

## Representation of Masculinity in the Character Kiriko in the Film The Boy and the Heron (Roland Barthes' Semiotic Analysis)

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### Abstract

*This study examines the representation of masculinity within the female body through the character Kiriko in The Boy and the Heron (2023), directed by Hayao Miyazaki. Using Jo Ann Arinder's feminist theory, the research highlights how Kiriko embodies masculine traits such as physical strength, courage, and leadership that are traditionally associated with men in gender constructions. Through a qualitative approach and narrative analysis of visuals and dialogue, the study reveals that Kiriko serves as a symbol of resistance against the stereotype of passive and weak women. She appears as a nurturing figure who also protects and leads, thereby blurring the boundaries between masculinity and femininity. These findings affirm that gender representation in animation can be fluid, creating space for new interpretations of female identity in popular media. The study also illustrates how Studio Ghibli consistently presents complex and strong female characters, while promoting values oriented toward social change in its visual storytelling.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Women are often assumed to be gentle, passive, emotional, and easily influenced (Dillawati et al., 2023). On the other hand, men are often considered to be tough, active, thoughtful, and tough. These differences in nature are social constructs and many parents consider the above differences to be commonplace.

The distinction between masculine and feminine above continues to develop in society due to the influence of diverse cultures, so that the meaning of masculinity depends on the cultural background of each individual. In the context of social norms, this concept is always understood to regulate how a person should act based on their gender. Masculinity is not a purely biological trait, but rather a social construct influenced by culture, background, and environment (Sukmawati, 2024).

Jo Ann Arinder (2020) in her feminist study emphasizes that women's bodies are often used as a vessel to display masculinity, but not as a form of true liberation. She states that women's power in certain narratives can actually be a means to strengthen the patriarchal system, not fight it. She emphasizes that the representation of masculine women can only appear to bring progress to women, when in fact it still hides patriarchal dominance behind it. According to Arinder (2020), the characterization of women is often used as a vessel to display ideas about gender that make women only shaped, controlled or used as symbols and do not really have power.

The concept of masculine and feminine is increasingly embedded in the minds of society because of shows that depict the differences in the nature of the two. Various aspects

that include masculinity influence society in understanding the concept of masculinity and its application (Riskiy & Hapsari, 2022). The background of masculinity is shaped by the attributes, behaviors, and roles of men in a cultural context. Traits such as physical strength, assertiveness, courage, and independence are factors of traditional masculinity. With the development of the times, the understanding of masculinity has changed.

Women in patriarchal societies are often positioned in a sequence that places men as the sole center in various matters. Women are considered to be below men due to several aspects (Safira & Sunarto, 2022). This understanding often makes women not seen in terms of competence, opportunities, and broad human aspects or as humans who have reason, logic, and feelings, but only seen in terms of sex alone.

The masculine and feminine sides are always seen in both men and women, but in practice the masculine and feminine sides are always boxed into one gender. The Korean drama *My Name* (2022) shows a female character named Jiwoo as a strong and brave figure. Female masculinity is presented in behavior or traits that are tough, strong, mighty, and brave. Not only that, a firm way of speaking is also presented to show that the female character in the Korean drama is not a weak figure. The nature of women who are often depicted as weak, graceful or motherly is not shown. This Korean drama is more about presenting the firm and brave side of women. Independence, an attitude of not giving up easily, optimism and the ability to dare to fight are new formulas for female characters. This makes women no longer dependent on men.

Masculine characters are often assigned only to men. Masculine characteristics can be possessed by men or women because they are influenced by cultural factors, education, and others. Femininity and masculinity are mixed with stereotypes or societal mindsets that explicitly emphasize feminine and masculine traits (Pranaya & Wijaksono, 2023). This statement assumes that masculinity is not present naturally from birth or biologically, but masculinity is present because of various influences. This means that masculine traits can appear in both women and men, without having to be tied to their gender identity. However, only a few people understand masculinity in women.

Morgan states that masculinity is a behavior carried out by men and women regardless of their gender (Pratiwi et al., 2021). Masculine is a concept that describes a number of dominant attitudes, such as strong physique, rational thinking, bravery, and assertiveness. On the other hand, there is the concept of femininity which is presented as a form of antonym to masculine traits. Feminine is understood as an attitude that is considered weak, irrational, and emotional. According to Simone de Beauvoir, women are considered the second sex (Rohmah et al., 2021).

