

“The Lady” and the Political Face of Myanmar

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ABSTRACT:

In film, it is possible to create a framing of an event, a character, their history, and even their future. “The Lady” is one such movie, creating a cult personality and positive framing for a character portrayed as having no flaws, despite reality being otherwise. Aung San Suu Kyi is a real person, and in the movie “The Lady” is portrayed as a pro-democracy character promoting non-violence. Using constructivism theory, this article aims to analyze the framing employed in the movie which held a strong and uncultivated sway on its viewers.

Keywords: *The Lady Movie (2011), Framing, Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar, Constructivism.*

ABSTRAK:

Melalui film, framing akan suatu peristiwa, tokoh, sejarah, maupun masa depan dapat diciptakan. The Lady adalah salah satu film yang mempertontonkan framing positif akan seorang tokoh tanpa cacat dan kultus walaupun pada kenyataannya tidak seperti itu. Aung San Suu Kyi adalah tokoh nyata yang difilmkan dalam film The Lady dengan menceritakan dirinya yang pro demokrasi dan anti kekerasan. Jurnal ini menggunakan teori konstruktivisme untuk menganalisa framing yang ada dalam suatu film dapat berpengaruh sangat kuat dan liar terhadap penikmat film tersebut (baca: The Lady).

Kata kunci: Film The Lady (2011), Framing, Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar, Konstruktivisme.

1. INTRODUCTION

Film is a cultural product intrinsically tied to social construct. Films enjoy a certain value in society. Being an easy-to-digest medium, films are born from the creativity and professionalism of people working in the sector. Film is used to examine social and political issues, can be employed to criticize certain cultural, social, or political situations, and are effortlessly accepted by audiences, making it possible to find movies dealing in such topics from any country in the world. Film, according to this writer, can be a political tool whereby it can create a framing of a public personality and disseminate the portrayal to audiences watching as if hypnotized by the frame.¹ In this analysis, the writer discusses one such public persona, framed in a movie as a perfect character having only positive qualities. The film represents her as flawless, despite the reality obviously being different. This study aims to analyze how people process their thinking when assessing an object based on pre-existing knowledge, and with “The Lady”, whether audiences assess the good with the bad. The writer employed constructivist theory to analyze whether the specific framing employed in “The Lady” maintained a strong and uncultivated effect on audiences.

The movie “The Lady” depicts the life and times of Myanmar political leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The film is directed by Luc Besson and was released in 2011. The titular character is played by Michelle Yeoh, which drew much audience attention. The carefully selected actress to play the role and the framing constructed by the director succeeded in making a cult figure of Aung San Suu Kyi, a public frontrunner who in the film is portrayed as inculpable, despite her own defects in real life, particularly a character trait which retains feelings of strong animosity.²

¹ Regarding film relations that shape the social, political, and cultural life of communities at the local, national, and global levels, see Cosmas Gatot Haryono, *Kajian Ekonomi Politik Media: Komodifikasi Pekerja dan Fetisisme Komoditas dalam Industri Media* (Study on Media Economies and Politics: Commodification of Workers and Commodity Fetishism in the Media Industry) (Sukabumi: CV Jejak, 2019), page 90.

² This animosity was apparent in the act of genocide executed by the Myanmar state military towards Rohingya Muslims. See "Aung San Suu Kyi: Myanmar democracy icon who fell from grace," 6 November 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-11685977>, accessed on January 22, 2021.



Picture 1: Scene from “The Lady” in which Aung San Suu Kyi waylays a group of armed soldiers.

2. DISCUSSION

As mentioned, the analysis by this writer employs constructivist theory. Constructivism is the theory that describes how people create knowledge based on their own construct of experiences of the world and the things they observe.³ Constructivism means when something a person knows is built on their own ideas. So, in constructivism, a single event could create multifarious viewpoints for different people based on the way each person applies the idea.

Constructivism believes its major strength is derived from the person’s own interpretation.⁴ Even though they can interpret their belief about an existent object, people are not at liberty to make that material or social interpretation based on their own opinion. There exist limitations against interpreting the material world because it is formed by the social world.

Similarly, Emanuel Adler said, constructivism is the belief that a person’s capacity to reflect or derive a lesson has the greater impact on how the individual and social actor associates meaning to understand the world through their experience and pre-existing knowledge.⁵

This paper looks at the concept of constructivism to scrutinize the construction of knowledge by individuals, and how it is used to assess an object based on the person’s own representations of preexisting knowledge or observation. Each person would have a different

³ Dr. Paul Suparno, *Teori Perkembangan Kognitif Jean Piaget* (Jean Piaget’s Cognitive Development Theory) (Yogyakarta: Kanisius) Page. 22

⁴ Ganjar Nugroho, “Constructivism and International Relations Theories,” *Global & Strategies*, Th. II, No. 1, Jan-Jun (2008) page. 88

⁵ Emanuel Adler. “Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics,” *European Journal of International Relations* 3.3 (1997) page. 322

assessment of the object, based on their own interest. Looking at the movie “The Lady”, this would be related to the political interest of Myanmar, which during the time the film was produced, had already made Aung San Suu Kyi an influential political figure in her own country.

