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## NEGOTIATING GENDER EQUITY: WEIGHING UP GENDER ROLE REPRESENTATION IN INDIA'S FILM *KI AND KA*

Ika Rizki Yustisia<sup>1</sup>, Widya Pujarama<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Debates on how humankind interacts as a society not often but always related on how gender difference is perceived. As feminism is culture-based, religious and multi-ethnic Asia, including India and Indonesia has its unique outlook. In Indonesia, the number of female workers have been increasing significantly, strengthening the role of women in public domain—after a long period of clear and strict gender division introduced in New Order Era through PKK (Organization for Family Welfare). Nevertheless, it does not necessarily liberate women of patriarchal culture from roles in 'private' domain, as a wife and a mother (as the only one role woman can hold).

Those depictions also being represented in Indian controversial film titled *Ki and Ka*. The film introduces the exchange of gender roles that is contrast with the social construction in India. Same with Indonesia's context, India is one of the countries whereas patriarchal culture being recognized and institutionalized. The female character (named *Kia*) is a wife and a career woman at once, while the male character (named *Kabir*) just being at home doing housework instead of working at public area. The film represents gender equality as a crossover of public (female workers) and private (a devoted wife) role repeatedly orients towards physical appearances as main social capital for women in both social domain. This paper tries to present dialectical dialogue through literature review about the paradox between equality of women in public sector and how does culture interpret domestic works as remain gendered, although gender role exchanges make it possible to negotiate an atmosphere of gender equality.

**Keywords:** gender role; *Ki and Ka*; gender equality.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

On the note of modernization spread in East and South East Asia, Stivens (2003) argues that it is immensely related to globalization and gender relations. The developments in Asia, as in Western countries, "... [H]ave long been obsessively gendered, usually as female" (de Grazia, in Stivens, 2003: 5-6). On the progressive development especially in East and South East Asia, Stivens (2003) further claimed that women has been put as the main actors of Asian Values formation as 'westoxification'

<sup>1</sup> **Brawijaya University**, Veteran Street, Malang 65141, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> **Brawijaya University**, Veteran Street, Malang 65141, Indonesia Corresponding author. Tel.: +62-82245490029; +62-85753603355. E-mail address: yustisia.ika@ub.ac.id; mncprwidya@ub.ac.id.



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counter-agent, preserving the traditional division between private and public gendered role.

In Asia, especially India and Indonesia, there are clear and strict gender division existing on both the said patriarchal countries, in daily lives and in formal activities. For example, in Indonesia, the notion of *macak*, *manak*, *masak* which in traditional Javanese roughly translated as putting make up, delivering baby, and cooking, as become the description of ideal femininity. In other words, being an ideal woman in Indonesia refers to being succeeded in domestic area, once the woman becomes a wife and a mother. Similarly, in India, the *mangala sutta* serves as a gender apparatus, which marks perceived gender role: the necklace given by groom to his spouse signifies the male role of providing happiness for the female, whereas female passively received the male's giving while praying for the happiness, loves, and loyalty, and also family prosperity in their marriage. In India, the man serves as a guardian for the woman, while woman's achievement in life was being marked with her devotion to the husband.

Sen (2003) reasons that Indonesia put female workers as political, cultural and economic subjects because firstly it strengthens the image of modern Indonesia culturally and economically, and secondly it signifies affluence. But this does not automatically erase women from domestic responsibility. Robinson (2003) maintains that feminism in Indonesia relies heavily on the women's interwoven private and professional life chained mainly on their role in domestic spheres. Sen (2003) illustrates this through "the five duties" of women in PKK (Organization for Family Welfare) that tended to stress their role in domestic sphere. The five duties sees women as (1) Producer of nation's future generations; (2) Wife and faithful companion to her husband; (3) Mother and educator for her children; (4) Manager of household; and (5) Citizen (Hull, in Sen, 2003, p. 36). In other words, even as a national subject, women bear their duty as family caretaker, unlike the opposite sex. The term, *Forshee* (2006, p. 164) states as *Ibuisism* ... "while men maintain a public image, women produce social reality within and between households" (p. 165). Socially, PKK was a medium for the term domestication in Indonesia. The state of *ibuism* came for the most oppressive element which stated that woman have to serve her husband, children, family, society, and nation. As a housekeeper, women are required to provide their work for free, without expecting any prestige or power (Suryakusuma, 2011), as a devotion.

