

Patriarchal Domination in Ernest Prakasa's *Imperfect* – an Adaptation Study

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ABSTRACT

This study deals with the adaptation of an Indonesian novel entitled *Imperfect* (2019) by Meira Anastasia into a film with a similar title *Imperfect* (2019) by Ernest Prakarsa. Although there are differences between the novel and the film adaptation, they have similarities in terms of the main issue of women's physical insecurities and their struggle for self-acceptance. Considering that aspect, this study aims to argue the persistent existence of patriarchal domination despite the differences in the storyline and characterization. The adaptation also bears similarities that indicate the issue of women's insecurities and struggle for acceptance. In this study, the theory of adaptation and patriarchal beauty standards are used as a tool to analyze the film adaptation. despite the adapters' aim to raise the issue of women's physical insecurities and criticize the patriarchy's standard of beauty, the film adaptation even indicates the persistence of patriarchal domination.

Keyword: beauty standard, film adaptation, patriarchy, self-acceptance, women insecurities

INTRODUCTION

The practice of film adaptation in Indonesia has a significant history in the development of Indonesian cinema and the most common adaptations are in the form of novel to a film. In fact, the history of film adaptation in Indonesia has dated back since the Dutch Indies government era which marked by the production of the first film in Indonesia entitled *Loetoeng Kasaroeng*, an adaptation from a famous Sundanese folklore *Lutung Kasarung* (Abidin et al., 2019) Many adaptation films have been produced ever since, which according to Sapardi Djoko Damono, the popularity of the movie adaptation is also related to the source text, which in this case is the novel. As a result, the more popular the novel, the more acceptable will the adaptation movie be (Abidin et al., 2019). Albeit the fact that there are ups and down in Indonesian film production, nowadays the trend of adapting novels to films in Indonesia began to increase followed by the success of the film *Ayat – Ayat Cinta* by Hannung Bramantyo in 2008 and *Laskar Pelangi* by Riri Riza (2008). Recently, there are quite significant numbers of Indonesian film which are adapted from the novels and gain significant success, such as *Perahu Kertas* (2012), *Dilan 1990* (2018) and *Bumi Manusia* (2019) (Rizka, 2020). Observing how the practice of adaptation has become increasingly popular, in this study I am interested in analyzing the adaptation of a novel entitled *Imperfect* (2019) by Meira Anastasia into a movie which entitled similarly, *Imperfect* (2019) by Ernest Prakarsa.

Imperfect: Karier, Cinta dan Timbangan is a movie by Ernest Prakasa which was released on 19 December 2019. It is considered as a loose adaptation since the movie and the novel are not similar in terms of protagonist and storyline, yet it has the same theme of women's insecurities and struggles for self-acceptance. Similar to Prakasa's typical previous films, *Imperfect* (2019) film is also wrapped in a romantic-comedy genre. The film was considered successful for vividly depicting the issue of women's insecurities and considered a huge success since it is related to women's

experiences and problems in their daily life especially concerning the patriarchal society's mindset on physically ideal women. As a matter of fact, on its closing on February 12, 2020, *Imperfect: Karir, Cinta dan Timbangan* has gained 2.662.356 viewers which overthrows the movie *Dua Garis Biru* (2019) that was ranked 2nd best-selling Indonesian film in 2019 (Diananto, 2020a). Most importantly, this movie was also nominated for 9 categories in Piala Maya, and achieved two awards as the best adaptation screenplay and the best makeup artist of Piala Maya in the year 2020 (Sayyidah, 2020). In the same year 2020, the film *Imperfect: Karir, Cinta dan Timbangan*, also overthrows Joko Anwar's *Ratu Ilmu Hitam* by achieving one of the most prestigious Indonesian Film Awards: Citra Award for Best Adapted Screenplay Writer by Ernest Prakasa and Meira Anastasia (Diananto, 2020b). Furthermore, the adaptation film *Imperfect* also achieved another award in 2020 which is the Asian Academy Creative Awards as the National Winner of Best Comedy Program (Octavianus, 2020). Perceiving the prestigious awards achieved, the film reaffirmed Ernest Prakasa's standing as a filmmaker whose accomplishments are to be reckoned with.

