

REPRESENTATION AND RESISTANCE AGAINST THE PATRIARCHAL SYSTEM IN THE DIGITAL LITERATURE ERA: THE FILM *BIG EYES*

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Abstract

The patriarchal system is one of the problems in gender studies that is still described in the era of digital literature. Digital literature has a dynamic characteristic, which makes film categorized as a literary work by focusing on the story narrative. One of the films that contains the issue of patriarchy is Tim Burton's Big Eyes. This study aims to describe the patriarchal structure in digital literature using a qualitative descriptive method and Sylvia Walby's feminist approach. The results of the research show that the six structures of the patriarchal system are related to each other but are centered on one main structure, Culture. As a digital literary work, the film Big Eyes also represents the resistance of the main female character, which can illustrate how the feminist movement is and how women should be able to fight against all forms of oppression caused by the patriarchal system.

Sistem patriarki menjadi salah satu permasalahan dalam kajian gender yang masih tergambar di era sastra digital. Sastra digital mempunyai sifat dinamis yang menjadikan film dikategorikan sebagai karya sastra dengan menitik beratkan pada narasi cerita. Salah satu film yang memuat isu patriarki adalah Big Eyes karya Tim Burton. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan struktur patriarki dalam sastra digital dengan menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dan pendekatan feminis Sylvia Walby. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keenam struktur sistem patriarki saling berkaitan satu sama lain namun berpusat pada satu struktur utama yaitu Kebudayaan (Culture). Sebagai sebuah karya sastra digital, film Big Eyes juga merepresentasikan perlawanan dari tokoh utama perempuan, yang dapat menggambarkan bagaimana gerakan feminisme dan bagaimana perempuan harus mampu melawan segala bentuk penindasan yang diakibatkan oleh sistem patriarki.

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality has always been at the center of the problem of feminism. The position of men and women is not the same in society. Men are superior, and women are inferior. This position makes men feel that

they are superior to women. The superior control the inferior, who must be willing to be controlled. This position applies both in the domestic environment, such as home, family, and in the public, such as society. The positioning of men as superior and

women as inferior is then called the patriarchal system. Patriarchy is a system of structures and social practices that places men as a group that dominates and exploits women (Walby, 1990). This patriarchal system often appears as a topic in literary works, and this system is developed into a problem in the story.

In this era of globalization, literature has also developed following the changing times.

Literary works identical with text and writing are now becoming diverse with the help of technology. Many terminologies are related to changes in these literary works, including cyber literature, electronic literature, and digital literature, which can be interpreted as literary works distributed via computer screens (Rahman, 2017). The change in digital literature makes literature dynamic in various forms and can be added to graphic designs, images, videos, and sound (Sanz&Romero, 2007). These characteristics make literature become audio-visual by paying attention to the essence of literature, such as the narration of film, storylines, and scriptwriting.

The patriarchal system is also still being discussed in the digital literature era. One of the literary works is the film “Big Eyes” (2014). This film is a biographical drama

film directed by Tim Burton. This film stars Amy Adams and Christoph Waltz. This film tells the story of a female painter named Margaret Keane who fights to get her copyright for a painting of a child with big eyes from her husband, Walter Keane, who claims that he was the one who painted the painting.

This story is based on the true story of a woman named Margaret Keane, who was born in 1927. In 1955, she met her husband, Walter Keane, who was a fellow painter by profession. Then they got married, which then caused problems when Margaret's paintings were recognized as her husband's work. Upon knowing this, Margaret fought for the copyright of her painting by proving herself to be painting at her prosecution trial. At trial, he was able to prove that he was the real painter of the painting of the big-eyed child by painting in court for 53 minutes (Parfrey&Nelson, 2014).

Margaret's character in this film, who fought against the patriarchal system before this was common at that time, makes it interesting to discuss further. The depiction of the resistance in this film will be discussed using the theory of Patriarchy by Sylvia Walby (1990). This study aims to describe the patriarchal system in the film

Big Eyes by Tim Burton and the resistance of the main female character, Margaret Keane, to the patriarchal system. The patriarchal system is essential to discuss because it is considered relevant today, and this system still exists in modern society.

Research on gender inequality in literature has become the main topic of gender issues. The patriarchal system that perpetuates this situation is always mentioned as a problem of the inferior position of women in social life. In addition, the patriarchal system is considered to be the source of the occurrence of oppression against women, as described in a study entitled „The Effect of Patriarchy towards Women's Oppression of Freedom in Enola Holmes: The Case of the Missing Marquess by Nancy Spinger (2023). This article explains that forms of patriarchy can take the form of oppression, such as suppression of education, voting rights, and individual rights. The oppression then led to acts of resistance by defending their rights to individual freedom as women.

