The Ambivalent Construction of Child Characters’ Subjectivity in Four Indonesian Children’s Films

Nia Nafisah
English Education and Literary
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia
Bandung, Indonesia
n_nafisah@upi.edu

Riris Kusumawati Sarumpaet, Joesana Tjahjani
Study of Literature
Universitas Indonesia
Depok, Indonesia
riris.kusumawati@ui.ac.id, tjahjani.joesana@gmail.com

Abstract—The notion of subjectivity is a concept of personal identity which deals with the self and its relations to the social structures. This study reveals the ambivalent construction of child character’s subjectivity in four Indonesian children’s films: Laskar Pelangi, Serdadu Kumbang, Lima Elang, dan Langit Biru. Employing structuralism approach and system formal analysis from Bordwell and Thompson (2008), it is found that textual structure and narrative strategies positions child characters as subjects, but only under certain conditions: the absence or without the involvement of adult characters, in open space, and group-oriented drives. Further analysis using Foucault’s theory of power and governmentality (1995) found the child character’s subjectivity is generally constructed through discipline in social practices to train children to take cultural aspects deemed important into consideration. Consequently, the constructed subjectivity is submissive children who obey the expected norms, prioritize the group’s interests, and avoid differences. Although the child characters can negotiate position and have literacy skills that can shift the adult’s dominant power temporarily, the two potentials are not strongly emphasized. This construction of superficial subject position yet submissive subjects reveals an ambivalent subjectivity which suggests Indonesian children’s films view children as deficient and so in need of guidance and instruction despite their emotional and intellectual potentials.

Keywords: ambivalence, construction of subjectivity, disciplinary power, Indonesian children’s films, subject position

I. INTRODUCTION

Children’s films, like any children’s literature in general, are texts which are made with the strong intervention of adults. Adults create and select texts about children with adults’ assumptions of children and what is best for children. Children are generally viewed as deficient in terms of “lacking the abilities, skills, and powers that adults have” (Gubar, 2013, p.451). This assumption is influenced by modernist thinkers John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau who presuppose childhood as a period of innocence, imagination, and fragility, yet it is an ideal period to instill skills and values children should adopt when they grow up (Lerer, 2008; Smith, 2014). These assumptions shadow children’s literature through textual structures, language, characters, and childlike point of view (Nodelman, 2008).

Although a child's character can perform heroic actions, for example, many studies show adult power operates in children’s literature. Foucault's (1995) theory of power asserts that it is exercised by even children to a certain degree. Research within the framework of Foucault’s theory of power (Chappell, 2008; Gottschall, 2011; Wilson, 2009; Wolosky, 2014) found that child characters carry out various strategies of negotiation and resistance in the power relation with adult characters. However, the strategies are, in fact, the forms of governmentality so that child characters abide by the norms and expectations of the society where the texts are produced. Similarly, than simply a site for entertainment, children’s film is more often a site to convey values and beliefs which adults believe the implied children audience needs to learn (Brown, 2017).

Learning about self and his/her relations with others, or the formation of subjectivity is considered important in children’s literature. In the definition of McCallum (2002, p.4), “subjectivity is an individual’s sense of personal identity as a – in the sense of being subject to external coercion – and as an agent – that is, being capable of conscious, deliberate thought and action”. Inherent in this definition is the position and role of an individual in forming a self. This proses of subjectivity is shaped through discourses, social practices, and ideology where the child lives. In other words, subjectivity does not merely have an identity, but also shows how a subject plays her subject position in her relation to other people and her environment. From this definition, discussions on subjectivity relate not only to the internal consciousness but also are influenced by the social structures of the cultural contexts.

