

INTERSECTIONS OF GENDER, CLASS, AND CULTURE IN THE FEMINIST REPRESENTATION OF KRETEK GIRL SERIES EPISODE 2

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Abstract. This study explores the representation of feminism and gender power relations in Kretek Girl series episode 2 through a semiotic and feminist theoretical framework. Using John Fiske's semiotic analysis combined with Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" and bell hooks' intersectionality theory, this research examines how female characters are portrayed in relation to patriarchy, class, and cultural context. The study employs a qualitative descriptive approach focusing on narrative structure, visual elements, dialogue, and character representation to uncover how signs construct feminist meanings within the story. The findings reveal that Kretek Girl presents a nuanced depiction of feminism, characterized by a tension between women's resistance and patriarchal dominance. Female characters demonstrate agency and empowerment, yet remain constrained by social norms that reinforce gender hierarchies. The semiotic analysis highlights how visual and narrative codes such as costume, body movement, and camera framing reflect both subordination and subtle defiance against male-centered perspectives. Furthermore, intersectional aspects of class and culture shape different experiences of womanhood, emphasizing that feminism in Indonesian media operates through negotiation rather than confrontation. The study concludes that Kretek Girl contributes to the evolving discourse of feminist representation in Indonesian cinema by portraying women's empowerment as a complex, layered process within a patriarchal society.

Keywords: feminism; semiotic analysis; gender power relations; male gaze; Indonesian cinema.

I. INTRODUCTION

Feminism has become a central discourse in the fields of social, cultural, and media studies, addressing the persistent inequalities that shape women's experiences across societies. As a movement advocating for gender equality and social justice, feminism critically examines power structures that perpetuate discrimination and marginalization against women [1]. In the context of media, particularly films and television series, feminist criticism focuses on how women are represented, whether they are portrayed as autonomous subjects or as objects within patriarchal narratives [2]. Such representations significantly influence the formation of societal values, gender norms, and cultural understandings of women's roles [3].

In recent years, Indonesian cinema has increasingly explored gender related themes through more nuanced narratives that combine social, cultural, and historical contexts [4]. One example is the Netflix series *Gadis Kretek* (Cigarette Girl), which presents a complex portrayal of women within the historical and cultural landscape of mid 20th century Indonesia. Episode 2 of the series, in particular, highlights women's struggles to assert their identities in a patriarchal environment while balancing cultural expectations and personal agency. The narrative invites a feminist reading by depicting how female characters resist and negotiate power in a system that simultaneously empowers and confines them [5].

According to Laura Mulvey's "male gaze" theory, classical cinema often positions women as visual objects of male pleasure, denying them full narrative agency [6]. However, contemporary feminist scholarship emphasizes how visual texts can subvert this gaze by providing women with subjectivity and control over their own representations [7]. Similarly, bell hooks' theory of intersectionality expands feminist analysis by incorporating race, class, and culture into the discussion, arguing that women's experiences are shaped not only by gender but also by social hierarchy and cultural location [8]. These frameworks are essential for understanding how Indonesian women are represented in media narratives that are deeply rooted in local traditions and power relations [9].

The portrayal of women in Indonesian visual media has historically oscillated between empowerment and objectification. Research by Wulandari found that Indonesian soap operas typically portray women as passive figures limited to domestic roles, while more recent films, such as *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* and *Yuni*, have challenged this depiction through narratives of female autonomy and resistance [10]. Similarly, Devi et al. (2023) identified that historical films like *Kartini* depict women as strong yet still constrained by traditional norms [11]. Such findings reveal that while Indonesian media has increasingly embraced feminist perspectives, patriarchal influences remain deeply embedded within visual storytelling [12].

The *Gadis Kretek* series stands out as an important case study because it integrates history, culture, and class in its portrayal of female subjectivity. Unlike explicitly feminist films that foreground rebellion and defiance, this series presents feminism as a subtle negotiation where women navigate existing power systems while maintaining their agency [13]. This complexity allows for a multi layered analysis that explores both the empowerment and the constraints faced by women within Indonesia's patriarchal social order.

Moreover, media representations such as *Gadis Kretek* play a vital role in shaping public perceptions of feminism in contemporary Indonesia. Despite progress in gender awareness, feminism remains a contested and often misunderstood concept in Indonesian society [14]. Therefore, examining how popular culture mediates feminist discourses is crucial to understanding the cultural transformation of gender relations in Indonesia's rapidly evolving media landscape.

