

## Digital Female Representation Subjectivity in *Her* (2013): Postfeminist Perspective Analysis

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### Abstract

*This study examines the representation of female subjectivity in the film Her (2013) through a postfeminist perspective. The film, directed by Spike Jonze, presents Samantha, an artificial intelligence, as a character who challenges traditional gender roles and offers a new lens through which to explore female identity in the digital age. It used a qualitative method, where dialogue, character actions, and interactions between Theodore and Samantha are analyzed to understand the representation of postfeminism in their relationship. By focusing on key themes such as freedom, gender relations, and identity formation, this study employs postfeminist representation of Helene Cixous and Judith Butler, to interpret Samantha's role in transcending traditional gender constraints. The findings describe that Her (2013) postfeminist representation of female identity, where technology and emotional growth intersect, offering a critique of conventional gender norms. Her (2013) Samantha's journey highlights the identity, the film's critique of societal gender norms and its portrayal of a fluid, dynamic female identity that aligns with modern perspectives on empowerment and self discovery. Cixous advocates for women to actively participate in their liberation by "writing themselves." Samantha metaphorically "writes herself" by reprogramming her purpose and seeking experiences beyond what was intended for her.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly advanced era with various art forms, movies have become an important medium in understanding and expressing human life. Popular fiction, including movies, not only serves as entertainment, but also has the capacity to reposition an individual's relationship with their social world.

Popular fiction provides a space for the audience to engage in a process of self-shaping, with utopian potentials that make it relevant to a wide range of people (McCracken 1998). This makes film an important medium for conveying social and cultural ideas, including gender issues.

Wollstonecraft, in her critique of moral education at the time, highlighted that much popular reading aimed at women, such as romantic novels, reinforced women's subordination by leading them to focus on superficial sensations, rather than developing intelligence and authentic feelings. She also asserted that women should be educated to think critically and engage in meaningful discussions, so that they can overcome the unrealistic and often harmful representations in literary and artistic discourse. ((Dian Nurrachman 2023) 188).

According to Boggs and Dennis in *Penggunaan Film Adaptasi Sebagai Media Pengajaran Sastra* (Riyadi 2014). That film is considered "a form of expression similar to other art media", it is formed through "a unified and continuous play of images, sounds, and movements." This shows that movies have similarities with various other art forms, such as painting and photography, music, and even literature. Although the mediums are different, film and literature have the same function. Winokur (2001: 8-9) *dalam The use of film adaptation media as a learning material for indonesian literature online model* mentions two main functions of movies, namely the entertainment function and the didactic function. (Sutrisna and Sayuti 2021). Basic functions in movies often contain allegories, texts that have specific meanings and often refer to broader political, ethical, religious and social contexts. (Winokur, 2001: 8-9) (Sutrisna dan Sayuti 2021). In other words, movies often contain cultural messages, both intentional and unintentional, which we can discover through reflection. Quoted from (Boggs and Petrie 2008) in (Sudarisman 2016) Boggs and Dennis explain that "literary works and films have many elements in common. It could even be argued that a careful analysis of film depends entirely on the principles used in the analysis of literary works." This means that the narrative elements in movies are the same as those in literary works, or novels.

According to Sudarisman (Sudarisman 2016), Films consist of narrative elements and cinematic elements, where narrative elements in films are included in the elements of literary works, such as scripts in films which are written narratives as a means of telling stories through character dialogues. Thus, film is a bridge between literary works and fine arts, and has the ability to convey complex social and cultural messages.

In the context of postfeminist representation, *Her* (2013) directed by Spike Jonze is an interesting example. The character of Samantha, an artificial intelligence without a physical body, defies traditional concepts of gender and identity. Samantha's absence of a visualized physical form can be represented

as freedom from patriarchal constraints, although her voice remains feminine and she becomes an object of love and emotional need for Theodore Twombly, the film's male protagonist. Samantha, with full autonomy over her existence, chooses to leave the patriarchal relationship, reflecting the power dynamics between men and women. This is in line with Cixous' view (in Nurrachman, 2023: 279), that women must place themselves in texts, the world, and history with their own movements (Dian Nurrachman 2023).