Different from its novel *Imperfect: A Journey of Self-Acceptance* (2020) which narrated by Meira as well as the writer of the novel, the movie *Imperfect: Karier, Cinta dan Timbangan* (2019) revolves on Rara's life as the main female character who often experiences bullying and body shaming due to her so-called imperfect body. As the first daughter in her family, Rara who is played by Jessica Mila, was born to have a dark skin tone, messy curly hair, and curvaceous body as a resemblance of her father. While her sister Lulu who is played by Yamin Napper, is blessed with white "cotton-like" skin, straight long hair, and a slim figure, which is more suitable to the idea of ideal women's beauty standards. In her adult age, Rara is portrayed as a smart woman but people never acknowledge her since she is often underrated due to her imperfect physical appearance. Since Rara is working in a beauty product company, she often experiences verbal bullying from her colleagues. On the other hand, Rara is actually a strong candidate for being the new research manager, but she was considered not representing the company, Malathi as a brand of beauty products, because of her appearance. Rara then approaches her boss, Kelvin, and asks him whether she can be given a chance to improve her appearance and be the next manager. The boss, who actually distinguishes Rara's qualification, gives her a chance to improve her physical appearance in accordance with society's beauty standards. Rara, who desires the position, gradually changes her appearance by exercising and becoming skinnier, learning to wear makeup, and improving her appearance. Yet, although finally Rara succeeds in gaining her goal of being a manager, she almost ruins her relationship with her family, her best friend Fey, and especially her boyfriend because of a misunderstanding that is caused by her ignorant and never-ending insecurities. Later, Rara's over dieting even affected her health which causes her to pass out during a meeting. Things are getting better when Rara manages to beat her insecurities and reconciles with her closest person, family, and friends. Rara's self-confidence also affects her performance in her workplace, and finally, she's able to meet her boss's demands on improving the company and escalating its profit. In the end, Rara realized, "turns out that being pretty doesn't always mean being happy. I learn to be the best version of myself, because the truth is, we don't have to be perfect to be happy." (Prakasa, 2019).

After reading the novel and watching the movie thoroughly, I notice that there are significant differences in the storyline and the characters in the adaptation movie, yet, Ernest as the director keeps the theme of women's "self-acceptance and body positivity as the main theme" that connects the novel with the adaptation movie (Nural, 2019). This is also related to the issue of women's insecurities due to the standard of beauty in Indonesian patriarchal society. Women in a patriarchal

society are very susceptible to being judged concerning their physical appearance, especially because of the beauty standard, such as white skin, long smooth black hair, and thin yet sexy body figure, which they should fulfill in order to be acknowledged by the society (Bartky, 1988; Wolf, 2006). As a matter of fact, women who cannot meet the beauty standard tend to become depressed and consider themselves worthless just because their body shapes are considered less ideal. This depression then triggered their physical insecurities, which causes them to have low self-esteem. At some points, some women even have mindless thoughts of changing their appearance instantly through excessive diet or plastic surgeries which may endanger their health and body. This problem is relatable with the theme of both the novel and the film since both protagonists also feel insecure about their physical appearance due to society's judgment. Interestingly, I also notice that the main issue of the protagonist's insecurity in the novel is broken down into several women characters in the movie who have their insecurities which resemble the protagonist's problem in the novel. It is perceivable then, although there are significant differences concerning the storyline, both the novel and the film are surely connected by the issue of women's insecurities as a result of patriarchal domination. This then aroused my curiosity to do the adaptation study of the *Imperfect* film. Therefore, in this analysis, I want to know in what way the *Imperfect* (2019) film adaptation depicts the persistence of patriarchal domination.