The main objective of this study is to analyze the representation of feminism in *Gadis Kretek* Episode 2, focusing on how narrative, visual, and dialogic elements construct women's identities and agency. By employing John Fiske's semiotic approach, integrated with feminist frameworks from Mulvey and hooks, this study aims to uncover how the series encodes meaning through signs, codes, and social ideology. The findings are expected to contribute to feminist media scholarship in Indonesia by demonstrating how contemporary media narratives reflect the ongoing negotiation between patriarchy and women's empowerment [15].

Feminism as a theoretical framework seeks to challenge gender hierarchies and advocate for social, political, and cultural equality between men and women [16]. In the realm of media, feminist theory emphasizes how visual narratives and mass communication shape collective perceptions of gender identity and reinforce or resist patriarchal ideologies [17]. Media content, such as films and television series, serves as both a reflection and reproduction of societal values; thus, studying gender representation within media allows scholars to uncover how cultural narratives sustain or subvert existing power structures [18].

Contemporary feminist scholarship in film and communication studies often draws upon Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" and bell hooks' notion of intersectionality to explore the dynamics of representation. These frameworks offer critical tools for analyzing how women are positioned—as subjects or as objects—within visual culture and how their identities intersect with race, class, and culture [19]. Through this lens, media representation becomes a political act that can either maintain patriarchal norms or open spaces for women's empowerment [20].

Laura Mulvey's essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) remains foundational in feminist film theory, arguing that mainstream cinema is structured around a visual pleasure system that privileges male spectatorship [6], [7]. In this system, women are typically portrayed as passive visual objects designed to fulfill masculine desire. However, later feminist critics expanded on Mulvey's theory, arguing that new cinematic forms could disrupt this structure by enabling women to become active narrators of their own experiences [21].

In Indonesian cinema, traces of the "male gaze" remain visible in how female characters are often sexualized, aestheticized, or confined to domestic spaces [22]. Nevertheless, a number of recent works—such as *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*, *Yuni*, and *Gadis Kretek*—have redefined women's visual presence by portraying them as agents of moral and emotional complexity rather than passive subjects. These films mark a gradual shift from patriarchal to post-feminist visual cultures in Southeast Asian media [23].

bell hooks' theory of intersectionality provides an expanded understanding of how gender representation cannot be separated from class, ethnicity, and cultural background [8]. hooks (2000) argued that feminism must embrace diversity, recognizing that the experiences of middle-class women differ from those of working-class or marginalized women. In Indonesian media, this intersectional dimension is particularly salient because cultural identity, religion, and social hierarchy deeply shape women's visibility and narrative power [24].

For instance, female characters from elite or educated backgrounds are often depicted as progressive and independent, whereas women from lower socioeconomic strata are portrayed as submissive or morally constrained. The *Gadis Kretek* series exemplifies this divide: it situates women within the constraints of 1960s Javanese culture, where tradition, class, and gender norms intersect to define female agency. Such depictions illustrate that feminism in Indonesia is not monolithic but culturally negotiated within local moral systems [25].

Research on feminism in Indonesian films demonstrates an ongoing tension between modernization and patriarchy. Earlier works, such as *7 Hearts 7 Loves 7 Women* and *Nyai Ahmad Dahlan*, portray women in transitional roles—seeking education and autonomy yet still confined by societal expectations [10]. Meanwhile, *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* represents a watershed moment for feminist cinema in Indonesia, positioning a female protagonist as both victim and avenger, challenging patriarchal violence through radical resistance [13].

Recent analyses, such as by Devi et al. [11] and Febiola et al. [12], highlight that although Indonesian filmmakers increasingly foreground strong female characters, many narratives continue to rely on traditional family structures as moral anchors. The resulting portrayals reveal both progress and ambivalence in Indonesia's feminist media evolution—where empowerment often coexists with subtle reinforcement of patriarchal values [17].

John Fiske's semiotic approach to media analysis provides a framework for understanding how meaning is produced through systems of signs, codes, and cultural conventions [15]. Fiske emphasizes that every media text operates on three levels of codes:

1. Reality codes – how characters' appearances, gestures, and environments signify social meanings;
2. Representation codes – how camera work, lighting, and editing shape audience interpretation; and
3. Ideological codes – how cultural ideologies (such as patriarchy, capitalism, or nationalism) are embedded within narratives [18].

By applying Fiske's model to *Gadis Kretek*, researchers can decode how visual and narrative signs construct gender

identity and power relations. The series uses traditional Javanese symbols—such as the kebaya, domestic settings, and ritual imagery—to communicate tensions between femininity, modernity, and social hierarchy. This approach aligns with feminist semiotics, which examines how visual representation both challenges and reproduces ideological control [20].

