

# Representation of Family Dysfunction in Melanie Martinez's "Dollhouse" Music Video

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**Abstract**—This study was conducted to determine how family dysfunction is represented in "Dollhouse" music video by Melanie Martinez. The approach used in this research is a qualitative descriptive research. The research method used is John Fiske's television semiotics, the codes of television, seen through three levels of code, which are the level of reality, representation, and ideology. The results of this study show how a family is described as having family dysfunctions such as substance abuse (alcohol and drugs), infidelity (unfortunate life event), bad relationships between parents, bad relationships between parents and children, and tense home atmosphere. This family is also shown trying to look perfect to outsiders like how an ideal family should be. In addition, the women in this music video are depicted as oppressed and voiceless in dysfunctional families. Patriarchal ideology also plays a role in family dysfunction. This can be seen from how a woman from a dysfunctional family is placed in a subordinate position and does not have the place to speak up about what she is experiencing and the condition of her whole family who is experiencing dysfunction.

**Keywords**—Representation, Family Dysfunction, Music Video, Semiotics, Dollhouse

## I. INTRODUCTION

Family is a social institution that functions to meet the needs of individuals in society (Murdock and Reiss in Moerdijati, 2013, p.9). If the family is not able to implement / carry out family functions, then the family can be said to be dysfunctional (Schneiders in Yusuf, 2012). Some of the reasons why families experience dysfunction is because of abusive parents, parents experiencing addiction/substance abuse, as well as unfortunate life events such as infidelity, and others (Ubaidi, 2017).

In the USA, it is estimated that 70-80% of people come from dysfunctional families (Gorski, 2012, p.46). This global phenomenon is not only found in the USA. According to the Central Statistics Agency (2019), the divorce rate in Indonesia in 2018 reached 408,202 cases, an increase of 9% from the previous year.

Family dysfunction in the mass media is also represented in the arts they produce, such as films and television. According to Gelles and Levine (1999), initially television portraits of the 1950s and 1960s were depicted as happy families. In the early '90s, family portraits became more and more varied, showing not only images of happy families, but also various forms of unhappy families.

Apart from films and television, family dysfunction can be represented in other art forms, such as songs or music videos. A music video is a combination of a song by a musician or group, with visual images mostly from video clips on TV or sold on videocassettes or laser discs (Epstein, 2004).

Music videos about family dysfunction have been produced by several musicians. One of them is "Stay Together for the Kids" music video by the band Blink-182. This video is a story about two parents who are in about to divorce, told from the point of view of a kid who can't do anything about it. This song is inspired by the true story of the divorce of the parents of Blink-182 guitarist, Tom DeLonge, and also the bassist, Mark Hoppus. In addition, there is also "Because of You" music video by Kelly Clarkson. This video is inspired by Clarkson's true story about her parents getting divorced. The video begins with Kelly fighting with her husband, but she has a flashback to her childhood, when she saw her parents fighting and eventually separated. The video ends with Kelly and her husband stop fighting for the sake of their young daughter.

Melanie Martinez also released a music video about family dysfunction titled "Dollhouse" (2014). This music video tells the story of a family that looks perfect from the outside, but they are actually experiencing many problems inside. Told from a daughter's point of view, she tells the real situation of her family behind the perfect cover they put to the outside world. It turns out her mother is an alcoholic, her father is cheating on her mother, and her brother smokes cannabis illegally.

What attracted the writer's attention to do a research on this music video is because Martinez uses the metaphor of a dollhouse or "dollhouse" to describe a dysfunctional family condition. In addition, this video uses a real person depicted as a doll, whereas other music videos generally use a real person as the real person itself. According to Laliberte (1999), dolls are representations of humans. Dolls are designed to imitate humans, such as small people trapped in cloth or plastic. Dolls represent humanity, even in the most artificial or idealized ways. So, dolls have the potential to represent real life.

Melanie Martinez is a singer from USA. She gained public attention after being on the third season of *The Voice*. Her first album, *Cry Baby*, where "Dollhouse" is one of the tracks, tells the story of a girl named Cry Baby, what she goes through, and how Cry Baby grows as an individual. *The Guardian* describes her music as "part-nursery rhyme, part tragic life story".

