure in constructing the traditional masculinity is the cause of woman's decision to become lesbi. In this sense, the female subject is inseparable from men within patriarchal ideology.

In the first decade of post-New Order the cinematic fictional representations of lesbi are related to the fears and notions evident in those erotic films of the 1990s. They become lesbi because of being raped, the victim of dysfunctional homes, the dangers of the city and emotional volatility. In this cinematic era, lesbi are depicted as violent, deviant, dangerous, and definitely to be avoided. They are also represented as a drug user and when they have an emotional relationship, they will never make it through the end of the film. Moreover, the woman's decision to become lesbi can normally be explained by the behavior of men.

Arisan!2, lesbi characters are represented through Joy and Ara. Joy is a successful plastic surgeon and Ara is a financier. The representation of both characters are, of course, different from the negative representations of lesbi in the New Order cinemas and some of similar films in the *reformasi* era. Both of them are concerned about their physical appearance. They speak good English and wear beautiful and fancy clothes and are also members of an exclusive *arisan*. Unlike any Indonesian characteristics of lesbi in general such as boyish, they are very feminine. By utilizing Butler's gender performativity, it can be inferred that gender is performative and does not always essentially correlate to one's sexuality. Through this film, it implies Joy and Ara are performing the traditional gender and beauty standard to hide their sexuality from the society.

In addition, the representation of Joy and Ara can be interpreted as an attempt of giving positive images to lesbi. But most importantly, the critical reading on lesbi subjectivities in this film is to look at their performativity within a patriarchal ideology. Joy is Gery's 'wife'. They got married with an agreement to hide their sexuality from family and society. It can be proven when Joy invited Sakti to her house. Joy doesn't mind if Gery is having a relationship with Sakti as long as she can keep her relationship with Ara. Joy said to Gery "*Bilang sama Sakti, aku gak apa-apa, asalkan kalian discreet*" (tell Sakti I'm OK if you're dating, as long as you are discreet). The concept of marriage is part of the heteronormative values. In Indonesia, procreative sexuality cannot be separated from the heteronormative as a dominant ideology. Shapiro (1991 in Cooper, 2002) defines heteronormativity as a social and cultural system that disciplines subjects into two traditional genders, male and female (Cooper, 2002). In line with Saphiro, Wierenga (2010) explains heterosexuality is deemed as the only 'normal' sexuality in terms of heteronormativity (Wieringa E., 2010). It can be interpreted as a form of negotiation to the state's ideology or

heteronormativity. The marriage is taken to hide their sexuality as homosexuality is still considered 'taboo' and 'immoral'.

Besides lesbi, the queer character is also introduced in this film through Meimei, Tom, and Moli. Meimei is a heterosexual woman and also Sakti's friend whose marriage ends up in divorce because of infertility. After the divorce, she finds out that she suffers from cancer. She then undergoes an alternative therapy with doctor Tom. During her medical treatment, she meets Moli who also knows Tom. Like Meimei, Moli also suffers from cancer, too. The relationship between Meimei and Moli is getting intense. Later, Meimei and Moli are engaged in a 'queer' relationship. Three of them are having an erotic desire to each other in one scene. Their queer relationship confirms what Butler's idea saying that sexuality is fluid and performative. It can be identified from the fluidity of Meimei's sexuality from a heterosexual woman to bisexual.

Conclusion

As a popular culture, a film contains certain discourse and hidden ideology that are intended to its viewers. In post-New Order, the contestation of ideology has come to resurface and many parties are given freedom to promote their values. Therefore, there is also a shift in the film industries where the issue of sexual minorities along with their lives that are being screened. *Arisan!* and *Arisan 2*, directed by Nia Dinata, are two examples of many Indonesian films in the reform era which highlight the issue. Unlike its first sequel which only screened gay subjectivity and sexuality, *Arisan 2* highlights more sexual minorities such as gay, lesbi, and queer characters. Through the analysis of representations of the non-heterosexual subjects in *Arisan 2*, it is identified that there is an attempt to bring the more complex 'realities' that are different from the cinematic constructions during the New Order period. Previously, in general the gay and lesbi subjects are often marginalized and associated with stigmas, but in the post New-Order, although not in all films, the gay and lesbi subjectivities are given more positive attributes that are linked to modernity and Western cultures. Such as in *Arisan 2!,* the characters are represented to be financially independent, wealthy, smart, and modern.

Nevertheless, the model of representation in this film does not represent the complexities of sexual minorities' lives in Indonesia that are mostly related to low-class people such as *waria*. This cinematic representation is of course far different from the representation in many Indonesian films. These representational models of the non-heterosexual subjects are concluded to highlight certain images that are linked to Western gay cultures as an impact of globalization. Briefly, the implication of this new image of gay and lesbi will potentially lead to normalizing or mainstreaming them into the 'ideal' construction of sexual minorities in Indonesia. It surely neglects the fact that the non-heterosexual subjects in Indonesia are different and not all of them are able to suit the standard. In one side, globalization brings the issue of equality and equity, while in other side it will potentially strengthen new 'heteronormativity' where gay and lesbi have to fit in 'ideal' standards to be socially accepted in their community. Besides that some performativity of the non-heterosexual subjects in this film is intended to hide their sexualities from public. For example, the marriage of Joy and Gery is just an act of hiding their sexualities from family and friends so that it can be inferred that homosexuality have not yet publicly accepted in Indonesia and the heteronormativity is still a dominant ideology in the society so that adopting its values and standards can be inferred as their strategies for these non-heterosexual subjects to hide their sexualities and be socially accepted.

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