Previous Indonesian studies have examined feminist themes in visual media, yet few have analyzed them within a historical-cultural context like *Gadis Kretek*. Wulandari [10] analyzed Javanese women in religious films, while Febryani [13] focused on female empowerment through acts of violence. However, there remains a gap in analyzing subtle or negotiated forms of feminism—where resistance operates within rather than outside patriarchal systems. This study fills that gap by focusing on how *Gadis Kretek* Episode 2 depicts female subjectivity through layered semiotic and feminist lenses, emphasizing the intersection of gender, class, and culture.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach. According to Denzin and Lincoln, qualitative research is a study that uses a background natural, with the intention of interpreting phenomena that occur and are carried out with The path involves various existing methods (Purwanza, 2022) . Qualitative research approaches are very useful in exploring complex, in-depth, and contextual research questions, as well as better understanding the nuances and complexities of social phenomena. In this study, the researcher used John's semiotic theory. Fiske, in semiotics (the science of signs) there are two main concerns, namely the relationship between a sign and its meaning, and how a sign combined into a code. Text is the main focus of attention in semiotics. Text in terms of This can be interpreted broadly, not just written text. Everything something that has a communication sign system, such as that found in written text, can be considered text, for example films, soap operas, opera dramas soap, quizzes, advertising, photography [15].

John Fiske put forward a theory about the codes of television. According to Fiske [15], the codes that appear or are used in television programs are interconnected so that a meaning is formed. According to this theory, a reality does not just appear through the codes that arise, but is also processed through sensing according to the references that have been owned by television viewers, so that a code will be perceived differently by different people too. In the television codes expressed in John Fiske's theory, the events broadcast in the world of television have been encoded by various social codes at three levels [15].

In the first stage is reality, namely events that are marked (encoded) as reality-appearance, clothing, behavioral environment, conversation, gesture, expression, voice, and so on. In written language in the form of text, interview transcripts and so on. [15]. In the second stage is called representation. Reality encoded in encoded electronically must be displayed in technical codes, such as cameras, lighting, editing, music, sound. In written language there are words, sentences, propositions, photos, and so on. While in the language of

images or television there are cameras, lighting, editing, music, and so on. These elements are then transmitted into representational codes that can actualize, among others, characters, narratives, dialogues, settings and so on. This is already seen as television reality [15]. The third stage is ideology. All elements are organized and categorized in ideological codes, such as patriarchy, individualism, race, class, materialism, capitalism, and so on. When we do a representation or a reality, according to Fiske, [15], it is inevitable that there is a possibility of including ideology in the construction of reality.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this study, John Fiske's method is used as a framework to analyze the representation of feminism in the *Gadis Kretek* series episode 2. John Fiske is famous for his semiotic approach in media analysis, which allows us to see how meaning is formed through signs and codes in media texts. With this method, the study focuses on how the series communicates the representation of women and feminism through narrative, visual, and dialogue elements. This analysis is then integrated with feminist theory, especially the idea of the "male gaze" from Laura Mulvey and intersectionality from Bell Hooks, to provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics of gender power in the narrative.

Representation of Women in Narrative and Dialogue

The first finding shows that women in the 2nd episode of *Gadis Kretek* are depicted as strong individuals, but are still trapped in the prevailing patriarchal social norms in society. The main female characters in the series, although depicted as having strong desires and determination, often have to deal with social expectations that restrict their freedom. In several scenes, the dialogue shows women's resistance to the patriarchal system, such as when one of the characters refuses a marriage arranged by her family, which is a symbol of social control that oppresses women's freedom. However, despite this form of resistance, women in the series are often depicted as submitting to the expectations of their families and society, indicating that their agency is still limited by the dominant social context.

From John Fiske's perspective, the narrative contains two levels of meaning: the first, the surface meaning in which women are seen as having strength and fighting power, but the second, on a deeper level, the series shows that the patriarchal system remains dominant, even when female characters try to fight it. This is consistent with feminist theory, especially Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze," which states that women are often placed in subordinate positions in media narratives, even though they appear strong on the surface [6].

Visual: Gender Codes and the Depiction of the Female Body

From the visual analysis, it was found that the female body in *Gadis Kretek* is often used as an object of male gaze. This is clearly seen in the way the camera takes pictures of female characters, focusing on their physical aspects, such as their faces and bodies, which seem to be designed to attract the attention of male viewers. This sensual shooting supports Mulvey's "male gaze" theory, where women in the media are often reduced to visual objects to satisfy male desires.

However, this study also found resistance to the “male gaze” in several scenes, where female characters managed to take over the narrative and portray themselves as empowered subjects. For example, in one scene, the main female character wears clothes that show her strength and authority, not just sexual objects. In this case, *Gadis Kretek* shows a duality in the representation of women: on the one hand, they are still subject to the male gaze, but on the other hand, they also try to redefine their self-image as independent subjects.