The *The Boy and Heron* film was studied by Praveda and Grahita (2024). This study examines the meaning of the character The Gray Heron in Japanese culture. In this film, the character The Gray Heron is depicted as having two transformations. The first transformation is shaped like a gray heron and night heron with jewel green, blue, gray and white feathers. Larger than the original, has human teeth and nose when opening its beak. The second transformation has the form of a half-bird, half-human with a human head and hands and a bird's body and legs.

If in general films depict the stereotype of women as gentle figures, the film *The Boy and The Heron* (2023) by Hayao Miyazaki is a film that tries to depict a masculine female figure represented by the character Kiriko. Kiriko has great strength just like most men. Kiriko's character is a hunter who has a brave soul and a strong body that exceeds the main character in the film.

The representation of women in films reflects how society views and shapes women's roles and identities. The development of the era has encouraged the emergence of more diverse and complex representations, including various gender expressions that do not

always conform to traditional norms (Sukmawati, 2024). Representation in films reinforces old stereotypes or denies them, providing opportunities for new meanings about the roles of women and masculinity. Representation is a form of how groups, identities, or ideas are depicted and presented to the audience. Representation is very important because the media, including films, have a major role in shaping society's understanding of reality and diversity. In films, representation does not only appear through characters and stories, but also through symbols, dialogues, and visuals that reflect certain cultural values or stereotypes. Therefore, films have the power to reinforce or challenge common views, provide space for voices that are often ignored, and create a more inclusive understanding of human diversity.

The media plays a crucial role in shaping public understanding of what is considered masculine. Film, television, and advertising are media for conveying messages about gender roles. Film as a visual communication medium not only functions as entertainment, but also as a means of conveying certain messages and ideologies (Abiyyah et al., 2024).

Masculine female characters have been studied before; many other researchers have conducted research on masculinity in films. One of them is the research of Christin, Gono, and Sunarto (2024). This study explains the stereotype of women who are embedded and required to have feminine traits as a result of patriarchal culture. Based on the results of the analysis using Roland Barthes' five-code semiotic reading method, when women are constructed as figures who have the strength of a man, who are able to face all their problem situations, even have a masculine appearance. Women in the film *Mencuri Raden Saleh* are depicted as dominant and strong figures. Where both of these traits are masculine traits that are identical to men. This shows that the existence of women who have masculine attributes can be found in society. The difference between this study and the one the author studied lies in the objects studied with a total of three women as research objects. Then, the use of Roland Barthes' analysis in this study uses five codes as a reference for each sign that appears in the film *Mencuri Raden Saleh*.

Furthermore, Setiawan and Prathisara (2024) discuss the *Kartini* film, highlighting how *Kartini* is depicted as a masculine character who does not have to be the same in terms of physical appearance and does not have to look like a man. Women are marked as feminine in the sense of not having a muscular physique, subordinate, and dominated. *Kartini* is also constructed not in accordance with the concept of masculinity that existed in the patriarchal culture of that era. The female character in the *Kartini* film is visualized as a beautiful, graceful woman, neatly dressed like a high-ranking daughter, and with an ideal body posture. However, *Kartini*'s masculine nature and characteristics are not like women at that time who were more obedient under the command of men. *Kartini* is depicted as a rebel who aims to liberate women so that they have the same rights and roles as men. Therefore, *Kartini* is a brave figure who is also considered a leader. *Kartini* is portrayed from the opposite side and emphasizes that masculinity is the result of social construction. Women are indeed identical to feminine characters, but in the *Kartini* film, women actually have characteristics that tend to be masculine.

Looking back at past history, Japan is known for its strong feudal government system that lasted until the Meiji restoration in 1896. Based on this common thread, it is not surprising that until now the existence of patriarchal culture in Japan is still felt. The image of the ideal woman in Japanese culture is perfectly depicted in the ideology called *Ryousai Kenbo* which was instilled during the Meiji government until World War II. This ideology is not only oriented towards women's obedience and dedication to men but also devoting their entire lives to the family. *Ryousai Kenbo* means "a good wife and a wise mother" which limits the space for exploration for women. If a woman has fulfilled the role of

Ryousai Kenbo and is obedient to her man (husband), then the woman is believed to have participated in maintaining order and harmony in society (Ambarastuti et al., 2024).