In this study, I use two theories to reveal the persistence of patriarchal domination. The first theory that I utilize is the theory of adaptation by Linda Hutcheon (2006). There are three interrelated characteristics of adaptations that Hutcheon proposes, which are: as a formal entity or a product, as a process of creation, and as a process of reception. Adaptation of a formal entity or a product is distinguished as a transposition that involves a shift of one medium to another medium (e.g. a novel to film), genre (an epic to a novel), from real to fictional, etc. Secondly, adaptation as a process of creation always involves the (re-)interpretation and (re-)creation which purpose is preserving and salvaging the original source text. Thirdly, adaptation is seen as a process of reception which is a form of intertextuality which means that adaptation is "experienced as palimpsest through one's memory of other work, that resonate through repetition with variation" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 8). The most common and familiar modes of adaptation are those that shifting from telling ↔ showing mode, which is from printed text to performance. One of the famous scholars of adaptation, Thomas Leitch states that an adaptation must be conscious of and purposefully extracting the story from another work in order to be classified as such (2008). Additionally, there are also several studies about adaptation and patriarchy which also useful in the analysis of my research. Andrei Nae (2019) stated that the representation of women in films had been designed by very rigid patriarchal norms. Male and female characters were created in binary opposition (Nae, 2019). As a matter of fact, in relation to gender roles, women are also expected to show their femininity through physical appearance and feminine behavior. It is found out that the adaptation remains faithful to the conservative gender politics of its source text in the sense that while Lara appears to promote the notion of women's empowerment, her task of carrying on her father's project and redeeming his legacy is simply about preserving patriarchy and maintaining patriarchal order (Nae, 2019).

Aside from the theory of adaptation and patriarchy, I also need to use the perception of patriarchy's beauty standard of ideal women to refine my analysis. Naomi Wolf's idea about patriarchal beauty standards represents the problems that happen in the novel and the adaptation. In *The Beauty Myth* (2006) as one of her eminent yet controversial book, Naomi Wolf emphasizes on how the society's beauty standards, which sometimes irrational, has become a double edge sword for women since it can be both empowering as well as discouraging especially when they could not meet the beauty standard. Additionally, Indonesian women often experience the same predicament in fulfilling society's beauty standard since Indonesia is known as a country with a strong patriarchal culture.

Thus, it is almost impossible for Indonesian women to break the stereotypes and beauty standards that have embedded deeply in the society, which also becomes the issue in both the novel *Imperfect* and the adaptation. Both women protagonists and other women characters in the film also suffer from society's standards of ideal women which then causes the rise of insecurities concerning their body and leads them to have low self-esteem. However, I notice that although both the novel and the adaptation film seem to criticize society's standard regarding women's ideal physiques, it turns out that later the adaptation even consolidates the patriarchal domination.

METHOD

In this study, I use two primary data for my research. First, I read the novel *Imperfect: the Journey of Self-Acceptance* (2019) by Meira Anastasia movie cover edition. Then I observe the movie *Imperfect: Karier, Cinta dan Timbangan* (2019) directed by Ernest Prakasa. The secondary data are taken from the library research, which includes textbooks, journals, online resources, and other significant data related to this research. In conducting the research, I analyze the novel by doing close reading, focusing on the protagonist and her insecurities through her experiences. After collecting the significant data that are beneficial in my research, I will continue to observe the adaptation film, especially focusing on Rara as the protagonist and the other women characters in the film. I observe and collect the data in a form of screenshots and take notes on the script. Then, I observe the relation of the novel and the adaptation, especially concerning what are being adapted into the film, and what are missing from the adaptation. Later in the second part of the analysis, I am focusing on revealing how the novel and the adaptation of the film *Imperfect* (2019) show the persistence of patriarchal domination. To conduct the research, I utilize the theory of adaptation and patriarchy which are supported by patriarchy's beauty standard. Afterward, I draw a conclusion based on my research.

