

# Chasing Dream and Change Destiny: Understanding Gender Gap in Film *Ali & Ratu-Ratu Queens*

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## ABSTRACT

Being a wife and mother are two words that become the ultimate weapon to label women and their role in Indonesia. A woman's life will be considered perfect if she is married and has children. If a woman has achieved all that, she will be questioned if she still wants something else. This study will discuss the gender gap in chasing dream and aspiration between woman and man that portrayed in the Indonesian film *Ali & Ratu-Ratu Queens* (2021). This study uses a multimodal discourse analysis method, an approach that looks at multiple modes of communication such as text, colour, images, and interaction with one another to create semiotic meaning. The result showed that, even though both Mia (female character) and Ali (male symbol) went to the United States to pursue the American Dream, but it was easier for Ali to conquer his aspiration. Meanwhile, the complexity raised when Mia willing to chase her dream. As a married woman with child, Mia was faced with a choice between family or plan. Meanwhile, Ali tends to have the privilege to leave his family without stigma. Social message that showed in the film is, a part of woman's social identity of being a wife and mother, she still has personal identity (self) to embrace.

**Keywords:** Gender gap, Indonesian film, *Ali & Ratu-Ratu Queens*, Chasing dream.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Ali & Ratu-Ratu Queens* (2021) is an Indonesian comedy-drama film that released during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the one-year delayed for release schedule, the film finally premiered on Netflix in June 2021. Directed by Lucky Kuswandi, *Ali & Ratu-Ratu Queens* told the story on dreams, family, and gender inequality. After his father, Hassan (played by Ibnu Jamil), passed, Ali (played by Iqbaal Ramadan) went to New York looking for his mother, Mia (played by Marissa Anita). When Ali was 5-year old, Mia left Hasan and Ali to pursue dream of becoming a singer in the United States. Mia promised to come back in six months if she fails. With a heavy heart, Hasan and Ali let Mia go.

The film then fast forwards when Ali turned to 19-year-old. Hasan just died from a cardiac arrest and left Ali alone. While tidying up Hasan's things, Ali accidentally found various letters, postcards, and tickets that Mia sent to Ali. Knowing that he was not abandoned by Mia, Ali rushed to New York to look for his mother. There, Ali met four Indonesian ladies or the Queens which are Party (played by Nirina Zubir), Ance (Tika

Panggabean), Biyah (played by Asri Welas), and Chinta (played by Happy Salma).

### 1.1. Finding Identity: a Wife, Mom, and Self

Wife and mother, these two words are the ultimate weapon to label women and their role in the world. A woman's life is considered perfect if she is married and has children. As if already at the peak of success. If a woman has become a wife and mother, why she wants anything else? As a woman, Mia's character portrayed unhappy in her marriage. She is not satisfied with her life that constrained by the gender role she has to undergo. When becoming a wife and mother, some women often lose themselves and felt trapped in that role. Instead of being known by their actual name, married women are often called by their social identity role. For example, Mia is known as Mrs. Hasan or Ali's mom. Not Mia as Mia, her own self.

In the concept of social identity, one can identify whether they belong to a group or social category such as power, prestige, and status [1]. Having a social identity means included into a specific group, having a particular role identity that means acting to fulfill the expectation of

the role [2]. Living a social identity in the midst of a patriarchal society, makes Mia strive to achieve the stereotype of Indonesian women who are responsible for domestic chores. As a housewife married to a Javanese man, Mia is bound to the kitchen, well, and mattress philosophy which means providing services ranging from preparing the food, cleaning the house, and serving her husband in bed. When other people (usually men) can describe themselves through degree, job title, and accomplishment, Mia's social identity is only being Hasan's wife and Ali's mother. Mia feels that she has lost herself and her personal identity. Mia has dreams, desires, and hopes to achieve as a woman. The willingness to self-actualize makes Mia desperate and decided to leave her family for the sake of finding her true self.