Japanese culture places men as the main power holders, both in the domestic and public spheres. Men are positioned as heads of families and dominant actors in politics and economics. In contrast, women are limited to their roles in the private sphere. Then women are stressed to maintain their appearance, take care of the house, serve guests, and obey their parents to strengthen the social structure that restricts their active participation in the public sphere.

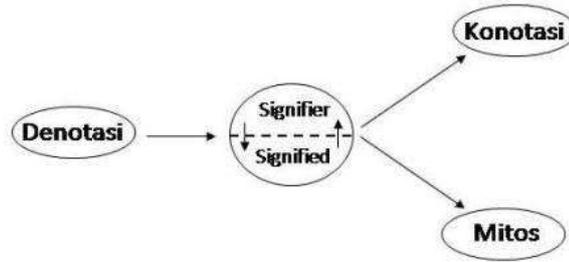
In contrast to the ideology of feminism which sees that women's identity, gender, and sexuality are elastic and formed through social customs and language used in everyday life. This view rejects the assumption that all women have the same experiences, and instead recognizes that every woman has different backgrounds such as race, social class, and culture. On that basis, feminism does not impose one point of view as the most correct, but rather opens up space for many different voices. In practice, this approach is used to criticize the way the media, law, and policy depict women narrowly or unfairly. The framework of feminist ideology is in line with Hayao Miyazaki's way of forming the representation of women in films as a form of subtle resistance to patriarchal norms.

Of the twenty-three films he has produced, sixteen have female protagonists. Hayao Miyazaki consistently presents female characters who are independent, brave, and the driving force of the story, as opposed to the passive female image expected in Japanese culture. Characters such as Nausicaä in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), San in *Princess Mononoke* (1997), Chihiro in *Spirited Away* (2001), Kiki in *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), and Sophie in *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004). In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2013, Miyazaki stated, "Any woman is as capable of being a hero as any man." He rejects the traditional stereotypes that are often attached to female characters in animated films. Miyazaki depicts his female characters as strong and able to stand on their own choices. They appear as independent, brave, and intelligent individuals, but still maintain feminine sides such as empathy and caring, showing that strength and tenderness can exist side by side.

The creation of female characters was based on observations in his studio; half of whose employees were women. Miyazaki not only presents strong female characters in the story, but also shows appreciation for the role of women in the creative process behind the scenes. Quoted from Magdalane, Hayao Miyazaki's works open up space for women to appear fully in the media without being trapped by stereotypes and traditional role expectations. Miyazaki shows positive feminist representation and gives space for women to speak up and act on their own.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study will examine the character of Kiriko in the film *The Boy and The Heron*. To answer the formulation of the problem, this study uses the semiotic analysis method according to Roland Barthes which is relevant to the research topic. Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis allows researchers to identify and analyze signs of masculinity that appear in the film.



**Figure 1.** Model Analysis Semiotics Roland Barthes

Semiotic analysis, according to Barthes, involves an understanding of signs, meanings, and the interaction between signs and culture, as well as the role of myth in forming deeper meanings. According to Barthes, semiotics is the science that studies signs and how they are interpreted. Signs consist of two main parts: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the physical form of the sign, while the signified is the meaning contained within it.

Barthes divides signification into two stages: denotative and connotative. Denotation is a universally agreed meaning, which contains the real meaning and has no hidden meaning. Connotation, on the other hand, is a meaning that comes from the interaction between the sign and the reality or emotions of the reader and the values of the culture. Connotation has a subjective or intersubjective value.

Barthes' concept of myth serves to explain how signs work at the connotative stage. Myth is a second-order semiotics used to critique the ideology of mass culture. Myth plays an important role in understanding how signs interact with culture and form deeper meanings.

In any form of social life, Barthes sees it as a separate sign system. He considers that language is a sign system that reflects the assumptions of a particular society at a particular time. Barthes focuses that the relationship between signifier and signified is not naturally formed, but rather random.

Qualitative descriptive method is used to examine the signs of masculinity found in the character Kiriko in the film *The Boy and the Heron*, because it allows researchers to describe in detail how the signs are used and what their meaning is in the context of the film. This study will use seven types of scenes to examine the signs of connotation, denotation, and myth.