A previous study was conducted by Dibba Nugroho from Petra Christian University, titled "Representation of Orientalism in the Thirty Seconds to Mars Music Video "From Yesterday"" (2017). This study discusses how orientalism is represented in music videos. The result of this research is that Eastern people are depicted as inferior figures in videos produced by Westerners. Previous research is used in this research for the similarity of the thing studied, music videos.

Previous research has also been conducted by Fikri Rachmat from the University of North Sumatra, entitled "Representation of Family Dysfunction in the film Reality Cinta and Rock'n Roll (Analysis of Semiotics in the Film Realita Cinta and Rock'n Roll)" (2013). The results show that the representation of family dysfunction in the film is a real picture of what's happening in modern families.

Susana Kristianawati from Sebelas Maret University has also conducted previous research titled "Representation of Family Dysfunction in the Media (Study of Semiotics of Social Symbols and the Meaning of Physical Values and Affective Values of Family Dysfunction by Parents of Children Represented in Extracurricular Films)" (2013). The conclusion of this study is that this film shows dysfunction in the family that endangers the family itself. Research by Rachmat and Kristianawati are used because both are research about the representation of family dysfunction.

Research on "Dollhouse" music video is different from other studies. This study examines the representation of family dysfunction, while Nugroho's research discusses the representation of orientalism. Second, "Dollhouse" is a music video, not a movie like Rachmat and Kristianawati's research. Third, generally movies or music videos use real people in their projects, but in "Dollhouse", they use dolls to portray real people. Furthermore, "Dollhouse" is a music video produced by the USA, while the object of research by Rachmat and Kristianawati is an Indonesian movie.

The formulation of the problem that will be studied is how is the representation of family dysfunction in the music video "Dollhouse" by Melanie Martinez?

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### A. Family Dysfunction

Family is a social institution that functions to meet the needs of individuals in society (Murdock and Reiss in Moerdijati, 2013, p.9). According to KBBI, family consists of a mother and father and their children. According to Berns, a family has five basic functions: reproduction, education, assignment of social roles, economic support, and viewing/emotional support (2012, p.80). If the family is unable to carry out family functions, then the family can be said to be dysfunctional (Schneiders in Yusuf, 2012).

Ubaidi (2017) explains the causes of family dysfunction as follows:

#### a. Abusive parents

One/both parents have a history of physical/non-physical violence.

#### b. The strict controlling and or authoritarian parent

One/both parents have a history of not allowing children to make their own decisions according to their age. Parents are usually driven by unexplained horrors and dispute the child's decisions for themselves.

#### c. The soft parent

One/both parents intentionally/not fail to set rules and boundaries in the household.

#### d. The large and extended families

Parents cannot pay attention to meet all the wishes and needs of the family; therefore, they get conflicting guidance about their own family from extended families.

#### e. Personality disorder in family members

Personality disorders of one/both parents affect the family.

#### f. A chronically sick or disabled child in the family

Sick children will harm all family members, family care automatically switches to the sick and that causes other needs are ignored.

#### g. Unfortunate life events

Events that have a negative impact on family dynamics (infidelity, divorce, trauma, parental death, layoffs).

#### h. Family values, culture, and ethnicity

This can have a negative effect on trust in cases such as gender roles, parenting practices, and the power of individual family members.

#### i. Insecure nature of family attachments

Feelings of insecurity will harm family dynamics.

#### j. Dynamics of previous dysfunctional generation

The dysfunctional family of the previous generation has a toxic effect on the next generation.

#### k. Systematic stability and or instability

Social, economic, political and financial factors can positively/negatively affect the nature of family dynamics.

#### l. The deficient or absent parent

One/both parents intentionally/do not have deficiencies, so they fail to act appropriately. Children eventually take on the role of parents and become caregivers for their younger siblings.

#### m. Substance abuse and or addicted parent

One/both parents intentionally/do not experience substance abuse/addiction. Parents will find it difficult to fulfill promises, so they will ignore the physical and emotional needs of their children.

Ubaidi also mentions common characteristics of family dysfunction (2017):

a. Lack of empathy, respect and boundaries for family members.

b. Borrowing or destroying personal property without consent.

c. Violating privacy without permission.

d. Extreme conflict/hostility in the family environment between parents-children or siblings.

e. Role reversal/confusion: both parents/children change their roles.

f. Restricted friendships and relationships with outsiders lead to family isolation

g. Secrecy, denial, rigid rule of religious extremists.

