

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Film is understood as a performance that presents a structured story through the portrayal of specific characters (Mabruri, 2013). Film functions as a medium that reflects social realities in society, while also serving as a construction of those realities (Nurbayati et al., 2019). In many films, portrayals of women are frequently shaped by broader issues such as patriarchy and women's empowerment, which reflects how femininity, motherhood, and autonomy are constructed on screen. Therefore, analyzing women's portrayal in film is crucial to understand how gender roles and feminist values are communicated through media.

This study applies feminist theories as analytical frameworks to examine the portrayal of women in the film. Liberal feminism focuses on women's equality, while postmodern feminism emphasizes how woman is not seen as one, but multiple (Ansari, 2023; Butler, 1999). These two perspectives are relevant to analyze a character like Donna Sheridan, who portrays both autonomy and emotional strength as a mother and a woman.

According to Bell (1997), marriage has traditionally been understood as a social institution that establishes socially recognized family relationships. Drawing on Gough's (1959) definition, Bell explains that marriage is a union between a man and a woman in which children are recognized as the legitimate offspring of both parents. Consequently, traditional understandings of marriage have closely

associated parenthood with marriage, reinforcing the expectation that children should be born within marriage.

Around the time *Mamma Mia!* (2008) was released, these traditional views of marriage and parenthood remained influential despite changing family structures. A Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2007 found that although a decreasing percentage of the adult population is married, most unmarried adults say they want to marry. Married adults are more satisfied with their lives than unmarried adults. Marriage is seen as the ideal foundation for life. The survey also reported that 69% of respondents believed that children need both a mother and a father to grow up happily, while 66% considered single women having children to be bad for society. These findings indicate that marriage was still widely viewed as the socially appropriate context for parenthood, and single motherhood continued to carry social stigma.

Within this context, expectations regarding the roles of husbands and wives have also been culturally constructed. According to Friedan (1963) in *The Feminine Mystique*, in societies, women's autonomy is still associated with marriage and family structures that position men as primary economic providers. Consequently, women devotes their lives from earliest girlhood to find a husband and have a children, and those who choose to live outside marriage are often viewed as incomplete, according to traditional norms. This perspective can influence the way single motherhood is interpreted, framing it as a form of vulnerability rather than autonomy. From a feminist perspective, this assumption needs to be questioned, because women are capable of managing both personal and economic responsibilities independently.

In this context, the character of Donna Sheridan in *Mamma Mia!* (2008) becomes particularly significant. *Mamma Mia!* (2008), directed by Phyllida Lloyd, tells the story of Donna Sheridan, a single mother who owns a small hotel in a Greek island, and her daughter Sophie, who secretly invites three men from Donna's past to discover her biological father before her wedding. Donna portrays a form of women's autonomy that presents an alternative to traditional portrayal of motherhood and femininity. Her character opens up a space to explore how autonomy, motherhood, and womanhood are analyzed within a feminist framework.

Premiering in 1999 at the Prince Edward Theatre in London, the stage musical *Mamma Mia!* has continued to be performed in many international productions (*Mamma Mia! The Musical*, n.d.). This popularity is also evident in Indonesia, where *Mamma Mia!* has been staged several times, in 2018, 2023, and the most recent in 2025 (Amirio, 2018; Anantar, 2023; Yazir & Rosana, 2025). Audiences from various generations are enthusiastic because the musical offers a warm, energetic, and easily enjoyable entertainment experience. One of the strongest factors that maintains its popularity is the use of iconic ABBA songs, whose cross-generational appeal and nostalgic value keep the musical relevant and widely loved.

Although *Mamma Mia!* originated as a stage musical, this study does not focus on the theatrical version. The musical is simply used as a contextual background to demonstrate the popularity and relevance of *Mamma Mia!*, which eventually led to its film adaptation. The primary object of this study is the film *Mamma Mia!*, which was released in 2008. Therefore, the analysis of women's portrayal in this study is entirely directed at the narrative and visual elements in the

film. Female characters such as Donna Sheridan display the dynamics of autonomy, female friendship, and mother-daughter relationships (with Sophie).

This study is based on feminist theory, particularly Nussbaum and Butler to examine women's autonomy (in terms of economic, relationship, and maternal autonomy) and female relationships in film. From a liberal feminist perspective, *Mamma Mia!* (2008) can be interpreted as a narrative portraying women who pursue autonomy and control over their own lives. Meanwhile, postmodern feminism is relevant in interpreting sisterhood not as an essential female trait, but as a constructed relationship, as portrayed through Donna's relationships with her friends and her daughter.