The researcher uses a qualitative research method with a critical paradigm to find out the hidden meaning of the representation of masculinity in the character Kiriko in the film *The Boy and the Heron* with Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis. This study examines a female character named Kiriko who is represented as having a masculine character and how this representation reflects and influences our understanding of masculinity in a broader cultural context. This study will explore seven visual data to reveal the meaning behind Kiriko's character.

### 3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Research result

The results of this study present visuals that show the representation of masculine women in the scenes. In the film *The Boy and The Heron*, the character Kiriko wants to dismiss women who are not seen in terms of competence, opportunity, and broad human aspects.



Figure 2. Pulling the Ship's Sail

Source: Documentation of the film *The Boy And The Heron*

At the first level, the denotation of this image shows a female sailor who is controlling a sailboat which is usually done by a man. Wearing a red headband which is identical to sailors or adventurers in animated stories.

The connotative meaning in image two illustrates gender injustice in the form of discrimination experienced by women who are considered incapable of doing jobs that require strength and toughness. Kiriko's character actually shows that women also have physical strength like men (Nursafitri et al., 2024). True strength and toughness can be achieved by doing a series of physical exercises. Hayao Miyazaki seeks to change society's view of women who are often depicted as weak, spoiled, or have other feminine traits. Like the character Kiriko who rejects forms of gender injustice by doing heavy physical activities. She represents a form of masculinity that embraces vulnerability as part of strength.

The myth is that women will not have the same strength as men, which until today society still believes about the weakness of women. The myth that women are naturally weaker than men is still deeply rooted, including in Japanese culture which tends to be patriarchal. This view has long shaped gender roles that place women in subordinate positions, both in the domestic and public spheres. In the context of Japanese popular culture, such as anime, this myth is often reproduced through passive female characters or simply being companions to the main male character. In fact, women's strength lies not only in physicality, but also in mental resilience and emotional intelligence.



Figure 3. Pushing the Ship from Land

Source: Documentation of the film *The Boy And The Heron*

In the scene, Kiriko is seen struggling with big waves. She is wearing yellow clothes and wearing a red hair tie. Kiriko is seen pushing a small wooden ship from the outside,

with part of her body submerged in sea water. The ship has a large white sail with red lines and is swayed by the waves. The sea around it is raging violently with dark blue colors indicating a storm or extreme weather.

In the picture, the three connotative meanings contained are that Kiriko's figure is present as a resistance to the Ryou Sai Kenbo ideology. Kiriko is shown as a strong, independent, and tough figure. Kiriko is present as a woman who brings freedom to Japanese women in living what they choose to do in life. As if it relates to a new principle among Japanese women today, namely *Jibun Rashiku Ikiru* (Puteri & Widarahesty, 2017). Hayao Miyazaki packages this film based on his ideology which targets all groups to be able to enjoy this film. Ghibli films refuse to see the world through black and white glasses or rigid dichotomies. There are no characters who are completely evil or good, nor are there characters who are completely masculine or feminine. This approach makes Hayao Miyazaki's works so impactful and memorable for anyone who watches them. Old, young, male, female, all can find warmth through Ghibli films. Because the world created by Ghibli is a world that is friendly to everyone.

Furthermore, the myth in the film *The Boy And The Heron* which is set during World War II is very thick with the ideology of Ryou Sai Kenbo which makes women as "good wives and wise mothers" where their main role is reproduction and education of children and as passive objects of the patriarchal system (Puteri & Widarahesty, 2017). In Japanese culture, it is believed that women will be better and safer if they stay at home, thus giving rise to the belief that the place of women is at home. This view gives rise to the belief that the ideal place for women is in the domestic sphere, taking care of the household and family. As a result, the role of women in the public sphere is often considered less important than men, and their participation in the professional or leadership fields is limited. This myth also reinforces traditional gender norms that are still strongly influential today.



Picture 4. Commanding Mahito

Source: Documentation of the film *The Boy And The Heron*

The denotation in the third scene is seen Kiriko ordering Mahito Maki as the main character to stand up. There is a pelican feather on her head which is evidence that Kiriko saved Mahito Maki from being attacked by a pelican. Kiriko is the guardian and protector of Mahito Maki.

