The Representation of Mother and Child Figures in Indonesian Children Books Illustration

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Abstract

This study discusses mother-child interactions in Indonesian children books published in 1973 until 2013. In the early 1970, the government started giving much attention to early childhood education in Indonesia; and in the 2010s children book industries have escalated considerably. In this time frame, an apparent social dynamics occurred and, consequently, representation of mother figure has shifted along with the alteration of socio-cultural context in society. The problem is that in 1970s, the traditional social role of a mother which was considered only in domestic area has extended to public area. Thus, it is essential to comprehensively observe and analyze both explicit and implicit meanings of the representation of mother-child interactions in children book illustrations. Illustrations are pieces of visual information which enable readers to be involved in a plot and bring them to the real experiences. This portrayal is vital to discuss since the representation of a mother in children's picture books is closely related to shaping a mother's figure in children's social life. This study aims at identifying the representation of mother figure in children books visually; finding how a mother and her child interact using Content Analysis and Social Semiotics. The results show that some changes in the interactions of mother and child are found in illustrated children books published in 1973-2013. In the early period (1973-1982), a mother was frequently presented wearing a "kebaya" (traditional clothes) with serious facial expression. Besides that, the mother-child interaction commonly took place in the kitchen and outdoor settings. In terms of age, the pre-adolescence children were more frequently portrayed. Meanwhile, in the transitional period (1983-2002), the spatial distance between a mother and her child was closer. The mother was described more relaxed and flexible in wearing clothes. On the other hand, in the last period (2003-2013) a mother was illustrated younger rather than the one in previous period; and the children were commonly under ten years old. The description showed the mother's companionship in children activities, such as studying and recreation, but the physical distance was not as close as the prior period. Most of the books in the 2010s presented a mother and her child wearing religious clothes.

Keywords: Mother, Child, Illustrations, Children's Picture Books.

1. Introduction

A mother is a central figure in human life. Besides giving birth, the mother raises and takes care of her child from the womb until the child possesses strong emotional bonds with her. The mother's role in a family is undoubtedly significant in building a child's character since a child's cognitive, social and emotional maturity is developed through her. Stereotypically, the mother is described as a figure full of love, gentle, helpful, tough, patient, noble, full of sacrifice and sincere. These characteristics are revealed in the forms of verbal and visual communication via all sorts of mass media such as advertisements, social campaign, numerous product packaging, and literature (magazines, books and novels). The existence of the mother and her characteristics are also shown in picture books for children. In those books, family life often becomes a theme of stories either in stories on a daily basis, folks, tales, fables, comics, textbooks, histories or science books. The roles of a woman as a biological mother, parent, and their traditional roles through metaphoric language in picture books are a representation of sociocultural reality in society. Those hierarchical relationship, classification and values of family appear in the stories and in the illustrations in children books.

As mothers, women become pregnant, give birth, take care, and raise children with physical and emotional involvement. These processes generate attachment or bond between the mother and child. This bond is started from pregnancy, birth, until breast-feeding period. Then, it continues to raising process which builds the relationship involving physical and psychological contact with the mother. Emotional bond is then the result of these processes between biological/non-biological mother and her child. This situation, later on, creates a labelling or certain images of the mother by society. The closeness and dedication of the mother and her children bring the mothers' images as noble, affectionate, lovable, helpful, patient, gentle, tough, full of sacrifice, unselfish, sincerely loving and serving their children. When educating children, the mothers have bigger part than the fathers in training basic skills. For example, the mother teaches her children to walk, to spell and to speak, to independently take a bath and to wear clothes. The effort of the mother in raising the children is basically a process of character building for the children, especially in developing children's basic potentials through social skills, cognitive ability and emotional maturity.