ANALYSIS

PATRIARCHAL DOMINATION IN THE ADAPTATION FILM IMPERFECT

The adaptation from novel to film *Imperfect* (2019) are bound by the issue of women's physical insecurities which are triggered by the coercion of society's beauty standard. Similar to the novel, the protagonists of both the novel and the film suffer the same problem of being women who are considered not conforming society's beauty standards. Not only the protagonist but the other women character in the film also endure the same predicament and struggle for self-acceptance that resembles Meira's struggle in the novel. However, aside from the *Imperfect* (2019) novel's theme of women's empowerment, self-love, and criticism towards patriarchal domination, the film adaptation still strongly engages with patriarchal domination which can be perceived by the perpetuation of beauty standards and the preservation of gender roles that depicted in the film.

1. The Perpetuation of Beauty Standards

The perpetuation of beauty standards in the film can first be perceived through the justification of women in maintaining their beauty in order to fit with society's beauty standards. In a patriarchal society, maintaining beauty has been considered as a way for women to fit in the beauty standard. Different from the novel which only elaborates on Meira's effort in improving herself by learning to wear soft makeup, the film is visualizing Rara's effort in improving her physical appearance.

Similar to Meira's effort in getting her ideal body in the novel, Rara as the protagonist in the film also negotiates the standard of beauty by dieting and exercising. Rather differently, in the novel,

Meira is dieting through over-exercising because she considers exercising as a punishment for her body because of being overweight. In the film, Rara is depicted to do over dieting and exercising to gain her goal as the new research manager. However, in the scenes, Rara seems to not consider exercising as a punishment, she is happily doing the exercise because she already gets the advantage and finally reaches the goal of being the new research manager in the office. This actually shows that the film is still trapped in a beauty standard because finally, Rara can reach her goal, because she is succeeded in transforming into Rara whose physical appearance is in accordance with society's beauty standard. As seen in picture 1, Rara's facial expression is displaying that she is not under pressure, yet, she looks happy and enjoys the exercise. Moreover, Rara is also wearing sportswear that exposes her arm, this is drastically different from the 'old' Rara who always wore a sweatshirt to cover her arms.



Figure 1. Rara: Negotiating beauty standards

Kelvin: Gimana Ra, jadi elo yang sekarang? Beda nggak? [So, how about being the new you now, Ra? Is there any difference?]

Rara: Dulu kan insecure banget. Sekarang ya... lebih pede. [I used to be very insecure, now I am more confident]

Kelvin: kalau sekarang, cowo-cowo pada nengok dong? [and now, all men are gazing at you?]

(Prakasa, 2019)

In this scene, Rara is being asked by Kelvin about whether her transformation from being overweight and lousy, into a slim and stylish woman has affected people's opinion about her. However, it bothers me that Kelvin asks Rara about men's gazing on her present appearance, and Rara admits that with her present appearance, people are paying more attention to her. Apparently, the transformation is for gaining others' attention, especially men's justification is what matters most for Rara to be acknowledged as an ideal woman. This also shows the notion of the beauty myth that beauty is seen as something that is not created by women themselves yet for the sake of men's interests since men are the dominant group, they have the power to form a standard that must be fulfilled by women (Wolf, 2006). Consequently, the scene above depicts the patriarchal domination through men's point of view concerning beautiful women.

The film adaptation is perpetuating the beauty standard through the visualization of the protagonist which is not in accordance with the protagonist of the novel. In the novel Meira is portrayed through narrative and illustration as a tomboy woman in her late 30's, with her status as a married

woman, her physical appearance may indicate her status as a wife and as a mother as well. However, she gets verbal bullying and judgment from society, mostly because of her status as Ernest Prakasa's wife. The condition might be different if she was not a public figure's wife, perhaps she will not get much judgment from social media especially from her husband's fans. While in the film, Rara is portrayed as an ordinary Indonesian girl in general, however, Rara has the potential of becoming more beautiful if she wears makeup. In the early scenes, Rara is portrayed as an unattractive girl, but at the end of the film, she appears more beautiful, with neat and sleek hair. When Rara was still overweight, she was more insecure and it is displayed in her gestures of avoiding people's gaze. Then, when Rara's body is now slimmer, she looks far more confident. In the last scene of the film, Rara is staring at her reflection with confidence, and she also smiles often. However, the new Rara is now paying more attention to her physical appearance, her skin is healthier and brighter, and her hair looks smoother and shiny, which indicates that now she is tending her physical appearance. Here I see that Rara is still negotiating with beauty standards, by not transforming back to the way she used to be. This notion is the same as Meira in the novel, where she also negotiates with patriarchal beauty standards, by improving her appearance, appearing more feminine, and exercising to get a more ideal body shape.

