

Upin-Ipin:

Gender Issues in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract—Upin & Ipin is an animated film for children that is very popular in Asia. This film has even been used as a national ambassador by UNICEF to educate the public on gender issues, represented by the character Abang Saleh. This phenomenon is interesting to study using the concept of cultural studies and a gender perspective. This paper aims to reveal gender issues in the film Upin-Ipin. Based on the results of the study, Abang Saleh's character, with his femininity, is a social mirror of the society. He is described as a male character who is feminine while at the same time educated, technology literate, and good at entrepreneurship. This is an effort to introduce gender issues from an early age. The Upin & Ipin film carries a message of tolerance and respect for differences. In addition, this film can help children use their imagination to build social skills and learn to appreciate the cultural diversity in society.

Keywords—femininity, gender issues, masculinity, Upin-Ipin

I. INTRODUCTION

It cannot be denied that watching television is the most popular leisure activity in the world [1]. On the other hand, television has an impact on the provision and selective construction of social knowledge, the social imagination where humans perceive the world, the reality performed by others, and it reconstructs imaginary life [2]. One television program that gets the Asian people's attention is *Upin & Ipin* film series. The series tells the life of two five-year-old twins. It was first aired in August 2007 by Les' Copaque Production Sdn. Bhd., a production house in Malaysia. The film was produced in three languages, Malay, English, and Chinese. The film series has been broadcast by several television stations in Asia and also by Astro Ceria and TV9. In Indonesia, the first session was broadcast by TVRI and the next session by MNCTV (previously named TPI), whereas in Turkey it was broadcast by HilalTV. The show can also be watched on Asia Disney Channel that covers a range of TV shows in several countries: Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, Thailand, Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Hong Kong, and South Korea. Youtube upload media and the official website of *Upin & Ipin* (<http://www.upindanipin.com.my>) also provide online shows for all episodes of this series [3].

Another interesting side of *Upin & Ipin* film series is that, on 7th of March 2013, the series was appointed by UNICEF (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund) to be the national ambassador for children. For UNICEF, the cartoon characters in the series are useful role models for children. UNICEF realizes that children are often better motivated when they learn from their own experiences and the experiences of other children like them. *Upin & Ipin* series is considered to be able to help children to use their imagination in building social skills and learn to respect the cultural diversity in the community.

In Indonesia, the *Upin & Ipin* series is very popular among the children. The characters are also in various other forms and materials that cover the Indonesian children's life, such as dolls, balloons, fashion, coloring books, books stick, bonuses in magazines, songs, stationeries, and so on. Mizan publisher even has caught this opportunity by publishing comics capturing *Upin & Ipin* in various series since 2010. The comics are easily found in the market until 2015.

People's enthusiasm in Indonesia and Malaysia about the *Upin & Ipin* series has invited researchers to examine the film. Most of the researches focus on the story and characterizations in the film that bring the impact on children in terms of diversity of life, social, multicultural, health, and so on. However, there is also criticism of the film for discussing LGBT issues through the character of Abang Saleh. Abang Saleh is one of the characters in the *Upin & Ipin* series with strong enough characteristics to become a topic of conversation.

Several studies such as the one conducted by Yasa and Santosa [4] stated that Abang Saleh is a male figure who accentuates female attitudes and that is not a good example for children. Contrary to this statement, Untari and Purnomo [5] stated that Abang Saleh has a generous nature. This can be seen when Abang Saleh donated to Upin and Ipin's fundraising for one of the characters named Ijat.

The pros and cons regarding the character of Abang Saleh often come up. Some people argue that the character of Abang Saleh, who is known as Sally, has multiple personalities and can introduce LGBT to children who watch the *Upin & Ipin*

series. Upon further examination, however, the writer believes that the character of Abang Saleh actually has a positive effect, namely in introducing the concept of gender to early childhood. This phenomenon is interesting to study using the concept of culture studies and a gender perspective. This paper aims to reveal gender issues in early childhood education.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Gender Definition

There are several definitions of gender, one of which is according to the Woman's Studies Encyclopedia [6-9]. Gender is a cultural concept that seeks to make distinctions in terms of roles, behavior, mentality, and emotional characteristics between men and women in society. Based on this definition, it can be concluded that gender is a concept that identifies the differences between men and women in terms of social and cultural influences.