- h. Perfectionism and unrealistic expectations of children.
- i. Emotional, verbal abuse, mocking and blaming family members.
- j. Speech and emotion stifled.
- k. Using children as weapons for revenge.
- l. Conditional love and emotional support are always pathological.

Yusuf also explains the characteristics of dysfunctional families (2004):

- a. Death of one or both parents
- b. Both parents are separated or divorced
- c. The relationship between the parents is not good
- d. The relationship between parents and children is not good
- e. Tense, no warmth at home
- f. Parents are busy and rarely at home
- g. One/both parents have a mental/personality disorder

### B. Representation and Semiotics

According to Stuart Hall, representation is the process of changing abstract ideological concepts into concrete forms. Representation is a concept used in the social process of meaning through the existing marking system: dialogue, writing, video, film, photography, and so on. In short, representation is the production of meaning through language (Hall, 1997, p.15).

Semiotics is the study of signification and meaning of sign systems, the science of signs, of how meaning is constructed in media "texts" (Fiske, 2004, p.282). Semiotics has three areas of study as follows (Fiske, 2012, p.66-67):

- a. The sign itself.
- b. Codes or systems by which signs are organized. communication channels available for the transmission of the codes.
- c. The culture in which codes and signs operate. Use a reference application such as Mendeley or Endnote when writing references, so that your concerns are well written and more perfect..

### C. Codes of Television

Things that need to be considered in semiotics are the relationship between signs and their meanings, and how these signs are combined into a code (Fiske and Hartley, 2003, p.22). In television programs, in the process of broadcasting, it has been encoded by social codes which are constructed in three levels as follows (Fiske, 1987, p.5):

#### a. First Level: Reality

The level of reality includes appearance, clothing, make-up, environment, behavior, speaking style, gestures, and expressions.

#### b. Second Level: Representation

The representation level includes camera, lighting, editing, music, sound.

#### c. Third Level: Ideology

The ideological levels include individualism, race, class, materialism, and capitalism.

## III. RESEARCH METHOD

Semiotics is the method of analysis to study signs (Sobur, 2009, p.15). The three elements that must exist in the study of semiotics are signs, sign references, and the use of signs (Fiske, 2012, p.68). John Fiske divides television semiotics into several codes seen through three levels, namely the level of reality, the level of representation and the level of ideology (Fiske, 1987, p.5)

The subject of this research is the entire music video for "Dollhouse" by Melanie Martinez. The object of this research is the representation of family dysfunction.

In analyzing the music video "Dollhouse" by Melanie Martinez, the researcher will describe then interpret the text. After that, the researcher will explain the codes, make generalizations, and draw conclusions.

## IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Cry Baby's family is described as a family of dolls living in a dollhouse. This family is trying to look ideal and perfect in front of others, but in fact they are a dysfunctional family. In addition, female characters in this video are also depicted as oppressed by patriarchal understanding and have no room to speak out about family dysfunction and injustice. the production of meaning through language (Hall, 1997, p.15).

### Depictions of a Dysfunctional Family Trying to Look Ideal

Cry Baby's family is depicted as putting up a good image in front of other people. In this video, Cry Baby's family often tries to hide their dysfunctional condition and try to be seen as an ideal family. Structurally, Cry Baby's family looks ideal, with a father, mother, and two children, but that's not really the case.

Their pretense can be seen from how they are described as a family of dolls living in a dollhouse. The dollhouse is a symbol of a house that is lacking in love, a mismatch between the ideal form of a household and the reality that exists, and a symbol of falsehood (Lynley, 2016). In this video, the dollhouse metaphor is used to symbolize Cry Baby's family, as a symbol of something fake, non-ideal, and a lack of affection. The dolls in the dollhouse symbolize the family that lives in it. Dolls are representations of humans, albeit in the most artificial way (Laliberte, 1999). In this video, the metaphor of a doll is used to symbolize a human who is full of fakeness.