To support the analysis of feminist perspective in the movie, this study uses semiotics (Roland Barthes) as an analytical tool to unpack the signs in *Mamma Mia!* (2008). Semiotics allows researchers to analyze the denotation, connotation, and myth through film elements. In *Mamma Mia!* (2008), these meanings are communicated through visual aspects such as appearance, character actions, and song lyrics, which collectively shape the representation of femininity, motherhood, and women's autonomy.

However, studies on women's empowerment and autonomy in film rarely focus on the representation of an independent single mother within a musical film such as *Mamma Mia!* (2008). Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by analyzing Donna Sheridan's single motherhood autonomy through feminist and semiotic perspectives.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this research are to analyze how women's autonomy is portrayed in *Mamma Mia!* (2008), particularly through the character of Donna Sheridan and the ways in which narrative and visual elements construct meanings surrounding female autonomy. This research also aims to examine how Donna Sheridan's portrayal aligns with feminist perspective from Nussbaum's capability approach and Butler's theory of gender performativity.

1.2 Research Problems

1. How is women's autonomy portrayed through the character of Donna Sheridan in *Mamma Mia!* (2008) as reflected in Nussbaum's capability approach and Butler's theory of gender performativity?

1.4 Scope of the Study

This research focuses on the main character, Donna Sheridan, in the film *Mamma Mia!* (2008). Other characters will be discussed if they contribute to Donna's autonomy. This analysis employs the feminism theory by Nussbaum and gender performativity by Butler. The analysis using Butler's theory is only limited to performative through performance, not to the point of changing from feminine to masculine.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research is important because it contributes to enriching the study of women's portrayal in the media, particularly in the context of musical films, which are still rarely studied from a feminist perspective. Analysis of the character of Donna Sheridan provides new insights into how women's autonomy and the identity

of a single mother are constructed through narrative and visual elements in the film. Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of liberal feminism and postmodern feminism studies by showing how the values of autonomy and emotional feelings are portrayed in a lighthearted entertainment genre. Practically, this research can provide insights for researchers, filmmakers, and film enthusiasts regarding how narrative and visual elements in films convey complex meanings. This research can also serve as a foundation for further studies on women in musical films and other popular media.

1.6 State of the Art

Many research has been conducted on the representation of women in film, particularly in representing independence, gender roles, and the construction of female identity within visual narratives. However, most studies focus on women's empowerment in general and have not specifically addressed the experiences of women as single mothers.

This research offers novelty by focusing on the concept of single motherhood autonomy as represented by the character of Donna Sheridan in *Mamma Mia!* (2008), through a feminist approach combined with semiotic analysis.

Previous research on women's representation in films show that film operates as a powerful medium for constructing, negotiating, and challenging gender roles.

Pope (2010) analyzes *Mamma Mia!* (2008) by emphasizing mother–daughter relationships, female friendship, and performative femininity, revealing how Donna Sheridan reflects women's struggles related to sexuality and moral

judgments. Similarly, Wati (2012) investigates *Les Misérables* using Marxist Feminist Theory and Film Theory to demonstrate how women experience oppression within both familial and societal structures shaped by patriarchy.

Another group of studies employs feminist perspectives to examine women's empowerment and autonomy in various popular films. Salsabila and Heriyati (2025) analyze *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) through liberal feminism and film semiotics, portraying Rachel Chu as an autonomous and rational woman. Likewise, Ambarwati (2022) studies *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021), showing that Raya's leadership and independence represent women's empowerment through courage and self-determination. Similarly, Khairunniza et al. (2024) explore *Barbie* (2023) using gender theory, revealing that the film critiques patriarchal norms by presenting women as capable leaders.

Several studies in the Indonesian context apply semiotic approaches to analyze women's resistance and emotional resilience. Salsabila et al. (2023) examine *Marlina Si Pembunuh dalam Empat Babak* (2017) using Barthes' semiotics and gender theory, demonstrating how visual elements such as appearance, setting, and cinematography symbolize women's resistance against patriarchy. Agustina et al. (2025) analyze *Hati Suhita* (2023), highlighting female emotional resilience shaped by cultural and religious expectations.

Research by Wulandari et al. (2025) on *Women from Rote Island* (2019) focuses on women's collective struggles against violence and discrimination. Using empowerment theory and semiotic analysis, the study reveals that women's empowerment is constructed through individual agency within socio-political contexts.

Although a number of previous studies have examined women's empowerment, independence, and autonomy in film, most of them focus on different characters, settings, and thematic contexts that do not specifically address the portrayal of an independent single mother within a musical film genre such as *Mamma Mia!* (2008). The role of songs, lyrics, and performance as meaning-making elements portrays an independent single mother, as seen in *Mamma Mia!* (2008).