Research on subjectivity in studies of children’s literature has been around for many years. In American or Austrian children’s literature, subjectivity is often constructed to encourage the individuation process—the child characters gradually set their different characteristics as a way to actively play a role in the social structures—(Elza, 2014; Sexeny, 2005; Stephens, 2013). Meanwhile, children’s literature in Asian countries tends to form the child character’s subjectivity to be communal with a strong influence of local cultures such as hierarchical and mindfulness in Japanese fiction (Barber, 2013; Hisaoka, 2013) or Buddhism in Thai fiction (Antaresena, 2013). Research on subjectivity, therefore, is influenced by the cultural concepts and contexts of the texts.
Despite the growing number of and interests in children’s literature in Indonesia, critical studies of Indonesian children’s film is a handful. Studies on Indonesian children’s films mostly deal with the pedagogical aspects and language (Fatoni, 2014; Septinus, 2014) or ideological meanings underlying the texts (Allen, 2012; Wibawa, 2008, 2018) without paying attention to whether the child characters represent Indonesian children. The representation of child characters is one of criticism from Indonesian children’s literature scholars. Purbani (2003) argues that Indonesian children’s writers fail to understand children and instead assume them as a group of people who are innocent and empty. Consequently, children’s books have often the impression of didacticism and so become the arena for adult colonialism (Sarumpaet, 2010).

However, little is known about the representation, position, and role of the child characters in the social structure. It can be inferred from those studies that there is an ambivalence between the desire to empower the child character as a model for the intended viewers and the desire to shape them according to the adult’s wishes. Therefore, this study aims to seek how the child character subjectivity is constructed ambivalently, which is broken down into two research questions: 1) how do the textual structures and narrative strategies show the child character’s positioning?; and 2) how does power negotiation shape the child character subjectivity?

The investigation on the ambivalent construction of child character subjectivity is significant for two reasons. First, this study interrogates the beliefs and assumptions of the producers of children’s texts about children and their relevance to the challenges faced by children in today’s changing world. Second, it is expected that this study contributes to the studies of contemporary Indonesian cinema. Most studies about Indonesian cinema discuss other genres like horror (Rusdiarti, 2015; Sutandio, 2014) and certain ethnic groups’ identity (Sen, 2006; Wibawa, 2018), but studies on children’s films are almost non-existent despite increasing interests to the children’s development and needs that have taken place in Indonesian society recently.

II. EASE OF USE

This study is based on analyses of four Indonesian children’s films: Laskar Pelangi (The Rainbow’s Warriors) (Riza, 2008), Serdandu Kumbang (The Bee’s Soldiers) (Sihasale, 2011), Lima Elang (The Five Eagles) (Sudjarwo, 2011), and Langit Biru (Blue’s Sky) (Susatyo, 2012). The films are henceforth abbreviated as LP, SK, LE, dan LB. These four films are selected for the scope of the study, which is subjectivity and can be taken as representative of Indonesian children’s films. Each film portrays protagonists between 12-13 years olds, a period when children begin to integrate in their social structure as well as begin to try to understand their selves and their relations with others (Bukatko & Daehler, 2004). Furthermore, the films cover problems faced most by Indonesian children today: education, social gap, and child abuse (KPAI, 2018).

Considering film as a text, this study employed a structuralist approach to the text with a method of system formal analysis (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008). In this method, the first step to analyze a film is by having a list of film’s sequences to see the film’s structure. Afterward, sequences were categorized according to topics to obtain patterns and irregularities by taken cinematic aspects into consideration. From this formal system analysis, the film’s meaning was interpreted using literary criticism, in this case within the framework of Foucault’s theory of power.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analyses, this study found that ambivalent constructions of child characters subjectivity is revealed through 1) textual structure and narrative strategies; and 2) disciplinary power in the social practices occur in social institutions.

A. Child Characters’ Positioning in Narrative Structures

Child characters’ positioning in narrative structures shows that child characters often positioned as a subject instead of an object. The position as a subject occurs when the child characters have wants, use their capacity to think, feel, and act and have recognition from others as a subject. On the other hand, the position as object occurs when the child characters are objectified as others do not recognize them as a subject. The objectification occurs in different dimensions such as violence, denied as a subject, denied of autonomy, or instruments for others’ objective/purposes.

