



Antagonizing the LGBT Community Through Memories of My Body Film Ban

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Abstract

The ban on the screening of *Memories of My Body* in 2019 by the Depok local government raises concerns since the film had already received approval from the Film Censor Board (LSF). This paper aims to comprehensively examine the decision to ban the movie by employing discourse analysis approach. Through this discourse analysis, the research seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the narratives surrounding the movie ban in Depok. The primary data for this study consists of literature studies sourced from various electronic news media. The theory and methodology utilized in this analysis are based on discourse theory analysis from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. The research findings indicate the ban was revolving around the term “deviant sexual behaviour”. It creates a nodal point for various elements to achieve their meaning. Upon deeper analysis, it is shown that the nodal point had become a point of antagonism for the other elements in the discourse. To support the discourse finding, further analysis reveals that these discourses also manifest in other events in form of policies and protest, suggesting that the movie ban is a result of a prevailing discourse against the LGBTQ community.

Keywords: *Discourse Theory; Antagonism; Memories of My Body; Film Ban; Discursive Struggle*

Introduction

Films can no longer be simply seen as popular cultural entertainment. As film develops, both as an entertainment industry and as a work of art, the ideas and ideology behind filmmaking have begun to be identified and become serious discussions in socio-cultural studies (See Heeren, 2012; Jaggi & Thirumurthy, 2015; Neve, 2004; Weldes, 1999) In fact, films can be used to influence political discourse. This is possible if a film is able to raise new discourses while at the same time penetrating established discourses. Discursive struggle, in Laclau and Mouffe’s term defines the struggle between discourses in shaping the reality of society. South Korean films and dramas, for example, often raise bullying in schools as the main issue. As a large, transnational cultural industry, such portrayal helped to elevate the issue of school bullying to policy-changing levels. However, the presence of film in discursive struggles cannot always change the status quo of established discourse. *Memories of My Body* a film by Garin Nugroho which tells a story about Lengger Lanang dancer's body as his collection of memory and experience, was opposed to be screened in City of Depok, West Java even though the film had passed the national film censorship.

On April 25 2019, the Depok City Government issued Circular Letter 460/185-Huk/DPAPMK which appealed to cinemas in Depok City to stop showing “Memories of My Body”. The film, which has passed the censorship by the national Film Censorship Institute (LSF), is considered a threat to the younger generation of Depok City and is not in accordance with religious values. The Depok City MUI, as a representative of Islamic religious institutions, supports the ban for similar reasons. As a result, *Memories of My Body* no longer be screened in the Cinemaxx Depok Town Square cinema.

Film and politics are often intertwined with ideological issues that struggles and confront each other. Through post-structuralism, the involvement of ideology in these political "battles" is the impact of discourse. Not only academics, but also the political elite have finally realized the ability of film to create discourse. Moreover, its distribution as an entertainment industry, makes film easily accessible and potentially threatens the dominant discourse. Yixiang Lin's research entitled *The Politics of Film Censorship: ideology and film censorship, with a focus on the Chinese case*. Lin studies show how China's political elite after the communist revolution controlled the Chinese film industry. Under Mao Ze Dong, the leader of China's first People's Republic of China (PRC), the strengthening of Chinese communist ideology greatly impacted the nuances in the film industry. Films deemed not supporting Chinese communism central government, misrepresenting Chinese communist society or criticising Mao's government, will be banned or censored (Lin, 2011).

Ruchi Jaggi and Priyanka Thirumurthy also explains how the banning of films in India is also closely related to the dynamics of national politics. (Jaggi & Thirumurthy, 2015) Both explained from the 11 films studied showed allusions between alternative and dominant discourses. Between the 1970s and 2005 in India, shows a continuous change on the dominant discourse established by the elite. This shows the power of the political elite to suppress alternative discourses and ultimately create the hegemony of their respective discourses. In this study, one of the strategies to suppress these discourses is to control censorship institutions. As a result, the Indian political elite is able to suppress alternative representations of marginalized identities; nationalism concepts; political persons; and even historical events.