In the concept of self and identity, self is conceptualized at the level of a reflective personal self [3]. In the process of self-assessment, the judgments of others contribute to self-definition. Personal achievement becomes essential because it also determines how self-assessment is given both oneself and others. Pursuing a dream to New York becomes crucial for Mia's self-proof character and getting her personal self-back. In research on first-time motherhood [4], there is a significant change in her role in daily activities when a woman becomes a mother. The activity of caring for the family at home becomes the dominant productivity. When becoming a mother, many women decided to stop working and become full-time moms. The feeling of guilt that arises when leaving children at home is one of the main reasons. In other research, guilt and shame are emotions associated with motherhood [5]. Further mentioned, there is a fear of negative evaluation by others and self-discrepancy. Mia's character shows self-discrepancy when she feels her ideal condition does not match the reality. Mia is described as fond of singing and playing the piano. Something that should be her personal identity. But she did not get the ideal self. This is what drives the emergence of self-dissatisfaction that turns to act of self-improvement, in this case by being a singer.

The film *Ali & Ratu-Ratu Queens* makes me return to the classic contemplation of being a woman. When a woman becomes a wife and mother, she will be bound by the 'baggage' of gender role [6]. The baggage she had to choose when she decided to pursue her dream. In Mia's case, she was faced with two choices, taking her luggage (Hasan and Ali) with her or leaving her baggage at home. The first option is unworkable since Mia is not settled yet and Hasan rejected the idea. In the patriarchal society, when a husband chooses to leave his career behind to accompany his wife abroad and live in uncertain condition are difficult thing. Hasan also will be trapped in toxic masculinity which causes self-conflict due to the obligation to meet masculinity standards from his conservative extended family. If Hasan choose this option, Mia will also be considered a selfish wife who

hinders husband's career. Indeed, Mia chose the second option to leave her baggage or family at home. With the consequences of being considered as terrible wife and bad mother. The dilemma faced is a moral dilemma of clashing ethical norms, between care for self and care for family (husband and children) [7].

### ***1.2. Male Privilege and Toxic Masculinity***

Male privilege is considered as a phenomenon related to the hierarchy in the social system of society. In an article entitled 'The Male Privilege Checklist', Barry Deutsch makes a list on male privilege, which is the development of Peggy McIntosh's writing about White Privilege. In that list, there are at least 45 male privilege lists. Some of them are 1) If I have children but do not provide primary care for them, my masculinity will not be called into question, 2) If I have children and provide primary care for them, I'll be praised for extraordinary parenting if I'm even marginally competent, 3) If I have children and pursue a career, no one will think I'm selfish for not staying at home, 4) I will never be expected to change my name upon marriage or questioned if I don't change my name, 5) Most significant religions argue that I should be the head of my household, while my wife and children should be subservient to me, 6) If I have a wife or live-in girlfriend, chances are we'll divide up household chores so that she does most of the labor, and in particular the most repetitive and unrewarding tasks, 7) If I have children with a wife or girlfriend, chances are she'll do most of the child rearing, and in particular the most dirty, repetitive and unrewarding parts of childrearing, 8) If I have children with a wife or girlfriend, and it turns out that one of us needs to make career sacrifices to raise the kids, chances are we'll both assume the career sacrificed should be hers [8].

The list shows the male privilege on Ali & Ratu-Ratu Queens. For instance, Mia needs to take care of her husband and children as a housewife. In society, men tend to have the convenience and privilege to leave their families to pursue dreams. There is not much stigma for wives who are rejected by their husbands to go abroad. Even if the wife decides to follow his husband, there is no societal pressure because being a housewife is common.

Unlike Mia, Ali's departure to New York was relatively easy and without significant conflict. Although there was opposition from his extended family, Ali was allowed to go to New York in the end. Ali quickly got an American visa even though he only had limited amount of money. Ali also promptly met a group of good people which is the Queens. Ali was accommodated and allowed to live in the Queens's apartment without prejudice. Not only that, Ali also managed to discovered Mia, found soulmate, and received a scholarship. Ali's cousin, Zoopunk, even quickly went to New York to follow Ali.

There is no significant complexity for male characters to achieve their goals and dreams.