These dolls are described as perfect, but there are a lot of indications of family dysfunction, such as substance abuse by Cry Baby's mother. Mother is addicted to alcohol, this can be seen when she has a hangover with a brown beer bottle next to her. In addition, she was also seen drinking liquor from a flask after seeing the other woman's lipstick marks on her husband's neck. She did this to forget her husband's infidelity. Substance abuse and infidelity (unfortunate life events) are causes of family dysfunction (Ubaidi, 2017). In addition, the cheating husband and the inability of Cry Baby's parents to discuss this issue also indicate a bad parental relationship, which is also sign of family dysfunction (Yusuf, 2004).

In addition, Cry Baby's siblings also experience substance abuse, which is also a cause of family dysfunction

(Ubaidi, 2017). He smoked large quantities of cannabis illegally.

When they got together, there was no warmth between them. This can be seen when they take family photos and watch television together, they always show a flat, sad, or serious expression. When together, they are always surrounded by a tense atmosphere. A tense and unwarm household atmosphere are signs of family dysfunction (Yusuf, 2004). In addition, their silence also indicates a poor parent-child relationship, which is also one of the characteristics of family dysfunction (Yusuf, 2004).

The lyrics in this video show how they try to look perfect:

*Places, places, get in your places  
Throw on your dress and put on your doll faces  
Everyone thinks that we're perfect  
Please don't let them look through the curtain*

But people outside Cry Baby's family are described not knowing the dysfunctional nature of her family. This is because her family always acts as if they are perfect when in front of outsiders. How pretentious they are can be seen from the lyrics:

*Uh oh, she's coming to the attic  
Plastic, go back to being plastic*

Plastic is the epitome of fakeness. The lyrics show how the Cry Baby family puts on the perfect mask again when someone else is around. This causes outsiders to be naive. This can be seen in the lyrics:

*You don't hear me when I say  
"Mom, please wake up  
Dad's with a slut  
And your son is smoking cannabis"  
No one ever listens  
This wallpaper glistens*

Glistening wallpaper symbolizes perfection. Because of this, when Cry Baby told other people about her family, no one believed it. When outsiders finally learn about the reality of Cry Baby's family, they are portrayed as terrified. This can be seen from how girls run away from the dollhouse in fear after entering.

At the end of the video, when the outsiders have returned to their homes, it is seen that the dollhouse is closed again. It symbolizes the people in the dollhouse will remain hidden behind perfection. The last lyrics sung by Cry Baby are:

*I see things that nobody else sees.*

These lyrics signify that Cry Baby is a witness to what is happening in her family that no one else sees. These lyrics appear many times in this music video. This repetition emphasizes important information.

This music video also shows some contrasts, such as the usage of dollhouse with very dominant cheerful colors, but the choice of color grading used are cool tones to describe a sad situation. How on the intro to the song, kid's toy musical instruments are heard, but the notes played are all in minor. How Cry Baby's hair is colorful on one side and black on the other. How she uses children's clothes but also use piercings and tattoos (Dorwart, 2019). Since this song is narrated from the point of view of a little girl, it symbolizes that a child

should not experience any of the above. These contrasts add into the dark atmosphere of the Cry Baby family.

From some of the things above, the researcher sees that there is an element of duality in the Cry Baby family. This duality element shows two sides of an event; what is seen and what is not, what is really happening and what should've been.

### **Depiction of Patriarchal Ideology and Female Figures in Dysfunctional Families**

Patriarchal ideology is very strong in this music video. Patriarchy is an understanding in which men are considered superior to women (Sultana, 2012). The existence of patriarchal ideology puts women in this music video in an oppressed position and cannot speak up. When the mother saw her husband cheating on her, she could only drink liquor and shed tears with a disappointed face. According to research by Peggy Vaughan (in McDaniel, 2008), up to 75% of relationships where men have an affair, women choose to stay in the relationship. Even though her husband cheated on her, Cry Baby's mother as a woman chose to stay silent and cry quietly. The limitation to act and the fact that she is only able to cry silently shows that women are still under the oppression of men.

In the lyrics of the song "Dollhouse", the mother character is in the "spotlight". Cry Baby talks about his mother a lot more rather than her father or brother. There is one part in this song that tells about what happened to Cry Baby's mother:

*Hey girl, look at my mom  
She's got it going on  
Ha, you're blinded by her jewelry  
When you turn your back  
She pulls out a flask  
And forgets his infidelity*

From the prominence of the mother character and what she has been through, Cry Baby tries to tell the story that there are women who are oppressed by patriarchal ideology. From this, the researcher sees that Cry Baby is trying to speak up about the injustices faced by her mother. She had seen her father cheat on her and how it had affected her mother; her mother drinks to forget. Here, Melanie Martinez as the singer of "Dollhouse" tries to speak up that women are often oppressed by men, and often all they can do is pretend as if nothing happened.