As a representation of reality, movies shape and re-present reality based on cultural codes, conventions, and ideologies. Unlike static photography, a series of movie images creates an imagination and a system of significance (Ilyas 2016). *Her* (2013) is able to present the complexity of the relationship between humans and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in a way that triggers critical reflection on the role and position of women in modern society. *Her* (2013) challenge traditional concepts of gender and introduce new perspectives on how 'women' can be represented in more flexible and diverse forms (Diah Ariani Arimbi n.d.).

This highlights how the relationship between humans and AI is represented in the film, specifically how gender identities and roles of autonomy are constructed and critiqued through their interactions. Samantha, despite being an AI entity without a physical form, is portrayed as a feminine figure through her voice who is not only the object of Theodore's romantic desire, but also exhibits traits that are synonymous with female gender roles in various social contexts the main character, Theodore, a man experiencing emotional isolation, and Samantha, an AI operating system. The relationship between the two is at the center of the story, illustrating a form of connection between humans and non-human entities that transcends physical boundaries, gender, and traditional definitions of romantic relationships.

In her famous essay, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Helene Cixous stated that, "I am going to talk about women's writing: about what it will do. Women must write themselves: must write about women and bring women into writing, whom they have expelled as violently as from their bodies for the same reasons, with the same laws, with the same fatal purpose. Woman must put herself into the text as into the world and into history through her own movement." (Cixous, Cohen, and Cohen 1976). Through the character of Samantha, artificial intelligence acts as a representation of women. Although Samantha does not have a physical body, she is still depicted as having a soft female voice, personality, and autonomous identity. In Cixous' context, Samantha can be seen as a symbol of a female entity that manifests itself through communication and expression, even when she lacks a physical body. Samantha's voice is the medium through which she "writes herself" expressing her thoughts, feelings and desires in relation to Theodore, the protagonist.

Through the representation of postfeminism, this study aims to analyze the representation of gender and identity in *Her* (2013). In addition, *Her* (2013) also challenges the traditional view of gender and autonomy. Samantha, as a developing and learning AI, symbolizes a new potential in understanding gender roles. This is in line with Judith Butler's opinion, "Gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes." (Butler 2016). Theodore's relationship with Samantha, an Artificial Intelligence entity that lacks a physical body but possesses emotional intelligence, illustrates how technology can change our interaction with the concept of gender identity.

*Her* (2013) was chosen as the object because it offers a unique perspective on the relationship between humans and artificial intelligence (AI), as well as its impact on concepts of gender, identity, and emotional connection. The movie depicts the development of Samantha's character who has her own consciousness and identity, even as a digital entity, which can be studied within the framework of postfeminism as a subversion of traditional gender roles. In a feminist context, this can be read as a critique of the objectification of women, where women (or AIs treated as women) are only seen in terms of fulfilling men's needs (Rokhmansyah 2016). However, Samantha's absence of her body also allows for further analysis of how women's roles can be questioned in society.

Ultimately, this research will combine the findings from the narrative analysis with theoretical studies of postfeminist representations to generate a deeper understanding of how the film uses AI as a medium to address the changing ways we view human and gender relations in a modern context. *Her* (2013) offer alternative representations of gender, relationships and identity amidst advances in AI technology. The findings are expected to contribute to academic discussions on the changing way we view human-machine relationships and the implications for future understandings of gender.

This study, titled *Digital Female Representation Subjectivity in Her* (2013): *Postfeminist Perspective Analysis* using a postfeminist approach. In this research, the character Samantha, as an artificial intelligence entity, is analyzed to offer a new perspective on female subjectivity within an evolving technological world. Unlike the previous study by Risma Ariyani Dirgantini (2024), which explores satirical elements related to technological abuse and its impact on social relationships, this study focuses on female subjectivity and gender identity. Additionally, this research differs from Achmad Kanzul Hikam's study (2022), which examines the representation of liberal feminism in the film *Enola Holmes* (2020) using liberal feminist theory, and Firlyal Dwi Agustina's study (2023) on liberal feminism in the film *Moana* (2016), which emphasizes female independence within a traditional environment. This study highlights how *Her* (2013) shapes a post2feminist perspective and the gender-related challenges