Nevertheless, as I have referred previously, Rara is acted by Jessica Mila, an Indonesian actress as well as a model. Jessica Mila is acknowledged as an actress who is normally having white skin and a thin figure. Yet, by being Rara, she was required to gain weight up to 10 Kilograms. Apparently, Jessica Mila is chosen to be Rara for the reason that she was willing to do a drastic transformation on her physical appearance especially on her weight (Baehaqi, 2019). The drastic transformation has then drawn many people's curiosity to see Jessica Mila's acting in the adaptation film *Imperfect* (Baehaqi, 2019). In relation to the theme that connects the novel and the film about self-love and body positivity in order to criticize the beauty standard, it will be much meaningful if Rara is portrayed as not having any transformation yet people still respect her regardless of her physical appearance. Nevertheless, the adapters' decision to choose Jessica Mila as Rara even shows the perpetuation of patriarchal beauty standards which indicates the persistence of patriarchal domination in the film adaptation.

2. The Preservation of Gender Roles

Aside from perpetuating the patriarchal beauty standard, the adaptation film *Imperfect* (2019) also indicates to preserve the gender role. In a patriarchal society, gender role refers to how we are expected to act, speak, dress, and behave based on our assigned sex, female or male. Thus, women in a patriarchal society are expected to show their femininity through their gestures, and physical appearance as well as showing their submissiveness, accommodating, and nurturing behavior. On the other hand, men are stereotyped as being strong, aggressive, and courageous, either to protect or to dominate women as their opposite sex (Planned Parenthood, 2021). This notion is also perceivable in the film especially concerning the traditional gender role in a patriarchal society, not only assigned for the women characters but also men characters in the film. The idea also corresponds to Andrei Nae's (2019) article concerning the preservation of gender roles in the adaptation of *Tomb Raider* 2018, which stated that female characters in the cinema usually constructed in binary opposition with that of male characters. As a result, the visual representation of the character either female or male characters is still regulated by patriarchal discourse (Nae, 2019). Similarly, the adaptation film *Imperfect* (2019) also displays the rigid gender role between female and male characters.

In both the novel and the film, both female protagonists are expected to follow the gender roles in the society to be considered as ideal women, in this case, both protagonists also suffer from similar insecurities concerning their physical appearance. While Meira in the novel is considered not feminine enough to be Ernest's wife and got scolded by society, Rara as a protagonist in the film is also encountering a similar problem when she is considered not conforming to her gender role.



Figure 2. Being insinuated for not conforming the gender roles

Mama: Kamu nggak telat, kak? [Aren't you late, kak?]

Rara : kok tahu ini aku ? [How do you know it's me?]

Mama: Getaran tangganya beda... [the footsteps sound different...] (Prakasa, 2019)

As displayed in figure 3, the mother's statement, "the footsteps sound different," is a subtle sarcasm concerning Rara's unfeminine gesture. Mother's subtle sarcasm is actually a form of punishment for Rara, in order to make her aware with her gesture and she expected to be smoother and more feminine in accordance with her gender role as a woman. In relation to patriarchal beauty standards, women must also pay attention to their gestures, and women are expected to display feminine gestures and walk gracefully to conform to the ideal women's standard (Bartky, 1988). As a result, mother as the agent of patriarchy is considered to have the right to admonish and to remind Rara.