Besides male privilege, Ali & Ratu-Ratu Queens also showed toxic masculinity at the beginning of the story. Coined in late 20-th century, the label toxic masculinity tended to be applied to marginalized men and invoked notions of “natural” male dispositions [9]. In the film, Hasan was described as having difficulty taking care of little Ali and doing housework after Mia left for New York. Hasan ran after Ali who did not want to wear the school uniform. The condition of the house looked messy. Hasan was also described as running out of patience and scolding Ali for scribbling on the walls. This scene seems to show that as a father, Hasan was incompetent in taking care of children and doing household chores.

Interestingly, Ali & Ratu-Ratu Queens also broke down some common male stereotypes in Indonesia. For instance, Hasan did not remarry after divorcing Mia. In fact, generally Indonesian men (especially those with children) will immediately remarry if they lose their wives. Not only Hasan, Ali's character also flexibly broke the stereotype of men who must be intense and not emotional. In some scenes, Ali showed emotions such as disappointment, sadness, and tears. He also demonstrated his ability to cook rendang (Indonesian traditional dish made by beef and coconut milk) for Mia.

## 2. METHODS

In this study, I use multimodal discourse analysis to analyze the messages, meanings, representations, and meanings that appear in Ali & Ratu-Ratu Queens. Multimodal discourse analysis puts more attention on communication modes such as text, color, images, gaze, interaction, posture, typography, and composition [10]. Multimodal discourse analysis is the approach that different modes are combined together to construct meaning in a multimodal text of a combination of writing, visualization, sound, music, and others for communication purposes. A multimodal approach is commonly used to analyze films, sounds, texts, museum displays, etc. By using this method, Ali & Ratu-Ratu Queens is diagnosed by looking at the modes of image and language to reveal its meaning and message, especially regarding the gender gap between the two main characters, which are Mia and Ali. In addition, this paper also looks at how similar or how real the representation given should be or the similarity of the object to reality in the film.

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this study, I will discuss the aspirations to pursue the dreams and change destiny of the two main characters, Mia and Ali.

### 3.1. Mia: *Between Dream and Reality*

Mia, a housewife, has a husband named Hasan and a five-year-old son named Ali. Carried out her roles and responsibilities as a wife and mother, Mia was not satisfied with her life. The burden of carrying out the social identity role, made her personal identity struggled. She was dissatisfied with her life and thought an essential part of her was missing. Mia harboured her dream of becoming a singer. Then, she decided to go to New York to pursue her dream and changed her destiny.

Before leaving for New York, Mia and little Ali were seen lying in bed. Ali showed his drawing which consists of Ali, Mia, Hasan, and the Statue of Liberty. From outside the room, Hasan looked at the two sadly. Not long after, the taxi that would take Mia to the airport arrived. Mia said goodbye while hugging and kissing Ali's forehead. Then, she asked Ali to look after Hasan. Heavy rain was the background of this farewell scene. Hasan umbrellaed Mia to the taxi. There was no conversation between the two. They just stared deeply.

Mia's character is a representation of some Indonesian women's condition. Having a great sense of guilt, some women decide to give up their dreams in order to keep their family together. Frequently, some women choose to endure domestic violence to ensure their children's lives and provide the complete father mother figure. Some women also trapped in gender heteronormative roles. However, Mia broke all stereotype. She decided to break the patriarchal system and leave her family to achieve her dream. Half-heartedly, Hasan let Mia go to New York. Mia promised to come back in six months if she fails to fulfill her dream. However, Mia broke her promise. Disappointed with Mia's behavior, Hasan called Mia and reminded her that her primary role is to be a good wife and mother. In contrary, Mia did not want to be a wife and mother. She did not want to be nothing. Disappointed with Mia's decision, Hasan then divorces Mia and cuts off contact with her.

Mia's decision to pursuit a dream seemed to be a fallacious decision. Instead of being a singer, Mia ended up being a waitress in a several small cafes in New York. In addition, she divorced by her husband and could not contact her son. Mia eventually met and married an American man named Alex, a contractor who runs a family business during her fall. Alex's presence made Mia get out of the Queens area and move to a more elite place called Fort Greene. Ironically, Mia even became a housewife with two children.