While in India, a history of hereditary tradition reasoned why women are often portrayed as a weak figures on the country's popular culture. Women acted as obedient





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personas to men, as wives who take care of household needs including preparing and cooking food for the family members, preparing the offerings for worshipping Gods, or as daughters who assist their mothers in all forms of domestic responsibilities. It is recognized that the mangala sutta implies woman's conscious devotion to the family, an attribute reinforcing cultural perception on woman's role in domestic sphere.

It appears that Feminism in Asia triggering the increasing number of female workers seems unrelated to the long traditional gender division. Asian women, then, are subjected heavily with domestic chores. In other words, domestic life remains gendered.

This paper tries to review an India's film titled *Ki and Ka*, which offers the idea of gender role exchange between a wife and a husband in which the wife is a career woman and the husband is being at home to take care of housework. This idea supporting gender equality, although in reality the construction of the ideal role of women and men is not entirely free of patriarchal culture, including when segregation between public space and the private sphere seeks to be modified. It important to challenge whether the idea of gender role exchange presented in this film intersects with traditional gender myth that already exists as yet.

## **2. NEGOTIATING GENDER EQUALITY: PROMOTING GENDER ROLE EXCHANGE**

### **2.1 Women, Culture, and Patriarchy**

Gender division in Indonesia seemed to be well preserved (Sen, 2003). Stivens (2003) studied Asian's position on the word family and domesticity, especially women in gendered relations in public and private domains. Asian middle class female workers, as Stivens (2003) explains, commonly have other workingwomen filling in their day job as housewives. Sen (2003, p. 38) states further that the term "working women" non-identical with "working-class women." Borrowing Popenoe's (In Segrin & Flora, 2011, p. 5) definition of family as " a small domestic group of kin..." Segrin & Flora (2011) asserts that family life is heavily associated with domestic sphere.

Segrin and Flora (2011, p. 71) further argue that women predominantly receive favorably the spouse dominance, regardless their capability to earn for the family. Forshee (2006, p. 162) adds, "... ideal marriages cement partnerships in which women handle finances and raise children while men hold the (at least public) role of power." To rephrase it, it is uncommon to perceive that household should habitually be androcentric.



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Forshee (2006) also itemized Indonesian traditional women's role: "... care for children, cook, clean, husk rice, pound coffee, garden, go to market, and often weave and dye cloth," while men have more free time and less responsibility.

Stivens (2003) maintains that there are strong relations between femininity, consumption and sexualisation of women in newly prosperous middle class Asia, especially in Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, China, Thailand, Vietnam, and Philipina. Robinson (2003) illustrates how maidenly Indonesian girls' life is heavily culturally restricted. Their marriage also mostly funded by the parents, who constantly seeking signs of their prosperous matrimony in their daughters' ability to espouse the causes of patriarchal system (Robinson, 2003). "It seems to be common for women civil servants to resent their obligations to Dharmawanita (wives organization at offices), and their bosses' wives who put additional demands on these working women in the name of that institution" (Sen, 2003, p. 44).

While in India, women's position is more complex. Kandiyoti (1988) stated that India is one country that embraces what she calls classical patriarchy. Under classic patriarchy, girls are given away in marriage at a very young age into households headed by their husband's father. There, they are subordinate not only to all the men but also to the more senior women, especially their mother-in-law. The extent to which this represents a total break with their own kin group varies in relation to the degree of endogamy in marriage practices and different conceptions of honor.