On the other hand, the indication of preserving gender roles can be perceived through Lulu's character, who is depicted as a very feminine woman. Throughout the film, Lulu is always depicted as a family's sweetheart with a very feminine gesture. Thus, she is a portrayal of a perfect woman's figure who fits with the beauty standard.



Figure 3. Preserving gender role – exposing femininity

As depicted above, Lulu is always portrayed as a very feminine girl which indicates the perpetuation of gender roles. Lulu's femininity can be perceived from her long sleek hair, feminine gesture, and also the pink color clothes that she mostly wears in the film. This notion, according to Qingli & Ying (2020) is related to the gender perspective of females in media such as TV or film, which typically alludes to society's view of how men and women should and should not behave. Masculine roles are typically equated with strength, aggressiveness, and domination in both Eastern and Western traditions, whilst feminine roles are typically associated with passivity, caring, and submission (Qingli & Ying, 2020). As a result, Lulu's portrayal also preserves the gender roles for an ideal woman of patriarchal society.

Different from the novel which is narrated through Meira's perspective as the female protagonist, the film also promotes the male gender role since it elaborates a wider perspective through an omniscient point of view. In traditional patriarchal culture, men are expected to display masculinity, not only from their physical appearance but also from the traits such as competitiveness, aggressiveness, dominance, and power orientation. Male gender roles are also displayed and preserved through the adaptation film, and also strengthen the difference between male and female gender. As Rara's boyfriend, Dika (Reza Rahadian) is not only displaying the masculinity traits, but he's also being considered as an ideal boyfriend with his handsome face and masculine posture. Moreover, since Dika is the only child from a fatherless family, he also supports and protects her family, especially his mother and his girlfriend Rara. In the film, Dika is possessing positive traits of masculinity as a responsible son, who also supports her mother in paying the family debt. Dika also portrayed as a very lovable person, he is depicted as a boyfriend who loves Rara so much regardless of her imperfect physical appearance. However, the notion of male domination is also perceived from Dika's statement by calling Rara "*Raranya Dika*", which implied that Rara is owned by Dika, just like women as men's property in a patriarchal society.

On the other hand, a similar case which displays gender role through male domination is perceived from George's character. As a male character in the film, George is displaying the male gender role that men should be the one who decides for women whether she likes it or not. This can be perceived in the scene when he admonishes Lulu about her chubby cheek and told her to cover it with her hair. Then, while they are having a live Instastory on George's Instagram, George is being asked by his followers about Lulu's status. Thus, George uses this occasion to elevate his Instagram views and followers. Here, George shows domination upon Lulu because he regards Lulu as his girlfriend without her approval. Afterward, he uses his Instagram to announce that Lulu is his girlfriend. Even in Lulu's case, she is being used as a means to elevate George's fame as an

Instagram influencer. It is perceived that women are often considered as men's property (Wolf, 2006). Moreover, by saying "it's really easy" which referring to Lulu's willingness to be his girlfriend is denigrating women's worth. This indicates that George considers himself as the man who can conquer Lulu easily. Lulu, on the other hand, is representing female gender roles who must submit to male's decisions. George's statement also shows that he doesn't love Lulu sincerely as Dika loves Rara, instead, Lulu is only used as a property who will bring George even more benefits, since as an influencer, George needs to elevate his Instagram viewers to get more benefit. This also indicates male domination and pressure upon women.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the film adaptation *Imperfect* (2019) is an interesting film to discuss especially in relation to its theme about women's insecurities and self-acceptance. Regarding the *Imperfect* (2019) film's achievements and the audience's positive reception towards the film, it can be considered that the film succeeds in gaining the audience's attention. As an outstanding director with his specialty in the romantic comedy genre, Ernest Prakasa succeeds to enthrall his film audience with the humorous yet complicated theme of women's insecurities in *Imperfect*. However, through this film, the existence of patriarchal domination is even more persistent which can be seen from the perpetuation of patriarchy's beauty standards and the preservation of gender roles. It can also be perceived that Indonesian films especially *Imperfect*, are currently still oriented to patriarchal mindset.

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