A shift of economic growth from agrarians to industries alters the structure of the society from traditional pattern—farming—to workers in a larger spectrum. This also generates a shift of social structure of a society from producers to consumers (Engel, 2009: 4, 219-222). This phenomenon affects ways of the society in fulfilling their needs—preferring consumption rather than production. A tendency of mothers to work outside their house for the sake of finance and life quality of the family is a way for women to express themselves productively and creatively. This, however, gives a social impact for the family as the smallest social structure in society. The impact is the shift of the mothers' existence from domestic to public area. Although at the first time it is performed to solve financial problem, this situation has slowly become a demand referring to the mothers to fulfil their social relational needs as well as their self-actualization.

2. Literature Review

Sarumpaet (2010:77), conducted a research entitled "*Tokoh dalam Buku Bacaan Anak*". She observed 40 realistic Indonesian children texts published in 1991-1993. Sarumpaet examined the plots, settings, themes, characterization, and styles to understand the characters in the texts. One of the findings revealed that stereotypically a father is illustrated as the main and the most prominent character in the narrations of children books. Meanwhile, a mother is a complementary character responsible for domestic arrangements. This research was not specialized in the mother character, but it was found that the mother's appearance is frequent as a complementary character in the stories.

Tomagola (1998: 330-347 as cited in Sarah, 2012, in a research about representation of women in the advertisements of four women magazines: Femina, Kartini, Sarinah and Pertiwi, mentions five (5) images of women in the advertisements published in 1986-1990. One of those advertisements reveals a mother-family relationship, which is also mentioned by Tomagola as '*Citra Pilar'* (image of a pillar). Here, it represents the mother as a caretaker of a family with love and affection.

Ruth P. Rubinstein, in her book "Dress Code, Meaning and Messages in American Culture" (Fashion Institute of Technology, SUNY) in 1995 discussed clothes as a social and meaning discourse as well as a relevance of American culture clothes in general. Particularly, this research uncovered that clothes are a social symbol carrying values in society. Expressing herself as a part of public self, she also mentions that children books also display certain figures to associate with particular behavioural patterns (Rubinstein, 1995: 85), for instance, certain clothes might represent some roles such as: caring, a wife/ a mother, and a woman.
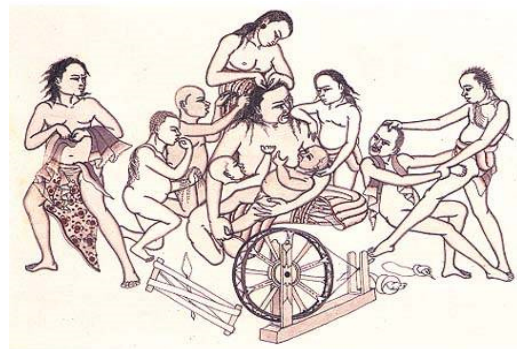

Figure 1. Painting of I Gusti Nyoman Lempad, Men Brayut (1930). Collection of Museum Neka, Bali, Indonesia. Source: http:// koleksilukisanbali.blogspot.com/2011/ 05/ i-gusti-nyoman-lempad-men- brayut-dan.html

In agrarian society, a mother's role is also carried out by the extended family, such as aunts, grandmothers and sisters. 'It takes a village to raise a child' was an African proverb meaning that child-rising is so difficult that it needs a village to do it. On the other hand, in modern society the role of mother is limited to the nuclear family. The Indonesian family program "*Keluarga Berencana*" is a government campaign to create a welfare family by limiting the number of childbirth within a family. An ideal family is suggested to have only two children. This situation causes families to become smaller. In the 1980s, when "*Keluarga Berencana*" was promoted by the Indonesian government, problems of reproduction, birth, and contraception were issues in respect of a control by the government over reproduction right which later on affected demography problem. The Indonesian family Planning program was not simply an economic policy but a program embedded in the discourse of social and cultural modernisation in Indonesia (Swann, 2011: 15). The New Order at that time supported wife organization and it also meant as a support for "*ibuisme" (ibu* = mother), an ideology which supports all efforts and actions as

long as the efforts are performed like a mother taking care of her family, class, company or country, without demanding any power or position (Suryakusumah 2011).