These researches demonstrated the intertwine between films, politics, and ideologies. Moreover, it points out important aspect between those three aspects: the existence of discursive struggle. Laclau and Mouffe in their canonical work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategies: Toward a Radical Democracy*, explained that the social world is created through discursive struggles. These struggles are a result of the meaning contingency. Opposed to structuralist believe such as Ferdinand de Saussure, meaning is not always fixed in a structure. It instead relates to each other through net of meanings. Like a knot in a fishing net, the fixation of meaning is only possible through its connection with other knot in the net of meaning.

Memories of My Body ban, I argue, is part of discursive struggle. Both Depok government and the movie present discourses that are contesting around certain knots. In banning the movie, Depok city government used phrases that are directed against the LGBTQ community that had been issue for a few years before the ban take place. Meanwhile, the movie presents the “body”, which also appears in the title, as a collection of memory and experience. However, the content of the films no longer matters for the government since the film’s trailer and title deemed enough to be banned. This banning therefore strengthens the already established discourse in the city against the community. This paper aimed to understand how the antagonizing the LGBTQ community, took place through *Memories of My Body* ban.

Theoretical Framework

Hegemony and discourse are two closely related concepts in Laclau and Mouffe's thinking. Thus, to be able to analyze the hegemony that exists in society, observing the discourse that is developing is the main point. The phenomena that occur in society are seen as a discourse. Mouffe and Laclau's point of view sees that the hegemonic operations carried out by the dominant class occur through discursive

struggles (Rear & Jones, 2013). Laclau and Mouffe's emphasis on discursive struggle is based on what they call articulation. As Laclau and Mouffe say that discourse is a "structured totality resulting from articulation practices" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2008). They argued social actions to be part of the articulations of discourse and these articulations will compete for their position in shaping the reality of society. These articulation practices however also produce incomplete texts (Jessop, 2019). Which explained the impossibility of society constitution according to both Laclau and Mouffe and therefore discursive struggle within societies will always take place.

The incomplete text is a result to the contingent nature of meaning. Changes in meaning will always occur because an element will be meaningful through differentiation with other elements (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). The identity of the "working class" will have its own meaning for the workers. However, it will be very different if it is associated with "owners of capital". This ambiguity and uncertainty in meaning is the result of social relations whose true meaning is negotiated, fought over, and agreed upon. So that in the meaning making process, the signifier needs to be fixed: the meaning is determined through its relationship with other signifiers. This process is achieved, according to Laclau and Mouffe, through the practice of articulation. Articulation is "... every practice creates a relationship in every element until its identity changes." (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Since the constitution of meaning is always referring itself to exclusion, meaning is then faced with the appearance of antagonism. Antagonism is the "limit of all objectivity" or "the presence of (the) Other that prevents me from totally being myself" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2008). Lending the logic from psychoanalysis, antagonism the constitution of self by the presence of the Other. The emergence of antagonism relies upon the inability of self to totally dominate meaning. The presence (or the creation) of the Other is an attempt for a constitution toward self. This concept will be the core analysis in this paper.

Research Method

Data in this study will be analysed using discourse analysis techniques. The primary data for this paper is online media coverage. Media coverage is considered as an important dissemination for political discourse and an object to discourse analysis (Rakhmatova, 2022). These online media coverage focuses on two main political actors, Depok City mayor and Indonesian Ulema Council chairman that directly gave their statement against the film.

Laclau and Mouffe's method of analysis as pointed out by David Rear (2013) focuses on the analysis of nodal points. Nodal points are seen from the special signifier that are repeatedly stated and become the centre of a discourse by looking at their relationship with other markers. Jørgensen and Phillips added more than nodal points. "Key signifier" and "myths" were also considered in analysing the data. The key signifier explained by Jørgensen and Phillips is a signifier that determines identity in a discourse (2002). On the other hand, myth determines its social space. These three key concepts will be identified and ultimately grouped to study their relationship to one another.

The key signifier lies in articulation practices. Thus, examining articulation practices is necessary to determine key signifier. The data which consists of statements and events are considered as an articulation practice and will be sorted by looking at their relationships with one another and their relation to the discourse on the banning of *Memories of My Body*.