The narrative structure shows the dynamic position of the child characters. The child characters in LP become subject in facing more diverse challenges than other child characters in other films. Meanwhile, the child characters in SK face challenges only from the adult characters. On the other hand, the urban child characters focus more on conflicts among themselves than those of rural child characters. This indicates that LE and LB have a tighter causal relationship in their plots which emphasize conflicts between child and child characters than that of LP and SK. LP and SK have slack causal relationships in their plots which underline conflicts are not limited between child and child characters, but they can be between child and adult characters. Child characters’ interactions in the four films reveal similar positioning. However, accommodation interaction –which means the child protagonist adjusts his or her agency for other characters’ preference – in the form of attraction to the other sex is only present in LP and LB. This form of interaction does not position the protagonists as objects because it gives them opportunity to be subjects. According to Nussbaum (1995), showing effort to please the loved one cannot be justified as objectification since the loved one reciprocates the feeling. Meanwhile, LP and SK provide subject positioning for the protagonists in more diverse places than LE and LB. It is also interesting to note that home does not offer space for urban child characters to be subjects. Town, in general, does not position child characters to be subjects, although to a certain degree the rural town can provide rural child characters to be subjects. However, the setting of nature shows ambivalence. On one hand, it positions child characters as the subject, but the visualization can put them as objects.

Table I shows the summary that rural child characters had more opportunities to gain a position as a subject in comparison to urban child characters.
Furthermore, the role of the child characters in the social structures as those who reproduce values believed by society.

Based on the analysis of the role of children in social practices, the child characters’ subjectivity is formed through the operation of disciplinary power. Corresponding to Foucault’s contention, a subject is not completely free in the sense of essentialist concept; rather, it has awareness and subject to other forces besides itself (Foucault, 1982). Consequently, the child characters in these four films are made aware of their roles through a disciplinary mechanism which is nurtured from the institution of family, education, and religion. The disciplinary power is productive because it generates the child characters’ subjectivity which conforms to the convention of the existing social structure positively. In so doing, the subjectivity constructs child characters to be empowered subjects within cultural values held as truth by society.

In all the social institutions the child characters are dominated by the adult characters whose power/knowledge is greater than the child characters. Power/knowledge occurs in the routines and regulations in social practices of home, school, and social interaction. By doing the practices regularly, although, in the context of different social backgrounds, the child characters are disciplined and so obey the rules faithfully. The narrative structures construct the child characters to be constantly under the adult characters’ supervision, either directly or indirectly. Even though there are some efforts and strategies to negotiate or to resist adult power, they are temporary and brief. In many cases, the child characters reproduce social practices without adult supervision which suggests the strength of disciplinary power. In short, the child characters follow the expectation of their society. In other words, it reflects the submissive subjectivity.

The construction of submissive subjectivity occurs because the characters in the social institutions are represented ideally. The institution of family protects the children’s safety, if not financial security. Although Lintang (LP) and Biru (LB) have single parents, their parents are no less supportive than Amek (SK) and Baron’s (LE) parents who are complete. The teachers in the institution of education are mostly responsible and caring for their pupils. Even though a particular teacher is oppressive in SK, the other teachers from the same institution balance the power so that the disciplinary power is formative instead of coercive. The figures of authority in the institutions of religion and society are similarly sympathetic. This adult portrayal imparts that figures of authority are normal and equally important in the narratives. It can also be interpreted that the adult characters’ protection is part of their care for the child characters. However, this care does not always mean empowering children. In some cases, parents’ protection, for example, limits children’s agency. Biru’s father in LB is portrayed to be very supportive and caring through his advice and actions during Biru’s experiencing her first menstruation. However, all the dialogues and acts are dominated by Biru’s father instead of giving space in the narrative for Biru’s active reaction to her experience.