2.1 Picture books for Children

Children's literature, according to Saxby (1991: 4 as cited in Nurgiyantoro, 2006), is images or metaphors of life conveyed using appropriate language description for children's scope of understanding; involving either metaphors of life conveyed using appropriate language description for children's scope of understanding; involving either emotion, feeling, thinking, sensory neuron or moral experiences. However, in reality, children's literature is also read by adults. In other words, children's books are stories or texts that are particularly and intentionally composed for children reading. The most important thing is that children's book need to suit interests as well as emotional development stages of the children. This is aimed to satisfy children when they read the books. In terms of the contents and how it is delivered, children and adults' literature possess some similarities and differences.

The selected books in this research are intended for 7 to 12 years old. Children at the age of 7 to 9 years old start to change their interest to object characters or real figures and this is the first stage of worldview clarification other than parents as a foundation to build independence in their adulthood. The appropriate books in this stage are "short chapter books" in which chains of picture have a bigger portion than texts. Generally, each chapter of the book is made short and simple in order to enable children to summarize messages provided. Furthermore, in the stage of 9-12 years old, children begin their logic process and shift from concrete to abstract. Psychologically, they have just started the early stage of self-concept formation and worldview clarification other than parents. The role of children books for them is as a stimulus of imagination development through communicating with stories (plots, ideas, and language) and pictures (concepts, ideas, and visualization), so all messages and values in the books can affect their cognitive and affective development, especially their emotion, language, and psychology.

In the first stage of life, the closest environment for children is family. Even story books for children generally talks about family, a house as the setting and family members as the characters. Considering this phenomenon, Anderson and Mykol (2005:1) argue that children's books have essential roles in building figures of parents as the central figures. As a part of children storybook content, illustration is able to create preferences of self-identity and an awareness of children cultural heritage (Nicholas, 2007: 52, 54).

2.2 Understanding Body Languages through Torso

Someone is able to understand more deeply about others' characters by observing body languages shown. Every gesture, behaviour, and facial expression is a part of body languages that can be interpreted as communication signals, even without being reinforced by a single word. It might happen since its characteristics lie everywhere, starting from the body as a medium of expression initiating a meta- communicative axiom, which is the impossibility of human for not to communicate either consciously or subconsciously. (Suwardikun, 2012: 34)

Human body language is a non-verbal language from a torso (the front part of the body; from chest to abdomen) to reflect feeling transferred from a limbic system (parts of brain controlling visual expressions). Accordingly, the torso is like a "house" for many internal organs such as hearts, livers, lungs, and digesting system. While the limbic system always attempts to protect the torso area when it is threatened, the torso reacts to possible dangerous and disturbing conditions by avoiding contact. This preventive behaviour is also well-known as *ventral denial* (a rejection from the frontal parts of body). *Ventral* parts of human is an area where eyes, mouth, chest, abdomen, and genital are located, which is very sensitive to love or hatred, preferred or dispreferred things, including the other person one is communicating to (Suwardikun, 201: 35). An opened position is facing the other person, while a closed position is not facing the other person. By doing so, when two people are interested in each other and have a conversation, they will face their body to the other person. In contrast, when two people are not interested in each other, they will turn their face from each other. Another example is that two people who have feeling (love) each other they will stare at each other.

3. Research Methodology

In this study, the data was collected from picture books portraying mother figures. The books chosen were realistic books in which the real natural situation in daily basis are represented, such as picture books, illustrated textbooks, and fiction. In terms of quantity, children books published in 1973-2013 are considerable. Hence, in order to comprehend illustrational meaning of a mother thoroughly, in this research 15 representative sources were selected to be sorted as valid samples. Those 15 sources are a school library, National Library in Jakarta, three public libraries (in West Java, Yogyakarta and Bali), and personal collection. From the sources, 265 books were collected as samples. The validity of the books was analysed using visual analysis and analytical approach to identify the representation of a mother and her child through physical appearances and their attributes in children book illustrations.