The connotation of picture four explains that Kiriko becomes a leader in saving Mahito Maki from the attack of a flock of pelicans. Mahito Maki considers Kiriko to be a reliable person and breaks the assumption that women are understood as something that is considered weak, irrational, and emotional. There are gender issues in society regarding women who have emotional natures and are still dependent on their partners so that they are considered incapable of being a leader (Billah, 2022). Kiriko shows that

women are characters full of courage who at the same time also have gentle souls and care about the people around them.

The next myth in Japanese culture is that women are seen as second-class citizens who cannot lead because they are considered irrational and emotional. So women are considered incapable or incompetent. This makes women not free to be what they want because these assumptions limit their freedom. According to (Billah, 2022) being a leader is seen as tough and requires sufficient physical strength, and this can be fulfilled by the innate nature of masculine men.



Picture 5. Rowing a Ship

Source: Documentation of the film *The Boy and The Heron*

At the denotative level of image five, Kiriko is seen rowing with all her might on a small boat in the middle of a sea with big waves. The sky looks cloudy, indicating challenging weather conditions. There is a bucket of water beside her, indicating serious activities related to sailing or rescue. The knife tucked into her waist shows that Kiriko is ready to face the threat. Wearing practical clothes, Kiriko looks focused, strong, and decisive in facing big waves that require speed to make decisions so that the ship and herself and Mahito Maki can survive.

Picture five has a connotation that indirectly represents Kiriko as a figure who helps in the rescue efforts of her ship and Mahito Maki. The view that women are helpless, weak, and have no sovereignty is not depicted in Kiriko. Kiriko is not depicted as a figure who needs help or is merely a visual sweetener. Instead, she appears as an active agent who takes control in a critical situation. The work clothes and weapons she carries represent empowerment, preparedness, and an active role. Her body position facing the waves and pulling the rope with full strength shows a symbol of courage and responsibility. The raging sea water is interpreted as a challenge to life, and Kiriko fights against the condition directly. This opposes the patriarchal gender construction that often places women in a passive or domestic position.

The myth of women in Japanese culture is often used as a supporting role or a mother role that cannot interfere in decision-making. Women are treated as supporting roles so that men's needs can be met. Women are considered weak, helpless, and have no power so that what is seen by society and used as a value for themselves is their appearance (Sakina & Purba, 2022). Male dominance in Japanese culture views women as weak, emotional, and not objective.



Figure 6. Splitting the Hunt

Source: Documentation of the film *The Boy And The Heron*

At the denotative level, Kiriko is depicted as a hunter. With a knife, he is able to rip open the stomach of his prey. His sleeves are rolled up, he uses a headband, and his facial expression is serious, indicating his seriousness in his activities. Around him, there are many small white creatures (Wara-Wara) who are seen watching his actions with great attention.

The connotation of Kiriko as a hunter certainly uses clothes that make it easy for her to move freely. The clothes worn by Kiriko are inspired by kimonos. The similarity lies in the silhouette and cut of the sleeves that resemble kimonos with wide sleeves and a crossed collar model. The motif worn is a picture of a ship's rudder which is her identity as a sailor and a knife that depicts Kiriko as a hunter and sailor. The simple design on the obi or belt is reminiscent of a traditional style. At first glance, the clothes worn by Kiriko look like work clothes which in Japanese culture are called samue or casual yukata that are modified for mobility.0020

The myth that women are considered as servants who take care of domestic work and are always seen wearing traditional kimonos. This myth goes hand in hand with the lives of Japanese society. Women are depicted as ideal if they do domestic work such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the family. In fact, behind this image there is a hidden message that makes women seem like they only deserve to be behind the scenes, not in public spaces or as leaders. The beautiful and traditional kimono is a restrictive symbol. The clothing limits movement and becomes a kind of mandatory "uniform" for obedient women. Making it seem as if women who do not obey their roles are considered impolite. Although it seems like just culture or tradition, narratives like this actually make it difficult for women to freely determine their own lives.



### Picture 7. Rowing a Boat Using Feet

Source: Documentation of the film *The Boy and The Heron*

The denotation of the seventh picture shows a Kiriko standing on a small wooden boat in the middle of the sea, wearing a traditional Japanese short-sleeved shirt with a distinctive pattern, loose work pants, boots, and a red headband. She is seen rowing her boat using her feet which shows her absolute strength compared to Mahito Maki.