Zaitunah Subhan [10] argued that gender is the concept of analysis which is used to explain something based on the distinctions between men and women due to socio-cultural constructs. A more concrete and more operational understanding was put forward by Nasaruddin Umar [11] who argued that gender is a cultural concept used to identify the differences in terms of roles, behavior, etc. between men and women in a society based on social engineering.

B. Gender Education in Early Childhood

According to Hadianti [7], gender education in early childhood cannot be separated from two aspects with special designations, namely gender identity and gender roles. Santrock [12] elaborated that gender identity is the feeling of a person as male or female, which is obtained by most children at 3 years old. Papalia et al. [13] stated that gender identity is a person's awareness of their gender and also that of other people at 2-3 years old. Gender roles [13], are the appropriate behavior, attention, attitudes, skills, and consideration of the social personality traits of men or women. On the contrary, Santrock [12] stated that gender roles are an expectation that contains how a man or woman should think, act, and feel.

III. METHODS

This research used the qualitative analysis technique. According to Untari and Purnomo [5], this technique is an analytical activity used in discovering the meaning, position, and relationship between various concepts, policies, programs, and activities to further discover the benefits of the results or impacts of these things. The method used in this research was content analysis. The main data source in this study was the content of *Upin and Ipin* series from television media. This work contains a religious background. This study used a moral approach because it analyzed the moral values contained in cartoon films. The population used was all episodes of the *Upin and Ipin* series, a total of 270 episodes with 102 cartoon titles of *Upin and Ipin*. The samples to be used were the *Upin & Ipin*

film entitled "*Seronoknya Baca*", "*Jari Jemari Saleh*", "*Pengembala and Biri-Biri*", along with secondary data from various writings discussing the contents of the *Upin & Ipin* series ranging from previous studies to the internet. The research instrument used in this research was the observation documents of *Upin & Ipin* series.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the above analysis, this paper focuses the discussion on two ways: (i) the character of Abang Saleh in the *Upin & Ipin* series, and (ii) the awareness of gender bias through the character of Abang Saleh.

A. Description of *Upin & Ipin* Series

Upin and Ipin are described as twin brothers who were born in 15 June 1997. Their father and mother died when they were babies. They live in the village of Durian Runtuh and are cared for by their grandmother, Mak Uda or Opah and their elder sister, Kak Ros. Compared to Upin, Ipin appears more intelligent. Ipin is smarter in counting, while Upin is more fanciful. Ipin really likes fried-chicken hence Ipin looks fatter than Upin.

Other characters in the *Upin & Ipin* series: Atok Tok Dalang or Tok Dalang as the head of the village. Upin's and Ipin's friends at Tadika Mesra school is also the determinant characters, such as Jarjit Singh; Muhammad Al Hafezzy/Fizi (an arrogant and spoiled boy who likes ridiculing others); Ehsan bin Azaruddin (a boy who is often called "*Intan Payung*" which means 'a spoiled child', the head of the class who is chatty and likes eating); Mei (a Chinese girl who is the smartest one in the class. She is good mannered, friendly, polite, and diligent); Ismail bin Mail (known as a diligent boy at school and likes helping her mother sell fried chickens); and Susanti (a daughter of an Indonesian family who has recently moved to Malaysia, likes badminton and favored by Mail). Cik Gu (the teacher), Abang Saleh (the librarian), food vendors, Chinese businessmen, and so on. The whole characters make this film receivable by the community in Malaysia and a number of countries.

B. The Character of Abang Saleh in the *Upin & Ipin* Serial Film

The author's observations on the character of Abang Saleh are described in several parts. The observations were done in terms of physical, psychological, and sociological. First, from a physical point of view. At face value, Abang Saleh is a person with a male body. He is depicted as a man with a tall and thin body, thick eyebrows, and thick lips. In 'normal' circumstances, Abang Saleh often wears a red headband, a white T-shirt, and a pair of pants. He also has curly black hair. In addition, Abang Saleh often lengthened his nails and colored them in various colors. For example, in the episode "*Jari Jemari Saleh*", Abang Saleh wears pink nail polish. He Saleh also often plays with his nails so that he looks more "flamboyant" compared to male characters in general.

Abang Saleh is Upin & Ipin's close neighbor, so he appears quite often in the series. Apart from the nickname "Abang Saleh", this character also has another nickname, namely "Sally". This nickname makes Abang Saleh appear to be a flamboyant character in the series. His physical depiction is shown in Figure 1.



Fig. 1. Abang Saleh.