Fiske's approach highlights how these visual signs create tension between traditional patriarchal codes and subversive attempts to challenge those norms. This strengthens the argument that feminism in the series is presented through a form of compromise between traditional expectations and attempts to break free from patriarchal social control.

Social, Cultural, and Class Influences on the Representation of Women

John Fiske proposes that meaning in media is not only shaped by the text itself, but also by the social and cultural contexts that surround it. The findings of this study suggest that social class and culture play a significant role in shaping the representation of women in *Gadis Kretek*. Female characters from higher social classes appear to have more freedom to make their own life choices, while women from lower classes are more bound by stricter social rules. For example, female characters from well-off families in the series have greater access to education and freedom to express themselves. In contrast, female characters from poor families are depicted as more subject to male authority and patriarchal society. This phenomenon supports bell hooks' idea of intersectionality, where women's experiences are not only influenced by gender but also by other factors such as social class and culture. In this context, the representation of feminism in *Gadis Kretek* is not monolithic; it varies depending on the social and economic background of the female characters.

Comparative Analysis with Other Movies and Series

When comparing the representation of women in *Gadis Kretek* with other films or television series in Indonesia, it is found that *Gadis Kretek* offers a more subtle approach to feminism compared to feminist films such as *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* or *Yuni*, where feminist issues are presented more explicitly. *Gadis Kretek* focuses more on depicting complex social and cultural dynamics, where women must navigate conflicting social expectations. Films like *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* feature female characters who firmly reject patriarchal violence through extreme acts of retaliation, while *Gadis Kretek* shows a more subtle resistance, where female characters try to find space for freedom without having to directly fight the patriarchal system. This comparison shows that although *Gadis Kretek* is more subtle, it still conveys a strong feminist message, especially through its complex narrative and characterization.

The Impact of Representation on Audience Perception

The final finding suggests that the representation of feminism in *Gadis Kretek* has the potential to influence audiences' perceptions of feminism and the role of women in Indonesia. Based on a small survey conducted among viewers of the series, many felt that *Gadis Kretek* provided a more realistic depiction of the challenges women face in a patriarchal

society. Several respondents stated that the female characters in the series inspired them to be more critical of gender roles shaped by society. However, there were also respondents who felt that the series was not radical enough in voicing feminist issues, especially when compared to other feminist films. This suggests that audiences' perceptions of feminism are highly dependent on their personal expectations and social backgrounds. John Fiske refers to this as “audience polysemy,” where audiences can interpret the meaning of a media text in different ways depending on their own experiences and perspectives [15]. The above findings suggest that the representation of feminism in *Gadis Kretek* is a product of the tension between traditional patriarchal norms and efforts to challenge the system. From the perspective of feminist theory, especially Laura Mulvey's views on the “male gaze” and Bell Hooks' concept of intersectionality, it is apparent that the series attempts to provide a more complex portrayal of women, but remains within established social boundaries.

John Fiske's method allows us to see how the meaning of feminism in *Gadis Kretek* is shaped by ambiguous visual and narrative signs. On the one hand, female characters are depicted as strong and independent individuals, but on the other hand, they still have to deal with a social system that limits their freedom. This representation reflects the social reality where women in Indonesia still face major challenges in achieving gender equality, despite efforts to empower themselves. The series also shows that feminism does not always have to be displayed through direct resistance to patriarchy, but can also be through negotiation and adjustment within the existing system. Thus, *Gadis Kretek* offers a more nuanced view of feminism, where women do not always have to be radical agents of change, but can choose to fight within the boundaries given by society.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion of the findings and discussion above shows that the representation of feminism in the *Gadis Kretek* series episode 2 is a reflection of the tension between patriarchal norms and resistance efforts against them. Through John Fiske's semiotic approach, this study found that although the female characters in the series are presented as strong and independent individuals, they remain within the boundaries of the dominant patriarchal social system. Laura Mulvey's “male gaze” theory is identified through the visual focus on the female body as the object of the male gaze, but the series also shows resistance by presenting women as subjects who have agency. Bell hooks' intersectionality concept is also clearly visible, where the representation of women is influenced by social, cultural, and class factors, showing that women from different social classes experience feminism in different ways. Compared to other feminist films or series in Indonesia, *Gadis Kretek* displays a more subtle resistance to patriarchy. However, the series still influences the audience's perception of feminism by providing a realistic depiction of women's struggles in a broader social context. The film, *Gadis Kretek* presents a multi-layered representation of feminism, where women do not always have to fight patriarchy radically, but can resist through

negotiation and adjustment within existing boundaries. This shows that feminism in Indonesian media is still a dynamic and ongoing process.

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