The movie starts with an event in 1947, when Aung San Suu Kyi was still a little girl. Her father, General Aung San, alongside several other high-ranking officers are shot dead by soldiers at the behest of rebel factions in the military regime opposing the democratic movement in Myanmar. When she turned adult, Suu Kyi married and lived happily with her husband, Michael Aris, a British professor, and the couple were blessed with two sons, Alexander Aris and Kim Aris.

Suu Kyi, who prior had been living abroad, decided to return to Myanmar when she received word her mother was gravely ill. At the time, Myanmar was going through political upheaval. Showdowns occurred in many places between state apparatus and students and citizens, sometime resulting in deaths. In the melee, people seeking for political change, pleaded for Suu Kyi, daughter of Aung San, a man renowned for his fight to establish democracy in the country, to continue her father’s work and struggle.

Suu Kyi was in a quandary, torn between wanting to be with her own family and serving her people. Suu Kyi accepted the responsibility the Burmese people put on her, despite it meaning she would live separated from her beloved family. But Michael Aris and their two boys gave their whole-hearted support to Suu Kyi’s decision to fight for democracy in Myanmar.

The historical-moralistic theme of “The Lady”, portraying the positive traits of showing compassion for others, fighting for democracy, and taking on the struggle to oppose the tyranny of a totalitarian government made it appropriate fare for viewers young and old alike. A woman with nerves of steel, fighting for democracy in Myanmar at the expense of being separated from her family, and the winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize to boot, Aung San Suu Kyi was

dubbed the Iron Orchid of Burma.⁶ These were the positive personality traits of the titular character highlighted by the filmmaker, succeeding in making audiences construct the idea of Aung San Suu Kyi a cult figure heroine.⁷



Picture 2: Scene from “The Lady”, Aung San Suu Kyi giving a speech and being lauded enthusiastically by her people.

The perfect actress to the masterly framing by the film’s director helped create the cult figure of Aung San Suu Kyi. The film made her an unblemished frontrunner for the people, despite the reality showing her as being a person of several defective traits, including that of someone filled with deep animosity.

The portrayal of Aung San Suu Kyi, cult figure, in “The Lady” hypnotized audiences everywhere. “The Lady” constructed in the minds of the film’s viewers the political face of Myanmar. The film described at length the cruelty meted out by the state during the political upheavals of that period, constructing for audiences the notion that democracy is the best system

⁶ The shift in name from Burma to Myanmar had implications on the social and political life of the nation. The name change created a polemic, as two “big” countries, the United States of America and Great Britain, refused to acknowledge the change. The new name was acknowledged by a UN majority, yet there are still certain countries who continue calling it Burma, namely the US and Great Britain. Australia has taken a mixed position, sometimes calling it one or the other. For a short glimpse regarding the name change from Burma to Myanmar, see "Sejarah Pergantian Nama Negara Burma Menjadi Myanmar yang Berimplikasi Terhadap Sosial dan Politik," 18 June 2020, <https://voi.id/memori/7472/sejarah-pergantian-nama-negara-burma-menjadi-myanmar-yang-berimplikasi-terhadap-sosial-dan-politik>, accessed on 22 January 2021.

⁷ The use of the term cult figure by this writer seems appropriate as this is the manner in which the movie ‘The Lady’ portrays Aung San Suu Kyi in the narrative.

for a government to run a country. “The Lady” constructed in the minds of audiences what the ideal face of Myanmar should look like.

CONCLUSION

The film which framed the ideal political face of Myanmar very capably also constructed an idea in the minds of audiences, that Aung San Suu Kyi, through her promotion of democracy spread an idea to the general public of what an ideal political face of Myanmar should look like.

From the selection of the perfect highly skilled actress to portray the titular character, to the careful framing by the director, the movie constructed and disseminated a perception of the cult figure, Aung San Suu Kyi, as a people’s figurehead without blemish. The crime of genocide against Rohingya Muslims she enacted portray a different reality, now at the level of being investigated by an International Tribunal.

Film, as a product of culture is intrinsically tied to social construction. “The Lady” is a product created from the history, culture, and politics of the state of Myanmar. “The Lady” is tied to the social construction it created, which described the political face of the state Myanmar of the time and the cult figure that Aung San Suu Kyi was made into. “The Lady” very powerfully influenced the perceptions of audiences who watched it. “The Lady”, in the period between 2011 to 2021 has become a movie which give people satisfactory perceptions while they derive much pleasure watching it.

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