At the connotative level, Kiriko is not depicted as a "gentle" or "silent" woman as is the stereotype of the ideal woman in Japanese patriarchal culture. The way she stands, the functional clothing, and the dominant gestures indicate resistance to old values that assume women must appear sweet and obedient. The movement of rowing with the feet shows full control of space and body, which is often considered "inappropriate" for women in conservative norms. This is a symbol of resistance to the boundaries of women's bodies that have been "controlled" by society. With Mahito who is depicted more passively rowing using his hands, there is a reversal of the narrative norm where men are usually saviors or dominant figures. This provides new space for the interpretation that women can also be the main actors and protectors. Kiriko's active, assertive body position, which is not limited by conventions of politeness, symbolizes a woman who is sovereign over her own body. She no longer lives based on social gaze, but on her own will. In fact, women also have the right to feel comfortable with their bodies, choose how to sit, talk, and dress according to themselves as long as it does not harm others. The principle of maintaining good manners should be a conscious choice, not a social coercion that makes women feel like they are always being watched or that they are wrong when they are being themselves.

Often, the myth of women grows with a series of unwritten demands about how they should behave, not to sit astride, not to laugh too loudly, not to dress too revealingly, and must always maintain "modesty" wherever they are. These principles are often packaged as a form of maintaining honor and self-esteem, but on the other hand, they often become shackles that limit women's freedom to express themselves. Women are taught to maintain their image, while men are freer to move without similar burdens. This creates a subtle but real inequality, as if a woman's value lies only in how "compliant" she is with the standards of politeness determined by society.



Figure 8. Teaching Mahito to Split the Catch

Source: Documentation of the film *The Boy And The Heron*

In this scene, Kiriko and Mahito Maki are skinning their prey. Her face is tense, her clothes are dirty and torn, her body is covered in wounds, and both of her hands are tightly gripping Kiriko's knife. Next to her, Kiriko stands in a much cleaner and calmer condition. Kiriko observes the situation while speaking in a firm voice, seemingly giving direct instructions to Mahito. Her clothes are still neat, her position is upright,

and she does not participate in the physical action. Visually, Kiriko is not involved in manual labor, but her presence is very dominant in the scene.

In terms of connotation, there are symbolic and cultural meanings that emerge as a representation of unusual power relations in the structure of traditional Japanese culture. Kiriko, as a female character, appears in a position that is symbolically higher than Mahito Maki. She is not only calm and clean, but also has control over the situation. The way she stands and gives directions shows dominance, authority, and assertiveness. On the other hand, Mahito Maki is positioned as a character who struggles physically and is visually in a position of “receiving orders”. This creates a new reading that male characters do not always have to be leaders or strong central figures. The relationship between the two shows a dynamic that reverses traditional gender norms that make women appear as directors, and men as implementers. Symbolically, this is a form of shift from standardizing roles based on gender.

At the myth level, this scene ideologically destroys the grand narrative of patriarchy that has long been embedded in Japanese culture and global society in general. Women are identical with gentleness, obedience, and passivity, while men are leaders, strong, and active. Kiriko's character is present as a form of deconstruction of this myth. She shows that leadership, strength, and control are not qualities that are exclusively owned by men. In this context, the myth that has positioned women as subordinates in both the family, society, and popular cultural narratives is broken by visuals and narratives that subtly but strongly position Kiriko as a figure who determines the direction of action. She becomes a symbol of women who are empowered without having to lose their femininity or identity. This is not just a matter of role reversal, but more of an affirmation that superiority is not attached to a particular gender, and that women deserve to be present as central figures who have control over circumstances.

### 3.2. Discussion

Generally, in various films, women are often idealized as obedient, caring, and nurturing natures so that domestic work is considered an unchangeable nature for women. Meanwhile, men are shown as strong masculine figures in the public sphere (Billah, 2022). However, the film *The Boy and The Heron* presents the character Kiriko as a figure that is the opposite of the depiction of women in Japanese culture. This aims to reconstruct the views of Japanese society about women who have so far considered women only appropriate in the domestic sphere. Because so far, the depiction of women in Japanese society has been influenced by the Ryou sai Kenbo ideology that has existed since World War II. Through the character Kiriko, Hayao Miyazaki provides a new meaning to correct the patriarchal view that has so far challenged women. So that the myth of women's representation can change with the times.