In this kind of social structure, the child characters’ resistance is almost insignificant—and if it occurs, it will take place briefly. Resistance occurs because the less powerful take

| Film Title | Plot | Characters’ Interaction | Setting |
|------------|------|------------------------|---------|
| **LP**     | School assignments; adult character’s pressure; adult character’s incompetence; child character’s will | Drop out from school; Cooperates on Conflicts; Accommodates | Home School; Town Nature |
| **SK**     | Adult character’s pressure; adult character’s incompetence | Physical punishment; Cooperates on Conflict; Accommodates | Home Neighborhood; Town Nature |
| **LE**     | School assignments; adult character’s incompetence; child character’s will | Confine; Cooperates on Conflict; Accommodates | Bedroom; School; Nature |
| **LB**     | School assignment; other child character’s pressure; other child character’s will | Bullying; Cooperates on Conflict; Accommodates | School; Home; Town |

B. The Child Characters’ Subjectivity in Social Practices

The analysis of social practices in the four films discloses the child characters’ attachment to the social structures where they live. Referring to the definition of subjectivity from McCallum (2002), the child characters empower their agencies to follow the norms and regulations of family, education, religion, and social institutions. It is in line with Trites’ contention that the child characters’ involvement in social structures is part of learning to accept rules of the institutions because “individual is inevitably affected by her or his institutional affiliation” (Trites, 2000, p.31). As members of society, these child characters use their agencies to participate actively in social practices of the institutions with the purpose to recognize their place and role in those institutions.

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actions to defy the wish of the powerful. In this case, the children found that their wishes are taken to be inconsequential or that they are suppressed from having a wish by the adults. Except for resistance against the illegal loggers who confined them (in LE), the forms of resistance in the other three films are eventually resolved with mutual understanding between the children and the adult characters. Except for the criminals in LE, no one truly suffers the consequence of misconduct. As a result, the resistance does not contest or question the existing social structure because most adult characters are good people with good intention and similarly, the children are basically good people. In other words, the resistance is just a ripple in an almost harmonious relationship. It also worthwhile to note that the most obvious, physical resistance of the children against the power of the illegal loggers (in LE) occurs beyond the surveillance of figures of authority such as parents, teachers and community leaders. This suggests that when children are present in social institutions, their resistance is easily overcome. Furthermore, the resistance is ambivalent since it tends to be constructed to reproduce the existing structure. For example, the children of LP’s resistance against the negligence of their study by Teacher Mus show their acceptance for modern education. They rigorously and thoroughly believe in the power of modern education.

Despite the submissive construction, the four films impart space, albeit little exposed, where the child characters can empower themselves in the power relations. The empowerment is manifested in the child characters’ literacy (in LP, LE, and LB) and their role in domestic space (LP and SK). The parents’ incompetence opens opportunities for rural children to play more active roles that shift adult’s power in domestic space. For example, because of their ability to read and understand modern communication, Amek and his sister Minun share their parts on overcoming family issues when their father is away, working as migrant workers abroad. Meanwhile, the urban children’s literacy skill helps them to carry out the school’s assignment (in LB), and manipulate adult power to get what they want to have (in LE). As children who live in the digital era, urban children especially, have technological knowledge and skills which may be higher than their parents. This finding shows that limiting adults’ competence and enhancing children’s literacy are empowering the child characters, while at the same time depicting more relevant challenge for today’s children.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the shift of role in the rural setting is ambivalent. On the one hand, this role raises the child characters’ bargaining position in relation to their parents. The children take part in solving the problems appear in the family. On the other hand, this role is partly in the realm of good, devoted and filial children instead of self-development or the children’s wishes. This is in line with Shiraishi’s (1995) findings that child characters in Indonesian stories published in the New Order era were constructed to understand their responsibilities as children. As such, the construction of rural children’s subjectivity also binds the children to their responsibilities.