Patriarchy has pillars or structures that build the system. Some of them are described in an article entitled “The Portrayal of Hegemony and Patriarchy in Louise O’Neills Only Ever Yours” (Naufina, 2021), namely mode of production, patriarchal state, and patriarchal

culture. In the article, all three structures are found in the private realm. However, there is another structure, and it does not only occur in the private sphere but also the public sphere. The existence of these structures in the public sphere is indeed not as clear as in the private sphere. As explained in the article entitled “Domestic Violence and Patriarchal Ideology in Kiran Desai’s The Inheritance of Loss” (2023) which explains that acts of oppression against women are prone to occur in the private sphere because society considers these actions to be private matters. This act of oppression has many faces, including physical, verbal, economic, sexual, and others. Meanwhile, the patriarchal system normalizes these actions, especially those related to domestic violence, which is a private sphere.

Along with the development of literature, research with a feminist approach to digital literature, such as TV series and films, has become a hot topic in the literary sphere. The article entitled “Abjection, Masculinity, and Sacrifice: The Reek of Death in *Game of Thrones*” (Johnston, 2022) conducts research on the characters in the TV Series entitled “Game of Thrones“. The article discusses the hypermasculinities displayed by the characters in the TV Series through the acts of sacrifice made by the characters in the

story's narrative. Apart from TV series, research on films has also been carried out using a feminist approach. The article entitled "Female Character's Empowerment in Islamic Oriented Film: A Case Study of *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih*" (Yusoh&Aziz, 2018) discusses the representation of women in the film "Ketika Cinta Bertasbih" and its relation to Islamic values. This Islamically oriented-film has several female characters who have been empowered after attempts at oppression in the narrative. The Empowerment process consists of two forms, empowering Islamic concepts and empowering feminism. This article helps provide an understanding of Islamic-based genres through female characters and provides a combination of theories that have a new dimension in analyzing films, especially Islamic-oriented films. While another article entitled "The Construction of Feminism in Indonesian Film: *Arisan 2!*" (Haryati&Suwana, 2014) discusses film as a medium that promotes liberal feminism through several issues of women's emancipation, especially in the areas of marriage, work, and social life.

The feminist approach in analyzing film narratives can be carried out through academic research to enrich research variations on digital literature. Cases that

occur due to problems in the patriarchal system are still found in the current era of digital literature and portrayed in literary works. This study aims to explain how the structure of the patriarchal system is depicted in digital literature, which in this case is the film "Big Eyes" by Tim Burton.

This film has a time background around 1950's but was published in 2014. The different time background is interesting because the social life between two condition of times are different. The portray of woman can be different. It makes this film is worth to be analyzed, besides still there is no research has been analyzed about this problem in this film.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative research uses the descriptive analysis method. This study takes data from a film entitled Big Eyes as the primary data source. The film, directed by Tim Burton, has a duration of 01.45.44. Data collection in this study started from watching the film. The author watched the film three times. The first screening of this film was carried out in its entirety to get the idea of using the patriarchal theory explained by Walby. The second screening was carried out in more detail by focusing more on the scenes depicting the patriarchal system and

resistance to that system. Taking scenes is considered carefully by stopping every scene that depicts the patriarchal system, especially in the structure of culture. The third screening is carried out as a whole by paying more attention scene by scene, especially the part that describes the patriarchal system and the resistance of the characters. In addition to the primary data sources, there are other supporting data sources, such as sources from the true story that inspired this film and several sources that support Walby's patriarchal theory.

Sylvia Walby explains a theory about patriarchy in her book *Theorizing Patriarchy* (1990). Patriarchy is a system of structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women. The concept of patriarchy is indispensable in analyzing gender inequality because it illustrates the depth, absorption, and interrelationships of various aspects of women's subordination within the household, family, and society. Patriarchy refers to male dominance in the private and public spheres. The culture formed by society creates the idea that every man is in a dominant position and women are under their control. This situation is what men refer to as superior and women as inferior. In a patriarchal system, men play an essential role in society. Men do this through

institutions such as academies, churches, and families which respectively justify and reinforce women's subordination to men (Millet, 1977).