Noted Indian social anthropologist, Srinivas (1977), first identified the role of women as custodians of family status and caste purity. Besides, there are many other more subtle markers of gender segregation robust in India. Restrictions on women's physical mobility is yet another marker of gender segregation in which women must seek permission from family elders before venturing outside the home to visit health centers, friends' homes, or the local bazaar, and often must be accompanied. Steve Derne (1994), in his qualitative work in Banaras (Varanasi) in north India, noted "in every interaction in which a husband gives his wife permission to go outside the home, he reconstitutes the normal state of affairs in which restrictions on women are necessary" (Desai, 2010).

## 2.2 A Review on “The Representation of Gender Role In Indian Film (A Semiotic Analysis of Kabir’s Role In Ki and Ka” Research

Widyawati (2017) on her paper tries to examine controversial Rajagopalan Balakrishnan’s Indian film *Ki and Ka* portraying a female worker and her stay at home husband’s life in India. On the film, a manly Kabir stand up to his father’s disagreement and long established canard in India that man should not be a stay at home husband. The distinctive film portrays Kabir, not only as a good husband, but also as a devoted son-in-law to Kia’s single mom and as a sociable neighbor to other housewives. Kia, the wife, is depicted as a female worker with strong character and professionalism, who had her moment uneasiness having a stay at home husband, creating a conflict with Kabir because of her attempt concealing Kabir’s chosen social identity once she is promoted to higher position.

Focusing on scenes related to gender role, the research employed Barthes’ semiotic analysis to investigate screen captures of 18 selected scenes that exhibit activities and works done by Kabir and Kia in both domestic and public domains. On positive side, the film shows that it is highly possible for man and women to switch their gender role, especially in a marriage.



Fig. 1. (a) Kia put on mangala sutta to Kabir.

For example, on one scene, Kia put on mangala sutta to her appeared-to-be happy husband, Kabir. This breaks Indian tradition of which husband was the one that put on the necklace onto his wife. The scene introduces the exchanged role between a man and a woman as both have met the mutual agreement about it. In other words, an exchange of gender role in a marriage is possible as long as there is a negotiation and agreement reached between the couple. However, the film displays that there are

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boundaries preventing the gender role occurs in all sectors (Widyawati, 2017). By that means, Kia as a wife still obliged to be devoted to her husband, once she reach home.

A noteworthy scene is in minute 44:23, where Kia stood up giving money to Kabir, who sat on the bed, receiving the money. As Kia appears to be higher and bigger compared to Kabir, regardless the gender, the statement that the moneymaker on the family would be treated as superior than the partner who works on domestic domain.



Fig. 2. (a) Kia giving money to Kabir.

Another scene worth mention is in minute 46:58 where Kia had put on her make up before her meeting with the boss (depicted boss and Kia on the sofa, at the same level height,) and succeeded on the meeting (when Kia raised her hand up). This means that a female worker has been put under an obligation to be physically attractive, even on professional occasion.

Throughout the film Widyawati (2017) contends that Kia and Kabir's marriage pattern is considered unlawful from India's patriarchal tradition. Kabir has been depicted as an inferior husband, regardless his masculine appearance and his guardian nature. While Kia as a wife has been characterized as a superior wife, but has been also portrayed as body conscious female worker seeking concession in her professional life. Widyawati (2017) research mainly focuses on Kabir's life and the concept of masculinity. Leaned against two scenes as mentioned before, the writers will further discuss about gender role construction in public and private lives.



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### 2.3 Discussion

Women, predominantly, in greater number of Indian cinema, are not characterized to be an equal to their male counterparts. It concerns with regard to objectification of women, accentuation of 'Male Gaze' perspectives, employing misogyny, and even put women as the selling point (as in most Telugu movie). But in the last decade, there has been a positive change in the film industry regarding women's inclusiveness. Queen, a Vikas Bahl movie, is one among the rare Indian films that passed the Bechdel test (Kamath, 2014). To pass the Bechdel test, the film must have: (1) two female characters (preferably named); (2) who talk to each other; (3) about something other than a man. Highway, English Vinglish and Shadi ke side effects are few other recent films that pay attention to the role of women (Shaji, 2017).