Most social practices are aimed to impart disciplinary of norms and values, and hence little consideration of playfulness or humor. Childish mischief derived from curiosity or challenges are most likely punished or ending in failure; in contrast, dire situations in which children should receive protection from adults, such as bullying, is not dealt satisfactorily. It seems that although in many parts, as mentioned above, the children are protected too much, their obedience is expected. This finding is a little different from Gubar’s (2013) proposition about the notion of children’s subjectivity in children’s fiction. Gubar (2013) argues that children’s fiction should have a balance between playfulness and dependence. Nikolajeva (2012) even suggests that playfulness is actually empowering the children’s characters. Furthermore, children should be treated like children who have ability to do many things, but they need adult’s intervention in situations that may harm them. However, in the present study, adult’s intervention is often unnecessary or irrelevant. For example, the cleft-lip surgery that Amek got by the end of SK is irrelevant to the plot. The cleft-lip has never been an issue in the plot’s progress, although it is hinted subtly by Amek’s reluctance to mention his ideals when asked. Nevertheless, Amek is never shown shy or unable to communicate his desire in front of others which indicates his strong personality traits and agency. Furthermore, the surgery diminishes the film’s power of presenting a physical ‘imperfect’ character as its protagonist.

The ambivalent construction of subjectivity in these films implies the representation of modern children. As proposed by John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau, modern children is considered to be potential human beings, who have intellectual ability to receive instructions and guidance from adults. Childhood is a phase of preparation to adulthood in which they will assume the roles and tasks as adults. With this view, children are taught to sustain the existing social structure and are not given too many liberties to interpret otherwise. Similarly, the child characters in these films are disciplined to integrate norms, morality, and ethics expected by their society. Moreover, the world they live in is a black-and-white one, with a clear cut of right and wrong. The social institutions are modeled with figures of authority who are mostly competent and meant well, people who are available to protect and guide the children. Although there are bad people, they are too few and insignificant so that they can be defeated easily.

Yet, the real world is not as safe nor ideal as presented in the narrative world of the four films. Children’s fiction needs to create child characters who are empowered to critically face the challenges of today’s world.

IV. CONCLUSION

Two conclusions can be drawn from the findings above. First, the ambivalent construction of child characters’ subjectivity is revealed through the narrative structures and representation of social practices. The narrative structure constructs the child characters to exercise their agency by taking actions and expressing feelings to some degree which positions them as subject. Nevertheless, in several crucial incidents, the child characters are objectified narratively and visually. In the allusion to social practices, the child characters are depicted to be able to negotiate their position, but the negotiations are always in the framework of disciplinary notion to maintain expected values such as togetherness and filially.
Hence, the child characters’ subjectivity is communal and tends to be submissive.

Secondly, this construction of subjectivity affects how conflicts are managed in the narratives. All protagonists are one-dimensional, ideal characters expected by the society. This characterization enables them to solve any problem easily. However, such characterization belittles children’s capability. Studies on children have found that actually children have cognitive and emotional capacities like adults do.

In addition, the ambivalent construction of child characters’ subjectivity and its implications reveal the children’s position in Indonesian society. The four Indonesian children’s films have not taken the children’s side. They have tried to portray children who are active and smart, but at the same time they have not been allowed to experience the consequences of their actions completely. The films tend to perceive children as lacking human beings who need guidance and protection, without taking a full account of the intellectual and emotional potentials which the children actually have.

Some further studies can be carried out to give a more comprehensive understanding of both the issue of subjectivity and Indonesian children’s films. Further study on the construction of subjectivity on contemporary Indonesian children’s films will give a better and complete picture of children’s position in contemporary Indonesia. Another one can be about the comparative study on contemporary Indonesian children’s films and New Order’s era. This study will disclose whether there is a shift of perception about children in the society for the past fifty years. Besides, the context of social politics underlying the different eras can shed a light on what aspects are considered important in for children’s subjectivity.

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