Walby's patriarchal theory shows two forms of patriarchy: private and public. This patriarchal ideology distances women from the power system attempted through private and public constructions for the world of women and men, respectively. With the control of the patriarchal system, the position of men is very advantageous by subordinating women. Walby states six patriarchal structures: Paid Employment, Housework, Culture, Sexuality, Violence, and The State.

The first patriarchal structure, according to Walby, is *Paid Employment*. This structure focuses on women in the world of work. This structure depicts women who suffer from wage discrimination, unfair treatment and often have fewer roles than their male counterparts. The second structure is *Housework*, where Walby explains that women must work voluntarily under the control of their husbands at home. The third structure is *Culture*. Culture is a representation of society, such as the media, religion, and education, which produces a patriarchal viewpoint that shapes women's

position. Then the fourth structure is *Sexuality* which is the application of different rules to gender in society related to sexuality. The fifth structure is *Violence* which is violence perpetrated by men against women. The last structure is *The State* which relates to regulations made by the state, such as regulations and laws that suppress women and harm women. The six patriarchal structures may be related to each other. However, this paper focuses on the cultural structure of the patriarchal system to further analyze the patriarchal system in the film “Big Eyes”.

Culture, the third structure stated by Walby, is centered on society that shapes women's position as inferior and becomes subordinate to men, which is called the patriarchal system. Walby explained that three issues are discussed in this cultural structure; first, dominant or hegemonic ideologies in society affect gender inequality. Secondly, there are essential differences between masculinity and femininity, the characteristics of which are also determined by society. Third, there is a link between individual autonomy and structural decision-making. These three problems are characteristics of the structure of culture, namely the existence of ideological domination and hegemony in society, which affect gender inequality.

Then, there is a difference between masculinity and femininity, a characteristic society forms. Then, there is a relationship between individual autonomy and structural determination.

The ideology of masculinity and femininity is the primary source of limiting differences in gender positions in society. The existence of cultural control from society in this patriarchal system makes men get real economic benefits from subordination to women. Since early childhood, this difference has been taught to foster gender-based behavior that is made into a culture. It is disseminated through religion, education, and the media. This ideology about culture is an ideology that has been realized and can be understood as a belief related to social phenomena. This ideology makes culture one of the structures in the patriarchal system suitable as a basis for discussing social phenomena in the film Big Eyes.

III. DISCUSSION

The film Big Eyes depicts the patriarchal system and the struggles made by the main female character, Margaret Keane. This film is set in America, in San Francisco and Hawaii, from 1955 to the early 1960s. The patriarchal system was still clearly visible at that time in American society.

Almost all structures in the patriarchal system are raised in this story, such as the paid employment structure, when Margaret, the main female character in this film, seeks work because she has to support herself and her child. The company that wanted to take her in said there were few female employees there on minute 05.36 of the film. The Boss said that "We don't have many ladies in here. So, your husband approves of you working?" The sentence describes how men dominated social society at that time. The dominance of men in the world of work is evident in the film scene on minute 06.38, when Margaret finally gets hired; she is the only woman there.

Fig. 1. The Scene on minute 06.38.



This film also discusses the structure of the state in a patriarchal system. This scene occurred on minute 16.07 when Margareth received a letter from the court containing demands from her old husband, who wanted to take custody of her child. This scene proves that the patriarchal system is still depicted in state laws and regulations because a woman and a single parent cannot

raise a child; in this case, it concerns the economic inability to finance the child's needs.

Fig. 2. The Scene at minute 16.07.



"He told the court Jane doesn't have a proper home. It is beyond my abilities as a single woman..."

The structures of the patriarchal system depicted in this "Big Eyes" film will be focused on the Culture structure because this is the most prominent among other structures in this film. This Culture structure discusses gender inequality formed by the society which is influenced by how it is conveyed through religion, education, or the media.

In this film, the culture structure is depicted in scene on minute 05.39, where this scene states that if a woman works, she must have permission from her husband. This structure relates to the Paid Employment structure previously discussed. This is because, at that time, working women were not usually done. Society thinks that women should be at home and men should be working. This shows that women should exist in the domestic

environment and only be in the private sphere. This thought is also shown in scene 32.14 when Walter, Margaret's husband, tells Margaret to stay home. Community construction creates a home metaphor; for men, home is like a place of refuge, while for women, it is a prison (Rizk, 2007).

Fig. 3. The Scene at minute 32.14.



"They couldn't meet me, because you told me to stay home!!"