When Ali turned 19-year-old, Ali searched for Mia to New York. When Mia first met Ali, she was shocked and ended up rejected him. Mia pretended not know Ali. Even though Ali was disappointed, but he continued to approach Mia. Eventually, Mia agreed to spend some time with Ali and talked about the past. Mia admitted that she was devastated when divorced by Hasan. She could

not even leave the house for 3 months. When they strolled around New York, they arrived at small cafe named Café Wha?, where Mia worked as a waitress. Ali was shocked to find out that Mia worked as a waitress and gave up on her dream. Ali felt very disappointed because Mia left the family and betrayed her dream.

**(Scene 42:42 – 39:47)**

Ali: *“You owe me a better explanation. I mean, you can’t discard me, dad, and now your dream just like that”*

Mia: *“Ali, wait! Ali, I wasn’t happy! I felt trap. But I wanted you to come and live with me.”*

Ali: *“But dad refused, right?”*

Mia: *“You think? He never understood me”*

Ali: *“What about now? You can go home. Visit his grave, then come live with me”*

Mia: *“Is not that easy. I have family here”*

Ali: *“What about me? Am I not your family?”*

Mia: *“You are.”*

Ali: *“So?”*

Mia: *“I can’t repeat the same mistake again”*

Mia's character showed contrary to the concept of women in general. Mother often portrayed as a person who will as going through the ocean to find her child. They will fight to get their child again. However, Mia did not fight enough for Ali. Instead, she remarried and has new family. She even rejected Ali and asked him to back to Indonesia. Mia's attitude also got criticism from four other female characters (the Queens). When first met Ali, the Queens were surprised to find out that Ali was abandoned by Mia since childhood. They really concerned about what happened to Ali. Not only that, when Mia was invited to have a dinner at Ali's apartment, the Queens treated Mia coldly. Mia was insinuated as heartless mother who has no heart, love, affection, loyalty, and sincerity. Boldly, Biyah and Chinta satirized Mia's attitude towards Ali. Experiencing this, Mia went home.

Not only experienced pressure from the patriarchal system, Mia has also received criticism from other women. The Queens humiliated Mia's personal choice on to pursue her dream in New York and leave her family in Indonesia. Living in a patriarchal system, women actually internalize patriarchal values known as internalized sexism. Unconsciously, women judge other women based on patriarchal values. Some examples of internalized sexism can be seen from judging other women for their personal choices, such as working mothers versus homemakers and breastfeeding versus formula milk.

In the end, Mia admitted that she was wrong to leave Ali. Mia realized that she is a bad mother. In Indonesia, a good mother figure is still widely defined as a person who risks her life for the birth of a child, caring and taking care of family (husband dan children) patiently, affectionately, and consistently [11]. A good mother is required to maintain relationships with the extended family. The mother is also expected to be a figure who accompanies the child in the process of growth and development and gives a sense of calm to the child. In the western context, providing home, food, and education is composed of good parenting. Besides material aspects, good motherhood also pays attention to children's emotional and psychological well-being [12].

**(Scene 18:00 – 15:58)**

Ali: *“What is it that I’m lacking, mom?”*

Mia: *“Go home!”*

Ali: *“Why? Do you have any idea what I’ve gone through? I had to watch Dad being completely broken every day. I found his dead body on the kitchen floor. Where were you? You should’ve been there with me. But where were you? If you wish I didn’t exist, just say it to my face. Just say it!”*

Mia: *“I abandoned you! I abandoned you. I’m a bad mother. Everytime I see your face, I just can’t forgive myself. Just hate me. Just hate me”*

### **3.2 Ali: Chasing Dream without End**

Ali's character is seem to be the opposite of Mia's character. Despite being abandoned by Mia since childhood, Ali could forgive Mia easily. Ali appreciated Mia for her decision to pursue her dream as a singer. Ali also asked Mia not to feel guilty for leaving Ali since childhood. Born as a male in a patriarchal society, Ali certainly experienced male privileges that gave him advantages more than Mia. Even though Ali's family initially opposed his decision to find Mia in New York, at the end, Auntie and his family approved of Ali's departure. Despite Ali has not attended college, has no job, and no income, but Ali quickly got an American visa.