Ray (2013) noted an increasing number of Bollywood films address 'Gender Equality and Individual Freedom' during pre and post liberalization period in India, 384 films (77,42%) in pre liberalization period and 594 films (80,38%) in post liberalization era. Structural reform in the post liberalization period brings a significant change in the life style of educated youth – specially, in the life style of educated female. Increasing number of female is working outside of their hometown and pursuing jobs in historically male dominated fields, like management, engineering and advanced technology. Changing structure of gender dynamics in Indian society becomes increasing important theme in Bollywood films in the post liberalization era (1992-2010). One example is Chak De! India (Come On! India, 2007) argues against the gender discrimination in work place.

Then, Ki and Ka produced on 2016 offered new perspectives on gender role exchanges that challenge India's patriarchal view. First, as mentioned before, the one that wore mangala sutta in the Kabir and Kia household was the husband, Kabir. Not only Kabir represented as a man happily received the mangala sutta, but also deliberately procured all domestic chores conventionally done by Indian women from the beginning of their marriage. Mangala sutta worn as a necklace for an Indian married woman on daily basis, but Kabir wore the mangala sutta as a bracelet. In spite of his acceptance towards taking domestic role on his marriage, Kabir portrayed still considering public's judgments on his mangala sutta, as it possibly hurt the masculinity or pride of a man in Indian culture.

The culture consciously challenge traditional gender construct by accentuating mangala sutta, which has been perceived as women's acceptance for their responsibility to serve the man and the whole family. Implicitly, this film contains a message that the





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responsibility for household chores and family need fall in both husband and wife, not only for the wife. It is portrayed that a man also capable of doing housework and manage all the household chores, including managing financial planning and accounting for the family. Unfortunately, in patriarchal culture that activities potentially spoiled man's position as the top strata in the family, and also in the society, culturally speaking.

On the film, Kabir depicted as a man with good cooking skill. Not only preparing food in the kitchen that closely associated as woman's workspace, but also doing grocery shopping, including bargaining for the best price. The scene was also supported by the backsound titled Most Wanted Munda, which lyric was "munda can shop... munda can chop.. kehnde bargain main hay yeh to that roughly translated into "he can shop, he can chop, he is good at bargaining."

On the film, Kabir has an ideal masculine appearance, which characterized with a strong man with muscular body, six-pack chest, and beard. Kabir pays attention to his appearance, depicted with his body building activities. Kabir also appeared as an ideal masculine man. Women neighbors praised him as he has ideal body appearance and good cooking skill.

It is maintained that men are considered as the main breadwinner in the family, owning privileges in the public space. Women who end up enjoying the position as breadwinners then, gain the power that aligns her position with men. In this film, Kia was being depicted as a career woman who had no interest in household chores, and fully exchanged the role of conventional man and woman in public and domestic spheres with her husband Kabir.

Another interesting point on this film was that body appearances still become women's social capital. Kia put on a lipstick on her lips before meeting with her boss, her success seemed to be caused by her cosmetic. Despite egalitarian condition at work was being introduced on this film, it was still highly gendered, as a woman in public domain is closely associated with her appearance and her beauty. Implicitly, this film reaffirms the discrimination experienced by women in the workplace.

Female workers have to face the so called statistical discrimination and preferential discrimination, an attempt of herding women only on jobs that fit the stereotype attached to them, such as a secretary. While men was stereotyped as a leader, person with important position. This lead to the term superwoman syndrome coined by Newel (1993), of which described women experiencing double-burden. This



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means that women has the same workload with men but different salary rate, women also experience non-egalitarian opportunity and preferential appreciation as men (Candraningrum, 2013).

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

This film represents gender equality as a crossover of public and private role represented with female workers and a devoted husband both emphasizing physical appearance as the main social capital on social domains. Despite the attempt of challenging traditional gender construct in India, the film heavily contained patriarchal perspective attributing women to the ideal femininity whereas men to the ideal masculinity conventionally perceived by the culture. It could be concluded that domestic work remains gendered.

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