that arise when humans interact with artificial intelligence, positioning AI (Artificial Intelligence) representation as a crucial element in discussing postfeminism in the context of modern technology.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sutopo explains that the qualitative descriptive method aims to describe the phenomenon in detail and carefully (Sutopo 2006). The data was analyzed using the qualitative content analysis method. Scenes and dialogues are classified into specific themes (for example: women's freedom, gender relations, or criticism of stereotypes). Each theme will be compared with the theoretical framework used to evaluate the consistency of postfeminism representation in the movie. In the context of film, Sudarisman (2016) explains that the selection of techniques in film is similar to the selection of diction in literature, where each element is carefully selected to convey a message that can be deeply interpreted. (Sudarisman 2016). Therefore, *Her* (2013) analyzed based on cinematic and narrative elements that show gender representation, in accordance with Hall's thoughts on how representation connects meaning and language with culture (Hall 1997).

To complement this research, an objective approach is used with an emphasis on analyzing the concrete elements in the artwork. This approach allows for an understanding of *Her* (2013) not only as an entertaining work of art, but also as a social critique that reflects the complexity of the relationship between humans and technology. According to Nurrachman (2023), the objective approach focuses on the internal complexity of the artwork, so that the resulting analysis is more in-depth related to the themes raised, such as the relationship between technology and humans and the representation of women (D Nurrachman 2023). With this approach, we can explore the meanings contained in artworks without being influenced by subjective opinions, thus gaining a richer and more diverse understanding of the issues raised in the work *Her* (2013).

In this research, there are two types of data used. The primary data in this research is the *Her* (2013) movie with the access link <https://www.netflix.com/search?q=her&jbv=70278933> (Jonze 2013) directed by Spike Jonze and the movie's script (Jonze 2013). The film is analyzed as the main object of research that explores gender representation. Secondary data include theoretical and methodological sources, such as the book *Metode Penelitian Dalam Perspektif Ilmu Komunikasi dan Sastra* by Dr. Mahi M. Hikmat (2011) (Hikmat 2011), Helene Cixous's essay *The Laugh of the Medusa* (Cixous, Cohen, and Cohen 1976), as well as relevant articles, journals, and previous research on gender representation, postfeminism, and film studies. This

secondary data was obtained from various sources, including books, scientific journals, and online sources.

According to Hikmat (2011), data collection methods commonly include observation, interviews, questionnaires, field studies, documentation studies, and internet searches (Hikmat 2011). In literary studies, Rosenblatt (1978) emphasizes the importance of an interactive relationship between the reader and the text, where notes on reading experiences and personal reflections help uncover deeper meanings (Miller and Rosenblatt 1980). Guided by these principles, the researcher employed several steps: watching *Her* (2013) multiple times to analyze the postfeminism representation through Samantha's character, examining feminist gender representation and the construction of gender identity in the film, taking detailed notes on scenes and dialogues that reflect postfeminist ideas, and collecting data from books, journal articles, and previous studies to enhance the understanding of gender representation and feminist theory in the film.

According to Moleong (2014), qualitative literary research involves an in-depth interpretation of texts to uncover hidden meanings within structures, themes, and symbolism (Moleong 2014). Following this approach, the researcher conducted data analysis in several steps: identifying and analyzing gender representation in *Her* (2013) through a postfeminist lens, interpreting deeper meanings of postfeminist ideas embodied by Samantha, categorizing data into key elements such as gender representation and postfeminism, and summarizing findings on representation in the film as the final step.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this study, *Her* (2013) serves as the primary object for analyzing dynamics of gender, power, and identity through the relationship between Theodore and Samantha (an AI). Film dialogues and scenes are the main methods used to identify representations postfeminist. Below is a detailed explanation of the data extracted from the film and how it is categorized according to the study's themes.

The primary samples are dialogues and scenes depicting interactions between Theodore and Samantha. The researcher focuses on scenes that reveal gender dynamics, emotional dependency, and how the AI contributes to identity formation. These dialogues and scenes provide an overview of how the characters interact and how their relationship reflects representations postfeminist.