Men are often labelled with power that makes them free to do everything they want. For instance, Indonesia boys are allowed to go out at night and given more freedom than girls. Boys also tend to excluded from household chores because it is identical to women's duties. This patriarchal culture then spread to the workplace with many strategic positions held by men. As a teenager, Ali freely went to New York alone. Once in New York, Ali can quickly found Mia's old address. Even though Ali was a stranger, the Queens quickly accepted Ali to live together in the midst of the rigors of life in New York. Men are often labelled with power that makes them free to do everything they want. For instance, Indonesia boys are allowed to go out at night and given

more freedom than girls. Boys also tend to be excluded from household chores because it is identical to women's duties. This patriarchal culture then spread to the workplace with many strategic positions held by men. As a teenager, Ali freely went to New York alone. Once in New York, Ali can quickly find Mia's old address. Even though Ali was a stranger, the Queens quickly accepted Ali to live together in the midst of the rigors of life in New York.

Another male privilege seen in *Ali & Ratu-Ratu Queens* was when Ali had the opportunity to show his art works to Eva's professor. In one time meeting, Ali right away received a positive response to his drawing and was encouraged to apply for scholarship. Ali was even allowed to take the professor's class even though he was not a student there. At the last scene, Ali was seen being interviewed by the campus admissions officer. Knowing Ali's success in New York, Auntie immediately allows Zoopunk (Ali's cousin) to catch up and to study together with Ali in New York. Zoopunk also showed arrive in New York with ease.

The exciting thing about *Ali & Ratu-Ratu Queens* is that there are several scenes depicting the breaking against male stereotypes. For instance, when Ali received a rejection from Mia, Ali was very shocked, threw up, and cried. Not only that, other characters like Zoopunk are also shown chopping onions and helping Auntie in the kitchen.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Both Mia and Ali went to New York to pursue their dreams. Mia went to New York to become a singer, while Ali tried to get back mother's love. Both of them were defiance the social role they had. As a mother and wife, Mia was expected to act as a mother and wife by staying at home and taking care of her husband and child. Meanwhile, Ali showed a child's defiance of an older family figure. Mia was portrayed as a failure in pursuing her dreams. Instead of being a singer, she returned to the central role of a woman: being a good wife and mother. Mia was saved by a rich man during her misfortune in New York. This indicated Mia was trapped in Cinderella syndrome. She only succeeded when held by a rich man. Ali's character showed having great privileges as a man. Having just arrived in a foreign city, he was immediately rescued by the Queens who loved and had no intention of harming him. He got a lot of support from people around him, both family and strangers he just met on the street. Ali's character was depicted as having no significant difficulties in achieving his dreams. Ali, who initially only intended to find his mother, seemed to have won the jackpot. Not only able to find his mother, Ali managed to find a family who loved him unconditionally. He also got a girlfriend and a scholarship in America quickly.

In *Ali & Ratu-Ratu Queens*, at least two assumptions can be concluded. First, the film really describes the reality of the gender gap in Indonesia. Even though currently we are living in digital era, the stereotype of a woman is still the same. Second, this film could be a satire on the existing reality. This is making the audience able to think, analyze, and reflect on what is shown in front of the screen. A satire that makes us think again about gender gap and self.

Of course, there is no prohibition for men and women to pursue dreams and change destiny. However, as a and individual, we have to be responsible and bear the consequences of every action. On the other hand, I think it would be more delightful if the female character in the film opposes the patriarchal system and dares to take risks able to gain success from her action. Instead of seeing the figure of a woman who is defeated and subdued in Cinderella syndrome, of course it will be more potent if audience can find the perfect role model. A person who has succeeded in achieving her dreams and getting her family back. Because it cannot be denied, film is a powerful medium that can change someone life's decisions and gain enlightenment. Apart from the story that raises the issue of chasing dreams, *Ali & Ratu-Ratu Queens* also offers new values and the meaning of a family. The audience is presented with the concept of a family without blood ties. A family can be formed when the hearts of its members are entwined with warmth.

#### **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

RR wrote the paper, analyzed, and approved the final manuscript.

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