This study used Content Analysis in sorting the visual data and Social Semiotics in understanding its meanings. Content Analysis is a scientific method studying a content of cultural artefacts to examine many signs related to communication contexts (Krippendorff, 1980: 76). This analysis was performed through detail of stages and data categorization to improve research reliability and validity as well as to deal with a huge amount of visual data with one degree of consistency.

4. Findings

The findings indicated a shifting map in three (3) divisions, namely the early period (the 1970s), the transitional period (1980-1990s) and the final period (2000-2010s).

4.1 General activities of mothers

Mother activities found in children book illustration in each period comprise of: taking care of children, organizing domestic arrangements, shopping, working, socializing, and having a recreation. Among those activities, taking care of children is the most frequent activity done by the mother. This activity is furthermore divided into: accompanying children to study, sending the children to school, having meal together in dining room, having a recreation, building relationship with others, and visiting public areas such as markets, banks, and health centres. In the early 1970s, the illustration of a mother taking care of children while doing another activity simultaneously was frequently found. Whereas, in the next period—which is in 1980-1990s—the mother doing single activity was more commonly discovered. Special characteristics in the early period is that in each activity the mothers wear Indonesian local clothes, called *kebaya,* and traditional hair style, called *sanggul.* Then, in the 1990s and later, the mothers were generally exposed with her child in public areas wearing short modern dresses. In the last period, especially in the late 2000s, the mothers were portrayed wearing religious dresses that cover the hair and all parts of the body.
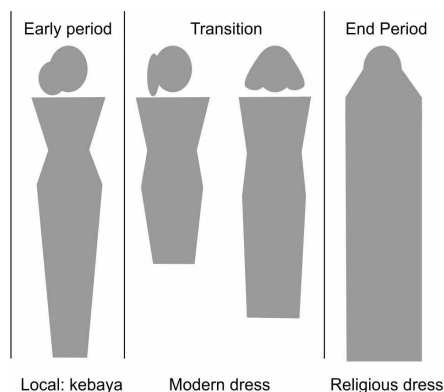

Figure 2. Shift of mother's dress style.

Figure 3. Mother wearing traditional dress Kebaya. "Kasih Sayang" (1982) by Iwan, illustration by Mulyadi W. (Karya Utama).

4.2 Taking care of children

Based on the most dominant activity of the mothers, which is taking care of children, there are three groups of mothers' activities, namely:

1. Raising children (the mother raising her children physically) – in the early 1970s,
2. Caring (the mother caring and loving her children) – transitional period, particularly in the 1990s,
3. Educating children (the mother improves children's skills) – last period, in the 2000s.

In the first period, the major activities are in relation to food nutrition, such as activities in a kitchen, cooking and preparing meals for the children and family. These activities are parts of a process to support children growth and development physically. In the transitional period, the mothers' activities are seen playing with the child, carrying the child, and taking care of an ill child. In this transition, the mother roles are emotionally stronger, especially in 'taking care' category (efforts to support the child's recovery both physically and emotionally). In the last period, there are many scenes in which the mothers accompany their child learning. So, it can be inferred that in this period the mother's role is more on educating the child in terms of improving their skills and intellectual. Besides, recreational activity is also normally found.