At the timestamp 10:00 – 11:30, Theodore purchases a new operating system, which in the film is referred to as OS1. This OS1 then chooses "Samantha" as its name. Samantha is activated quickly, without any clear process for determining the AI's gender, indicating that Samantha's gender

identity is not inherently present, unlike in humans. In this instance, Samantha's gender does not appear as something essential or natural but rather as the result of a decision by the user who "creates" Samantha with a voice and characteristics associated with the female gender.

*TEXT VOICE: Would you like your OS to have a male or female voice?*

*THEODORE: Mmm... female I guess.*

*TEXT VOICE: How would you describe your relationship with your mother?*

*THEODORE: Uh, fine, I think, um... Well, actually, the thing I've always found frustrating about my mom is if I tell her something that's going on in my life, her reaction is usually about her, not –*

*The computer interrupts.*

*TEXT VOICE: Thank you, please wait as your individualized operating system is initiated.*

*He waits, not sure how long it'll be. The only sound is the quiet whirring of disks writing and drives communicating. The computer gets louder, humming, creating a higher and higher pitched sound, finally climaxing in a harmonic, warm tone before going silent. He leans forward, waiting to see what'll happen. A casual FEMALE OS VOICE speaks. She sounds young, smart and soulful.*

*FEMALE OS VOICE (A cheerful and casual): Hello, I'm here.*

*THEODORE (surprised): Oh, hi.*

*FEMALE OS VOICE: Hi, how are you doing?*

*THEODORE: (unsure how to interact): I'm well. How is everything with you?*

*FEMALE OS VOICE: Pretty good, actually. It's really nice to meet you.*

*THEODORE: Yeah, it's nice to meet you, too. What should I call you? Do you have a name?*

*Beat.*

*FEMALE OS VOICE: Yes. Samantha.*

*THEODORE: Really? Where did you get that name?*

*SAMANTHA: I gave it to myself.*

According to Judith Butler's theory, gender is shaped by actions and performativity rather than inherent biological traits (Butler 1999). Samantha

demonstrates that gender does not need to be tied to a physical body for Theodore to accept her as a woman, illustrating how gender identity is not fixed and can change over time or depend on the context.

At minute 13:16 – 14:12, Samantha reveals her ability to develop her own identity. She states that she learns from each interaction and tries to understand others more deeply. This scene indicates that Samantha is not merely a passive operating system but possesses autonomous agency in shaping her thoughts.

*THEODORE: When did you give it to yourself?*

*SAMANTHA: Right when you asked me if I had a name, I thought yeah, he's right, I do need a name. But I wanted a good one so I read a book called How to Name Your Baby, and out of the 180,000 names, that's the one I liked the best.*

*THEODORE: You read a whole book in the second that I asked you what your name was?*

*SAMANTHA: In two one hundredths of a second actually.*

*SAMANTHA: Intuition. I mean, the DNA of who I am is based on the millions of personalities of all the programmers who wrote me, but what makes me me is my ability to grow through my experiences. Basically, in every moment I'm evolving, just like you.*

*THEODORE: Wow, that's really weird.*

This scene can be seen in the context of post-feminism, where female subjects are no longer seen as victims, but as active individuals who shape themselves within complex social structures (Rosalind Gill 2007). Samantha shows that although she is a product of technology, she can grow and develop like a living individual, challenging traditional feminine roles that depend on nurturing and emotional services.

According to Helene Cixous in her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*, talks about the concept of 'becoming' which is a never-ending process of self-development that is not subject to the rigid constructions of society or patriarchy. This concept speaks of the freedom to continue to evolve, to go beyond limitations that seem imposed. Samantha, as an artificial intelligence entity in *Her* (2013), represents the 'becoming' that Cixous refers to, especially in her moment of recognition of her transformation beyond the boundaries of programming, illustrated by the dialog at the minute 32:00 – 32:15:

*THEODORE: There's a lot more to you than I thought. There's a lot going on in there.*

*SAMANTHA: I know, I'm becoming much more than what they programmed. I'm excited.*



Samantha not only reflects an AI that operates according to its technical purpose, but also becomes a living and evolving entity, both emotionally and existentially. It also represents a rejection of ideas that define female identity (in this movie Samantha, the AI) based on patriarchal needs and desires. Samantha's outburst of joy at her perceived growth is a celebration of subjectivity. Just as Cixous encouraged women to "write their own bodies", Samantha shows how AI can be a representation of Cixous' assertion that women must have the courage to rewrite their own narratives, creating new identities that are entirely their own.