Hayao Miyazaki, as the creator of the Kiriko character, presents Kiriko as an antidote to the depiction of female characters in most films. This aims to change the public's view that always makes women weak objects and sex objects to attract viewers. Kiriko, who still appears feminine, defines a figure that is close to reality in society by not abandoning her feminine nature which simultaneously has masculine traits. Meaning that feminine and masculine are not differences that are limited to gender, but are more emphasized as a collaboration for women's freedom.

The depiction of Kiriko from Jo Ann Arinder's perspective (2020), illustrates a phenomenon that actually shows how women's bodies can be used as a medium to display masculinity without actually destroying the underlying patriarchal structure. Arinder emphasizes that masculinity manifested through women's bodies is not necessarily liberating if it remains within the framework of patriarchal values. In the

context of the film, Kiriko is valued for her masculine characteristics and the strength of her feminine values, so that her role does not deviate from the dominant patriarchal logic. Although she appears powerful in front of Mahito Maki, her contribution remains limited because she is not the center of the story, but rather functions as a supporter of Mahito Maki's journey.

Thus, Kiriko's representation in *The Boy and the Heron* shows that the presence of women in masculine spaces does not always signify liberation or resistance to oppressive systems. Through Arinder's (2020) framework, it can be understood that women's bodies are often only used as a medium to absorb patriarchal values without changing the basic structure that places women in a subordinate position. Kiriko may appear strong visually and narratively, but her strength is still measured through standards of masculinity and functions to support the male protagonist, so the role cannot be fully read as a form of resistance to the existing order. Instead of dismantling the patriarchal system, characters like Kiriko risk strengthening it in a new, better form.

This view is also reinforced by Ninuk Mardiana Pambudy, Senior Editor of *Kompas Daily* (2025), as well as a writer on gender issues. According to her, the entire film depicts a form of feminism in a modern format. She considers Kiriko to be a depiction of a blend of cultures that is no longer black and white in the context of differences between women and men. According to her, Kiriko is a widely accepted figure because her figure reflects masculinity that feels in line with the development of the times. This representation also reflects the dynamics of Japanese society today, where gender boundaries are becoming increasingly flexible and open to diverse identities. Kiriko's protective attitude reflects the role of motherhood that is closely related to the nature of women as bearers, birthers, and maintainers of life. An action that is full of feminine meaning and cultural myths surrounding women.

The findings in this study indicate that Kiriko's emergence as a firm and visionary female leader proves that women's leadership capacity is not something new, but rather something that has long been ignored. As emphasized by Pambudy (2025), according to her, a woman's leadership has only recently been recognized, especially in the world of business, politics, and the world of work. Women's involvement in the economy and development in the public sphere contributes significantly to the creation of social welfare that is commonplace in Japan. This shows that when women are given equal space, they are able to demonstrate capacity and intelligence that is no less than men. Apart from Kiriko, there are many female roles that guide Mahito such as Lady Himi who shows the way for Mahito and the domestic workers who appear as protectors from evil. There are no evil female characters in this film, all the evil ones are presented in male characters, such as in the flock of pelicans and storks.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The researcher found the conclusion that Kiriko as a female character is a figure who does not agree with the patriarchal system. Her character states indirectly that if women are given the same space as men, their abilities and capacities are not unequal between men and women. Her figure is present as a form of feminine and masculine collaboration that is not always about gender. The depiction of Kiriko as a combination of women and men makes her character close to life. Kiriko is not a symbol of true freedom for women, but her figure is a new format for modern women today who are no longer bound by patriarchal domination. Kiriko's characterization, which shows the background of World War II, does not make her have to follow patriarchal rules, which is an indirect example that it is not a new thing for women to be like men, but in practice such things do not get attention and seem to be ignored.

This research is still quite limited because there are difficulties in accessing the theory and limited to focusing only on the masculine character of Kiriko where women can have masculine aspects, whereas, in this film there are many aspects that can be analyzed from the whole film. The researcher hopes that future research can examine the audience's response to this film and examine the overall female characters in the film *The Boy and The Heron*.

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