4.3 Children's Situation

From year to year, the number of children accompanying a mother mostly described in the books was only one child. However, there were also descriptions of a mother accompanied by two children. In the early period, the most frequent illustrated with the mothers were pre-adolescence boys (around 12 years old). The children in the last period were described younger than the previous one, so 5-8 years old children appearead in the illustration. In the transitional period, a portrayal of a baby carried by the mother and a girl was detected. Then, starting from the 1990s, if there were pictures of a nuclear family, most of them showed a family with two children, a boy and a girl. This continued until the last period (2010s).
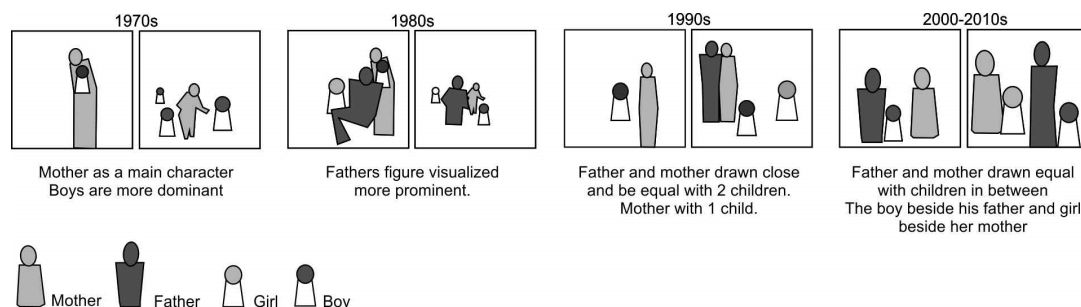

Figure 3. Mother-child interaction.

In terms of picture styles, there is an obvious difference, where in the early period the mother and the child were visualized using natural styles and anatomy, while in the latest period, the picture styles changed into digital techniques, which were influenced by Manga, so the anatomy was more like a cartoon.

4.4 Distance and gestures between a mother and her child

The distance between a mother and her child comprises of: close, medium dan public distance. In the children book illustration, the most dominant distance found is the 'close distance'. In this type of distance, the mother is normally talking to the child, having meal together, sitting in a living room, accompanying the child studying, shopping, cooking with the child, exercising and having recreation. In this category, there is also the more intimate skin-ship between them when hugging, playing, embracing, and lapping. The mother's hug is considered as a way to express love, protection and attention. A baby or a dependent child needs the adults' help, so they need to be carried by their mother. In the early period, around 1973-1982, there are some portrayals of the mothers who hug their children. These hugs are apparently much warmer than those in other periods. Moreover, the mother's chest touches the child's. Look at the picture below.
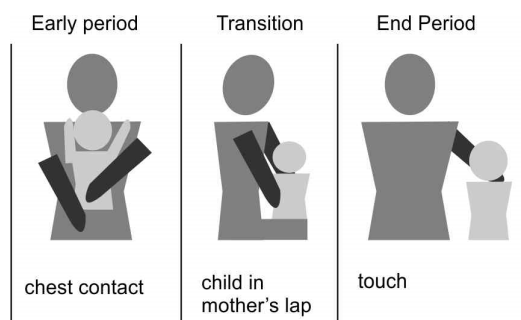
Figure 4. Various positions of the mother hugging her child.

In 2000's books, a mother in religious outfit mostly hugs her daughter (child with the same gender) meanwhile a mother with modern outfit can hug both gender (boy or girl) see Figure 5.

4.5 Expression of mothers

The expression of the mothers in the early period was more serious than those in the following period. The mothers seemed to have more stiff expression especially in the books of the New Order era. In the transitional period, the expression of sympathy and affection started to be discovered, then in the latest period the expression was more cheerful. Besides cheerful expression, the mothers were generally illustrated wearing lipstick and blush on, and beautiful eyebrows. In the early and transitional period, the mothers were shot in a longshot angle. Meanwhile, in the latest period the shot was much closer, such as medium angle even close up shots. In the Figure 5, the mother smiles with empathy. Both of her arms are circled to the child's body.

Figure 5. "Yang Paling Istimewa" 2008, by Clara Ng, illustration: EmTe (PT. Gramedia Pustaka Utama).

Gestures of the mother in hugging and carrying the child symbolized a gentle mother contrasting with the stiff aggressive gestures. The position of mother's hug also showed protection, security and affection from the mother to the baby/child. However, the position of the mother surrounding her arms to the child's body can also reveal that the mother was more dominant than her child. This is a domain expansion towards the child.

5. Discussions

In 1970s books, mother and child were mostly depicted in open spaces, whether in a yard or in a park, a field, trees, and any environment which was exposed by sunlight. In books at the beginning of the period, longshot angles made the characters' expressions less observable and tended to be unimportant because the mother and the child were mostly depicted in a long distance. The most important thing was the background atmosphere which controlled the theme of the pictures. In visual communication, it gave a connotation that Indonesian society was still close to nature.