Secondly, from a psychological perspective, Abang Saleh's character is described as a man who has a high level of sensitivity. In several episodes, Abang Saleh often helps Upin and Ipin when they are in trouble. Abang Saleh appears as a helpful character. An example is in the episode "Pengembala dan Biri-Biri". Abang Saleh coincidentally crossed paths with Upin, Ipin, and their friends when they were having trouble making costumes for a performance at school. Abang Saleh happily helped to measure the children's sizes and offered to make the whole costumes. Upin, Ipin, and their friends were certainly very happy and thanked Abang Saleh. On the other hand, Abang Saleh is also temperamental.

Thirdly, from a sociological point of view, Abang Saleh is described as a man who is sociable and has many skills. In the episode "Jari Jemari Saleh", Abang Saleh showcased his skill in using electronic devices, and also in making wedding parcels. In the episode "Seronoknya Membaca", Abang Saleh was portrayed as a person with a firm character and a literate. He also took the role of a mobile librarian. In the episode "Pengembala dan Biri-Biri", Abang Saleh revealed his expertise in the world of fashion, namely being able to make the costumes based on the concept of the story that the children performed. Figure 2 shows Abang Saleh using a laptop.



Fig. 2. Abang Saleh using a Laptop in the episode "Jari Jemari Saleh".

C. Abang Saleh as Gender Issues in Early Childhood Education

Nowadays, the problem that often arises in children's social development is gender issues. This is often misunderstood by most parents. The children's activities tend to be regulated because the parents are worried that their children will grow and develop not according to their gender. An example is the children's play activities, in which boys are not allowed to play cooking because they are considered girly and can undermine their dignity as boys/men. On the other hand, the girls are not allowed to play soccer or kites because these are activities usually carried out by boys.

Prohibitions for children regarding their play activities are not appropriate and deemed as a mistake in parenting. Parenting mistakes like this can cause misunderstanding about the concept of gender in children. All types of play activities can help grow and develop the various potential intelligence of children and can affect their quality of life in the future because it will hamper other aspects of the children's development if one of them is suboptimal [7].

There are several alternative solutions to overcome misconceptions regarding gender issues in early childhood, such as the following:

- Providing an understanding of the concept of gender to children using simple language that children can understand well. Children should get an understanding without feeling restricted in their activities and remain in accordance with their wishes to play.
- Not using harsh language in a scolding that causes the child to feel traumatized. This can affect the children's development and cause the child to be hesitant and afraid to move.
- Training the children to always think logically. Providing understanding to children should be based on knowledge that can be understood with logic. Not by giving a ban without reason, but by providing an understanding of what can and cannot be done based on logical reasons without blaming gender.
- Instilling mutual respect since childhood. Children can be instructed to be able to respect a different gender than themselves, and not to abuse friends of the other gender.
- Accompanying the children when watching movies. Even though the media that most children enjoyed are cartoons, it does not mean that parents should just leave them by themselves and not provide further understanding to the children.

Saleh/Sally is an interesting character in *Upin & Ipin*. Why should this character appear? In the *Upin & Ipin* series, Saleh is always angry and corrects his name: S.A.L.L.Y. His job is sewing, and a part-time job as the mobile librarian for the school in the Durian Runtuh area. Upin and Ipin often made fun of Saleh behaving like a woman. Not only the attitude, but

the way he dresses is also similar to how a woman does. Is Sally intended to be just a joke in the *Upin & Ipin* series? Sally should be interpreted as a third gender reality, aside from men and women, in Malaysia. The existence of people in real life who are similar to characters like Sally is as far back as the 15th and 16th centuries [14].

The character of Sally as a reality has existed for a long time, but the recognition of the situation of a character like Sally is still questioned by most people in Indonesia and Malaysia. However, with the presence of the character Abang Saleh in the series *Upin & Ipin*, people as film lovers can take several values that are related to gender education. In early childhood, for example. With parental assistance and supervision, children can build knowledge about gender based on what they see [15,16]. With the experience that was built after watching the series, the children will have an understanding that there are people like Abang Saleh in real life.

V. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study, the character of Abang Saleh, who appears feminine, is a representation that the series *Upin & Ipin* can accept differences and teach tolerance as well as respect for others, because people like Abang Saleh do exist in real life. Abang Saleh is described as a character who is educated, literate in technology, and good at entrepreneurship. This is an effort to introduce gender issues from an early age, that men and women have femininity and masculinity. The *Upin & Ipin* series can help children use their imaginations to build social skills and learn to respect the cultural diversity in society.

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