The scene depicts Margareth's position in her relationship with her husband. Walter's reason for telling Margareth to stay at home was indeed to cover up his deception, but this also illustrated that women had to obey what men said as husbands at that time. This depiction reinforces that the role of women should be in the domestic area and let men go into the public sphere. The position of women becomes invisible when they do something well (Becker, 1999). This invisibility is caused by men negating women's position and not considering women in the public sphere. So if women do things better than men, men can negate these things and, even worse, recognize them as

their abilities. The position of working women is vulnerable to being manipulated in the narrative so that they lose the nuances of normality and professionalism (Banks, 2011), which becomes a male weapon for personal gain.

Apart from that, this matter is also raised as a problem related to the state structure. The previous scene about state structure explained that women are unable to take care of children because they are unable to finance and raise them. As previously explained, from one structure to another in a patriarchal system can be interconnected, and this happens in the state structure, which then shows the existence of a Culture structure. This is shown in scenes 16.13. To find a way out of the state structure that shackles Margaret, she finally decides to marry Walter, who says he can support and care for her and her child. This shows that a woman cannot be independent and must depend on men.

"Walter: Marry Me! And I'll take care of you girls." (minutes 16.13)

As previously explained, one way of spreading thoughts about gender is through religion. This is also shown in "Big Eyes" on minutes 38.40. This scene depicts Margareth confessing and looking for answers on what to do by meeting a priest at the church. She

said her problem was that she had to lie to many people, including her children because her husband admitted that the painting she was painting was his husband's work. The answer given by the priest shows that in religion, men are superior and dominate women. The priest said these problems were common, and Margaret had to follow her husband's decision as the head of the family.

*“Priest: It sounds like your husband is trying to make the best of an imperfect situation. You were raised Christian, so you know what we are taught: The man is head of the household.”
 (minutes 38.40)*

Dissemination of gender position in society apart from religion is also raised through the media. This film clearly illustrates that her husband, Walter Keane, appears in the public sphere as a man. This was because, at that time, female painters were not taken seriously by society, and no one would buy the painting if the public knew it was a woman who was painting. This is shown in the film scene at minutes 50.13 *“Sadly, people don't buy lady art.”* and 53.34 *“Yes, we don't use my name, since people don't take women's art seriously”*.

The depictions of the patriarchal system through this Culture structure lead to the formation of another structure, namely the Violence structure. Within this structure is

oppression and violence perpetrated by men against women, both verbal and non-verbal. This is shown in scenes 01.04.58 when Walter said *“NO YOU WON'T! Or -- I'll have you whacked!”*, and 01.15.25. These scenes show that Walter Keane verbally abused Margaret by threatening and blaming Margaret for what happened. Then, he also committed violence by wanting to burn Margaret and her child. This violence includes physical violence, the most controversial violence in the household. Physical violence is defined as an act that causes pain or harm to the victim, which causes severe consequences both physically and mentally (Zabihzadeh et al., 2015).

Fig. 4. The Scene on minute 01.15.25.



Suddenly, he pulls out a BOOK OF MATCHES. He lights a MATCH and waves it sinisterly --

The formation of the position of men and women, which is formed by the society discussed in this Culture structure makes men dominate women. Male domination in the private and public spheres is clearly depicted in this film; even Margaret stated that Walter dominated her, so she finally

committed public fraud by using the name Keane in her painting. She said her husband forced her, and she was scared. He has no other choice but to survive. This is illustrated in the movie scene on minute 01.30.04.

Fig. 5. The Scene on minute 01.30.04.



“He had me dominated. He would rant and rave if I didn't do what he wanted. I was afraid. I didn't see any option, so I went along. I felt very bad...”

The depictions of the patriarchal system in the film *Big Eyes* show that although it is focused on one structure, culture. However, the relationship between one structure and another makes discussions about Culture structures inseparable from other structures. The treatment of Margareth's husband, Walter Keane, as a man towards her as a woman made Margaret put up resistance to this treatment which was also a resistance to the patriarchal system.

Margaret Keane's resistance to the patriarchal system was carried out not to rebel against the system deliberately. He made these fights without knowing that he was fighting the system that was developing at that time. In this film, Margaret Keane's

resistance is seen from the beginning of the film. The first scene in this film immediately shows Margaret, who is packing to get ready to leave the house. She left her selfish husband long before it was normal for a woman to do.

Fig. 6. The Scene on minute 01.30.04.