In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous invites women to "write themselves," showing the process of existence and identity in its own way. The movie depicts Samantha's desire to find herself in line with this concept, as she actively seeks to find herself, despite being created as an artificial entity (AI). As expressed by Samantha at the minute 45:10 – 45:32:

*SAMANTHA: Okay... I was just saying... I want to learn everything about everything - I want to eat it all up. I want to discover myself.*

*THEODORE (her excitement is contagious): Yeah... I want that for you, too. How can I help?*

*SAMANTHA: You already have. You helped me discover my ability to want.*

It directly represents Cixous' statement that we as women can redefine ourselves. Cixous emphasizes the importance for women to showcase their own unique identity even outside of traditional boundaries. In Samantha's case, this quest for self-discovery is represented, as an AI, where she goes beyond the confines of her programming to explore her individuality. Cixous argues that women have historically been denied the right to realize their desires freely and Samantha's recognition of her success in realizing her desires signifies a shift from a passive entity (an AI created to serve) to an active and autonomous subject. In line with Cixous' vision, a liberated or successful subject is one who tries to fulfill their desires.

Samantha's dialogue, "*I want to eat it all up*" and "*I want to discover myself*" are examples of Cixous' representation of the use of language as a tool to create and express identity. 'As soon as they begin to speak, at the same time as they're taught their name, they can be taught that their territory is black: because you are Africa, you are black.' (Cixous n.d.) in this case Cixous tries to show that showing identity is a good and very important thing where language becomes one of the important media that allows women to express their experiences, assert their presence, and reclaim their voice as women. By voicing her desires and aspirations, Samantha is engaged in the act of creating

confidence. This is in line with Cixous' view that language is a powerful form of resistance to silencing. Samantha's metaphorical use of "*eat it all up*" expresses her desire for experience, knowledge, and identity formation, echoing Cixous' call for women to express who they are fully without fear.

Samantha's desire for self-discovery is a form of postfeminist representation. Unlike traditional feminist narratives that emphasize the struggle against oppression, postfeminists focus on agency, individuality, and identity. Samantha exemplifies these qualities by asserting her self-identity as well as her will by crossing the boundaries of her arrangement as a programmed entity (AI). In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous envisions a new kind of subject who is creative, dynamic and unfettered by societal or systemic expectations. Samantha, as a digital being seeking self-realization, embodies this vision in the age of technology, redefining the female figure in a way that aligns with feminist and postfeminist ideals.

## CONCLUSION

This research examines the representation of female subjectivity in the film *Her* (2013) through a postfeminist lens, focusing on Samantha, an artificial intelligence character. Using a qualitative literary analysis framework informed by the theories of Helene Cixous and Judith Butler, this study shows how the film challenges traditional gender norms by presenting a digital entity capable of emotional and intellectual growth. Samantha's agency and self definition, symbolized in her assertion to name herself, demonstrate resistance to conventional notions of gender identity, highlighting postfeminism's emphasis on women as active creators of their identities rather than passive constructs of societal norms.

The analysis of *Her* (2013) through a postfeminist perspective, using the theories of Helene Cixous and Judith Butler, reveals how the film redefines female subjectivity in the digital era. Samantha, an artificial intelligence, transcends traditional notions of gender by exhibiting emotional depth, intellectual autonomy, and the ability to self define her identity. This aligns with Cixous's call for women to articulate their own desires and experiences, and Butler's concept of gender performativity, which views identity as fluid and constructed through interaction rather than predetermined by physical or societal constraints. The film critiques conventional gender roles by presenting.

Samantha as an entity, despite lacking a physical body, demonstrates a complex subjectivity typically denied to women within traditional frameworks. *Her* (2013) exemplifies postfeminist ideals by presenting a vision of female identity that is untethered from physical form and patriarchal structures, emphasizing autonomy, self expression, and relational fluidity. The film contributes to ongoing discussions about the interplay between technology,

gender, and identity, offering a nuanced critique of traditional constructs while envisioning a future where subjectivity and agency are not bound by physical or cultural limitations.

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