Furthermore, it is important to deconstruct the nodal point as central signifier meaning is not fixed. Deconstruction of meaning is used to see how the discursive space is being formed. The relations of key markers within and between these spaces will be categorized. This is done to examine antagonism that exists in the discourse.

Findings and Discussion

The articulation of *Memories of My Body* ban is demonstrated through online media coverage. The media acts as an extension of politicians in the dissemination of political discourse as explained in previous part. Analysing statements in these online media coverages therefore is an important starting point in identifying the discourses that are being developed.

Identifying discourse in *Memories of My Body* ban begins with a statement by Depok City mayor, Mohammad Idris. Idris stated his reasons for banning the film (Lantara, 2019a):

"The film is suspected of having negative content that can affect the younger generation,' said the Mayor of Depok, Mohammad Idris in Depok, Thursday.

Letter number 460/185-Huk/DPAPMK dated April 24 2019 stated that the objection letter was issued in order to protect and protect the community from the impacts caused by behaviour that is considered sexual deviation in Depok City.

In addition, it is also to strengthen family resilience to sexual deviance and its impacts.

There are three main reasons the Depok City Government banned the showing of the film, namely first it has an impact on public unrest because the scenes of sexual deviance shown in the film can influence people's perspectives or behaviour, especially the younger generation to follow and even justify sexual deviant behaviour.

Second, conflicting with religious values.

Third, it can lead to alteration of public opinion, especially the younger generation, so that they consider sexual deviation behaviour as normal and acceptable, said Mohammad Idris."

The statement begins with associating *Memories of My Body* with "negative content". The "negative content" associated to the film refer to deviant sexual acts in the later part of the statement. *Memories of My Body* an art work is being associated with sexual deviant behaviour which is considered a threat to the lives of the people of Depok City.

Later in the statement Idris pointed out three reasons for the film ban. First point revolves around public concerns regarding scenes depicting sexual deviance in the film. Such content is believed to influence people's perspectives and behaviour, thereby challenging the notion of "normality" and "abnormality" within society. The term "unrest" is important to note as it signifies unease and a sense of insecurity among the community. Idris is apprehensive that the film's portrayal might lead to protests and demonstrations, which he might consider his responsibility to prevent as a city leader. Essentially, he is exercising his political power and official role to ensure the safety and security of his constituents. However, this narrative gives rise to political discourse concerning the obligations of local governments towards their citizens, albeit building on certain misconceptions.

The notion of "normality" highlighted in the preceding paragraph aligns closely with the narratives shown in the first part. Idris consistently emphasizes "normality" and the well-being of the younger generation. The phrases "youth generation" and "strengthening family resilience" in the third paragraph serve as crucial indicators of the city government's political articulation.

Another reason for the ban on this film is that it goes against religious values. However, upon closer examination, Idris did not specifically mention which religion he was referring to. This statement becomes clearer when the chairman of the Depok City MUI (Indonesian Ulema Council) also spoke up and expressed support for Idris' decision. Nevertheless, only MUI can be identified as expressing its

opinion on this matter. Therefore, the narrative of Islamic religious morality also becomes part of the discourse that developed from this ban.

Below is the statement by Depok MUI chairman (Lantara, 2019b):

"The Indonesian Ulema Council in Depok City, West Java, has issued a letter of support for the Depok City Government's stance regarding the ban on showing the film *Memories of Body* in cinemas throughout the Depok area.

Chairman of the Depok City MUI KH. A. Dimiyati Badruzaman in Depok said Saturday that the film was not in accordance with the norms of decency in society, especially with the principles and values of the Islamic religion.

"The Depok City MUI strongly objected to the film directed by Garin Nugroho being shown in cinemas and watched by the people of Depok," he said.

The Depok City MUI has several views so that the film, which has won several international film awards, should not be watched.

The letter, dated April 25 2019 and signed by the Chairperson of the Depok MUI Dimiyati Badruzaman and Secretary Nurwahidin, explained that the film had great potential to damage the younger generation of Muslims in Depok City for free and deviant sexual behavior.

"We fully support the Mayor of Depok's step by banning the screening of the film in the Depok area," he said.