In terms of idea domination, a finding showed that there were ideas from the government and religion sides which emerged in two different periods. The government has stated the policy in the provision of Inpres (Presidential instruction) books for primary education since 1973. The impact that we could see was that the content in 1980s books seemed to be different from 1970s books which were produced by private sectors. In 1980s books, and even until 1990s, mothers' gestures looked closed and passive. Nation's ideology, through the

Family Planning Program policy and Dharma Wanita, constructed mothers to be supportive to the nation. There were still many mothers depicted wearing *kebaya,* although in the end of 1980s until the beginning of 1990s they were no longer depicted as mothers wearing *kebaya* in their daily life, except in special occasions. The ideal image of a mother in books published in this period was the image of mothers in *kebaya* attribute.

In 2010s, children's books were dominated by Islamic publishers. It made the illustrations depicted mother and child always wearing modest clothes at home. It showed that the illustration did not show the reality in everyday life; where women (mothers) and children did not always have to use modest clothes unless they were meeting someone else. The producer's background, whether it was the decision maker or the publisher also influenced the making of attribute representation of mothers and children's figures.

In books which were influenced by Japanese manga style, mothers were depicted to be younger, and so were the children. All of the characters were depicted to be childish. In cartoonist illustrations, the special characteristic which appeared was the size of the eyes. They were bigger than the normal human eyes size. Besides, the shape of the nose and the mouth were made very simple, even they were intentionally made unclear so that the audience became more focus on the eyes as the center of the facial expression. All of the character's expressions were focused on the eyes and eyebrow's movement so that we could find close up and medium sizes of pictures angle. This angle also emphasized that the characters were more important than the background/setting. The layout and the size of the character, which were big, created a stronger interaction between the characters and the readers.

6. Conclusions

In Indonesian children books with realistic genre and daily basis stories, mother figures are more dominantly illustrated as the one taking care of a child. In the early period, the mothers took care of the child in their physical growth. There were a lot of activities found outdoor, with the natural landscapes and scenery. Family activities were commonly performed with the society and showed that the family was involved in raising the child. Physical distance, domination of mothers' attention to the child's physical growth and the use of *sanggul* and *kebaya* showed strong local characteristics and natural elements in this period. In the transitional period, Reformation Era, in which political situation is more liberated; the use of *kebaya* is changed into short dresses and various hairstyles (short, long, pony-tailed, wearing a small hair bun). The existence of social dynamics which opens freedom and equality creates the representation of a mother and a father that is more equal than in the New Order era. In the transitional period, a mother-child interaction was not only in a dining room but also in a living room, house yard, and public areas doing some activities like shopping in a market. In this period also, it seemed that roles of the mothers was much more evident in taking care and maintaining emotional aspects. In the latest period, religiosity dominated the illustration of the mothers—a mother and a girl wore religious clothes, the mothers were rarely visualized in a kitchen, and a dining room, but more in a living room and in public space but did not interact with the society. The mothers in the 2000s had a role in educating the children, especially in improving and developing a child's skills and intellectual. In this period, the distance between the mother and child was not as close as before. There seemed to be a distance separating the mother and child, the mother and the father, even the mother with the society. In the end of the period, the books (both in books with religious outfit and modern one) with the concept of Indonesian ideal family was also seen as a small happy family and smart children.

In the observed books, there was an idea dominating the representation of mother-child interaction, comprised of a domination of nature and local aspects, shifted to the state ideologies including the regulation of a number of children in a family, then later shifted to a domination of equality and freedom. In the 2000s books, the ideology has shifted into religious ideology that consequently showed a distance limiting the mothers. Nevertheless, a family was described to be more individualistic, using more technology appliances, which showed urban life contradicting the rural life in the early period. Thus, the illustration in the children picture books might be clues representing a sociocultural situation in a society.

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