It was start of the day, when Margareth Ulbrich walked out of her suffocating husband long before it became evastable things to do

It also shows Margareth's resistance through her courage in expressing her opinion about her disagreement when her husband admits that he was the one that painted the *Big Eyes* painting, such as in the scene at minute 27.09. She did not remain silent against the injustice he got. Even though, in the end, he felt helpless and could not do anything about the conditions that happened to her. This was because her husband proved that society had never seen women as capable. Her husband's oppression also encouraged her to try to defend herself bravely when they conducted an interview at minute 50.15. She tried to reference other female painters when her husband made it clear that society does not take a woman's work seriously by saying,

“What about Georgia O'Keefe?”. Margareth as a woman, is not afraid to express her feelings and opinion, especially when she needs to stand up for herself.

Margareth also wanted to be recognized in society by painting new things. She wanted to be known as a painter and show that she, as a woman, could do the same thing as a man. However, this proves that society still does not take women's work seriously. It was proven that when Margareth exhibited her paintings, people preferred to buy her husband's paintings and were not interested in Margareth's. After showing some efforts to stand up for herself, Margareth's little resistance finally exploded when she received violence from her husband. She decided to run away again and divorce her husband. She started her new life in Hawaii and filed for divorce. This is shown in the minute 01.18.47 film scene.

Margareth's resistance did not stop until she asked for a divorce; she continued to fight by revealing the truth about what happened to a radio station called Big Lolo in Hawaii, as shown in scene 01.23.08. She clarified all Big Lolo said about her husband as a painter by saying that Walter is no longer her husband and he is not a painter. She even underlined that she was the only painter in her family. Revealing the truth to the Radio

shows that she began to advance into the public sphere and tried to take her rights. She begins to reveal all the secrets that harm her as a woman.

The news of Margareth's confession becomes big and becomes the talk of the community. After her divorce, she later decided to sue Walter for the copyright to her paintings. In court, Margareth acknowledged all the treatment of her husband, who dominated her, and she managed to prove that she was someone who had the right to copyright the Big Eyes painting by painting for 53 minutes in court. This action wins her in court.

Margareth's resistance in this film shows that the patriarchal system is detrimental to women. This also shows that a woman wants equality by being treated the same as men. Women also have the same rights as men and the same position in both the private and public spheres. This film and the struggles made by the character Margaret Keane show that women are also able and deserve to be recognized in the public sphere. This film can also teach young women not to be easily manipulated.

Digital Literature provides an opportunity to spread the essence of literature to a wider scope because it can reach people who cannot be reached by conventional literature. Almost all patriarchal structures are

contained in the film, except for the structure of sexuality. The possibility of removing this structure is that the film will pass censorship in the Parents Guide-13 category, which affects the number of viewers. The number of viewers is significant in the genre of popular literature. It must be considered from an economic point of view because, after all, the film is a cultural product requiring a large amount of money in production. It is the same with the choice of feminism topics in this film which, at the same time, the issue of feminism is increasingly spreading in society and can make people interested in watching the film.

IV. CONCLUSION

The position of men and women is not the same in society, which is called gender inequality. The positioning of men as superior and women as inferior is then called the patriarchal system. This issue is still being portrayed in the digital literature era. One of them is a film called “Big Eyes” directed by Tim Burton. This film is analyzed using the patriarchal theory by Sylvia Walby. Walby states that there are six patriarchal structures: Paid Employment, Housework, Culture, Sexuality, Violence, and The State.

All patriarchal structures are related to one another, and the relationship between structures in a patriarchal system also occurs because of cause and effect. The analysis results found that the oppression that occurs in the main female character is the impact of the cultural structure, which results in acts of oppression that lead to other patriarchal structures. This research found that almost all patriarchal structures are contained in this film, except for the structure of sexuality. The possibility of removing this structure is that the film will pass censorship in the Parents Guide-13 category, which affects the number of viewers. The number of viewers is significant in the genre of popular literature. It must be considered from an economic point of view because, after all, the film is a cultural product requiring a large amount of money in production. It is the same with the choice of feminism topics in this film which, at the same time, the issue of feminism is increasingly spreading in society and can make people interested in watching the film.

Digital literature has a characteristic that can help literary works spread widely. So, the essence of literature also can reach many more people. The positive impact of this film is A realization of women's position in society and how it is essential to be brave to



stand up for themselves towards something they are capable of. This film and the resistance of the main female character show that the patriarchal system is very detrimental to women. It also shows that women are capable and deserve recognition in the public sphere. The screening of this film in 2014, even though it has a background in the 1950s, shows that patriarchal issues still exist today. This film can also provide a picture of women in society and teach young women to understand their abilities and rights as individuals.

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