The Chairman of the Depok City MUI's statement above associates *Memories of My Body* with promoting free and deviant sexual behaviour, where the phrase "the younger generation" also resurfaces in the context. There seems to be a deliberate effort to reproduce a specific narrative.

Here it can be identified the elements of which the discourse is build upon. The signs such as "unrest", normality", "morality", and "younger generation" are mentioned numerous times and is related to each other indirectly. These elements are mentioned to oppose "deviant sexual behaviour" element. Therefore, "deviant sexual behaviour" is constructed to be the antagonist. It become the nodal point for the other elements to achieve their meaning. However, the term is a myth *per se*. "Deviant sexual behaviour" is used to represent the LGBTQ community. The meaning of LGBTQ was reduced only to describe their sexual preference rather than the rich meaning it consists, such as self-expression, human right, or equality in gender discourse. This action is what Laclau describes as fixing the meaning from their contingency. Meanings which are polysemy then being reduced into a certain moment of meaning. It can only be achieved through reproduction of articulation which fixes the meaning.

Based on secondary data, it is evident that antagonism towards the LGBTQ community has been a notable issue during Mohammad Idris' governance in Depok. Prior to the film ban, there were widespread discourses against the LGBTQ community, evident in various events.

In early 2018, the Depok City Government formed an Anti-LGBT team following the arrest of two homosexuals involved in immoral videos at a gym in Depok City. The team comprised the Social Service, police, community organizations, and 200 residents from different urban villages. The team's purpose was to eradicate the presence of the LGBTQ group in the city (The Jakarta Post, 2018). In January 2019, Mayor Muhammad Idris issued Surat Edaran Number 460/90-Dinsos, urging citizens to report any activity related to the LGBTQ community in their neighbourhoods (Suseno, 2019). The case of Reynhard Sinaga, a Depok resident involved in same-sex sexual violence in England in early 2020, reignited discussions about the Anti-LGBT regional regulation draft (CNN Indonesia, 2020).

Additionally, there is an ongoing discourse in Depok's public policy centred around protecting the younger generation. One policy explicitly called for families to safeguard their children from "deviant sexual behaviour," while enforcing the rejection of such behaviour within the community. Family resilience, originally a national policy by the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection to foster better household environments, took on a distinct interpretation by the Depok local government, utilizing its political legitimacy.

The vision and mission of Depok City under Mohammad Idris' leadership sought to transform the city into a religious one. Although the plan to declare Depok City as a Religious City was rejected by the local parliament, it demonstrated a narrative development effort by the city government.

The dominant discourse against the LGBTQ community in Depok heavily influenced the local government's decision to ban the film "Memory of My Body" from cinemas. The film was perceived as a threat to the established anti-LGBT discourse. Mayor Muhammad Idris aimed to create hegemony in Depok city, and this decision was a way to demonstrate his consistency in governance. The use of the term "reject" and "sexually deviant behaviour and community" in his family resilience program further legitimized his action in banning the movie, indicating a political intention behind the ban.

Conclusion

This article conducts an analysis of the statements made by the Depok local government and MUI during the ban on the film *Memory of My Body* using Laclau and Mouffe discourse theory. It reveals that both actors use same elements such as "unrest", "normality", "morality", and "younger generation" in opposing the "deviant sexual behaviour" element in the discourses. In opposing the term, it thus creates an antagonist which then is considered as a common enemy. The term "deviant sexual behaviour" is then revealed as a way to represent the LGBTQ community. Consequently, the Depok local government attempts to securitize the LGBTQ issue presented in the movie, treating it as a threat. While supporting the major decision to ban the movie, MUI also strengthen the antagonizing discourse of the LGBTQ community.

The antagonism towards the LGBTQ community has become a recurring theme in Depok's sociocultural and political landscape, as evident in the government's policy titled "Implementation of Strengthening Family Resilience against Sexual Deviant Behavior and Its Impact." This policy legitimizes and encourages citizens to be more resistant to discussions about the LGBT community. The decision to ban "Memory of My Body" by Muhammad Idris, the Mayor of Depok, can be seen as an effort to uphold the dominance of the anti-LGBT discourse.

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