Cry Baby is described as fed up with patriarchy that places women in subordinate positions. This can be seen when she destroys dolls that resemble women's bodies. This is a form of rejection of the view of how women are considered babyish and weak (Univeristy of Bath, 2005). But in the end, she as a woman could not do anything. The mutilation she did to her dolls is a symbol of her frustration with the patriarchal ideology that oppresses women in her family.

In addition, Cry Baby's inability to take action is also illustrated when she is trapped in a Barbie box. A person trapped in a box is an illustration of the boxed in idiom. This idiom describes someone who feels limited/stuck due to limited choices (Oyster English, n.d). As a woman who wants to be free from patriarchal oppression, she can't do anything. Cry Baby wants to speak out for the injustice experienced by women, but can't. This is because in a patriarchal environment, women have a limited voice (Estrella, 2019). This scene of being trapped in a Barbie box appears twice in

the music video. This repetition emphasizes Cry Baby's feeling of being confined as important information; there are not many things that women can do when facing injustice situations.

Another example of the existence of patriarchal understanding in this music video is the existence of gender roles. This can be seen from Cry Baby's mother who is preparing her husband and child to take pictures. This is a gender role related to domestic behavior, where a mother will take care of her family members and prepare for her family needs ("What are gender roles and stereotypes", n.d).

While dad sat at the dinner table and read the newspaper, mom went to the sink to wash the dishes. It also illustrates the patriarchal ideology related to gender roles. The gender roles found in this section are domestic behavior, where the wife is tasked with cleaning the house but not with the husband ("What are gender roles and stereotypes", n.d). Cry Baby also indicates that in the kitchen, there is injustice against women happening. This can be seen in the lyrics:

*Don't let them see what goes down in the kitchen*

The amalgamation of images of mothers washing dishes and fathers sitting reading newspapers indicates the subordination of women. Cry Baby wants to show that the role of women in patriarchal families is to serve (Dorwart, 2019).

Cry Baby's brother also demonstrates superiority over others by smoking cannabis and folding his arms. Folding arms is a symbol of power poses that men do to make them look bigger and intimidate others (Navarro, 2014). His expression also shows a contempt expression, which is a feeling of being superior to others (Ekman, n.d).

From the explanation above, it can be concluded that in this music video, women are depicted as weak and unable to do anything when facing injustice. This shows that patriarchal understanding is still very strong in society. In the country where this music video was made, USA, it turns out that patriarchy is still strong; women are still considered submissive than men and women do not have much room to speak up. Almost all families in the USA are patriarchal. This can also be seen from how wives tend to take their husbands' surnames, and not vice versa (Cohen, 2012).

In conclusion, the researcher found that; first, dysfunctional families put up a front. They are described as trying to present themselves to look ideal and perfect in front of others. This can be seen from how people who are not part of Cry Baby's family do not believe it when they are said to be dysfunctional. But when these people have seen it for themselves, they believe the horror experienced by the family. Behind the perfect cover they put up, there is an indication of a dysfunctional family. The forms of family dysfunction are infidelity (unfortunate life events), substance abuse (alcohol and drugs), parent-child relationships are not good, relationships between parents are not good, and a tense household atmosphere without warmth.

Second, this music video depicts the existence of women who are oppressed and cannot speak out about injustice in a dysfunctional family. Because of the patriarchal ideology, women do not have the space to speak out for the dysfunction of their families and the injustices they experience. This patriarchal understanding also emphasizes gender roles. This can be seen from how men are described

as superior to women, and women are depicted as carrying out domestic roles in the house. The female character is depicted as a weak character and unable to do anything in the face of injustice in cases of family dysfunction. This can be seen from how the mother can only cry silently and pour her sadness on liquor when she finds out her husband is cheating on her, and Cry Baby destroys her dolls as a form of rejection of the view that women are weak and oppressed.

Suggestions for further researchers to conduct research on this music video using the reception analysis method to see the acceptance of feminist audiences on how dysfunctional families and women are represented in the "Dollhouse" music video.

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