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## Table of Contents

<b>Greetings from the Rector of Universitas Sanata Dharma</b>	1
<b>Greetings from the Committee</b>	3
Unveiling Power Relations and Resistance in Fantastic Mr. Fox through a Post-Structuralist Marxist Framework <i>Muhammad Emir Abdillah</i>	5
Malin Kundang and Bawang Merah dan Bawang Putih: Orientalism's Representation in Indonesia's Children's Literature <i>Bella Valencia B</i>	13
Imagining New Worlds in Southeast Asian Post-Apocalyptic Narratives <i>Hazel Ann P. Cesa</i>	20
Womanhood in England's Peter Pan and West Nusa Tenggara's Folklores "Tempiq-Empiq" and "Putri Mandalika": A Comparative Analysis <i>Ellysabeth Sahasrara Excelsaputri</i>	32
Folklore and Efforts to Maintain Relationships with Nature in Nutmeg Cultivation in Fakfak Regency <i>Wabilia Husnah, Dina Srirahayu, Suribidari</i>	41
Eating Onomatopoeia in Japanese Manga and English Webtoon: A Contrastive Analysis <i>Raditya Jagadhita, Yufita Ria Oktiani, Elisa Debora Silalahi</i>	55
Redefining the Human-Nature Relationship through Sara Teasdale's "There will come soft rains" <i>Yosafat Andrew Gabrian Kameo</i>	66
'Gundala' (2019) and 'Batman Begins' (2005): Personal and Cultural Value in Forging Hero's Path <i>Bernardus Angjaya Kusuma</i>	69
The Cultural Meaning of the <i>Tasi Mosa</i> ritual song in Palu'e Island, Nusa Tenggara Timur <i>Fauzi Bin Abdul Majid</i>	77
The Influence of Cultural Tradition on The Attitude of Mothers <i>Bernad Leon Jonathan Manik</i>	84
Comparative Study of Sri Asih and Wonder Woman: Women's Empowerment and Personal Fulfillment <i>Maribeth Manuhutu</i>	92
Female Characters in the Films "Hunger Games" and "Divergent": Exploring Feminism Theory and Social Issues <i>Oriza Fidei Metanoia Nahusona</i>	102
Prom and Prejudice and Prada and prejudice: Pride and Prejudice in 21st Century <i>Tri Pramesti, Adeline Grace Marianne Litaay</i>	108

Representation of Marginalization Experienced by Nyai Ontosoroh as a Subaltern Woman under Dutch Colonialism in the Novel <i>Bumi Manusia</i> <i>Wira Yudha Ramadhan Iksan Aulia Subekti</i>	117
Democracy, So Confusing: The Integration of Stan Culture into Indonesian Political Landscape on X (Twitter) <i>Priska Jeanny Rosanty, Medina Qatrunnada Zulfa</i>	123
Graphic Novels and Cultural Evolution Through Raymond Williams' Residual-Dominant-Emergent Perspective <i>Maya Sekartaji, Rukayah</i>	130
Community in <i>Winnetou Gugur</i> : Analysis of Postcolonialism <i>Kustri Sumiyardana</i>	138
Comparison between Mistress Status and Prostitute Profession in Subaltern Female Characters in the novel <i>Bumi Manusia</i> <i>Cita Putri Artika Sunjoyo, Hanny Aulia Mathilda</i>	146
Resistance through Hybridity by Characters in the <i>Bumi Manusia</i> Novel <i>Zahra Fakhirah Syahrani, Alicia Marta Yulianti</i>	152
The Pain of Losing in Han Kang's <i>Human Acts</i> <i>Zefanya Wynona, Susanne Andrea H Sitohang</i>	158
From Post-colonial to Postmodern: Space and Place in the Historical Novel <i>Michelle Ramos Ylaya</i>	167
A Barthesian Analysis of Postcolonialism in the Anime <i>The Journey</i> : Religiosity as Instrument against Imperialism <i>Alexander Pedestrian Garda Paska, Michelle Amelia Sugijanto</i>	176
Repetitive Language Style in the Song Lyrics of the Album "Semoga Sembuh" by Idgitaf <i>Siti Lailiyah, Iwan Marwan</i>	187
The Superhero Genre: Modern Myths in Filipino Fantasy Films <i>Carmenchu M. Lacsamana</i>	196
Homelessness as Portrayed in <i>American Girl</i> Movie (2021) <i>Lea Maria Moningka, Mike Wijaya Saragih</i>	202
Proses Dekolonisasi Karakter Minke Dalam Novel <i>Bumi Manusia</i> <i>Mohamad Athallah Azhar</i>	207

## Homelessness as Portrayed in *American Girl* Movie (2021)

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### Abstract

*American Girl (2021)* is a semi-autobiographical film directed by Feng I Fiona, telling a story about an American girl moving from Los Angeles to Taipei with her family due to her mother's breast cancer treatment. This film demonstrates that Fen as the main character does not feel the atmosphere of home in Taipei, but feels more connected to the American values she grew up with. The study aims to show the portrayal of homelessness highlighting her sense of disconnection and rootlessness in her new home country, Taipei. Using a qualitative descriptive method, the portrayal of homelessness will be analyzed using Somerville's homelessness theory combined with cinematography elements. The result of the study shows there are three key signifiers of homelessness experienced by Fen which are: lack of hearth, heartlessness, and lack of privacy. The three key signifiers of homelessness are caused by her different perspectives of Taiwanese and American values. Fen considers that Taiwanese values are inferior to American ones. Being different from her community makes her feel disconnected from her social life.

**Keywords:** : home; homelessness; disconnected; American values

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### Introduction

Home is more than just a physical place; it involves emotional security, social connections, and a sense of identity. Gurney (1990) explains that home is not only about physical structures or memories but also about how we mentally and emotionally perceive it. The idea of home is shaped by societal beliefs, meaning our understanding of what home truly is can be influenced by these broader cultural and ideological frameworks. Similarly, Biebuyck (1982) argues that home encompasses various aspects of an individual's life and well-being, not just the physical space. This means that home has significant emotional, social, and psychological dimensions. This is in line with the idea of home stated by Saragih (2020). Displacement theory in sociology examines how individuals or groups are forcibly or voluntarily moved from their original place of residence to another location.

Talking about home as a space becomes the common issue experienced by individuals or groups who are forcibly or voluntarily moved from their original place of residence to another location. This can be due to various reasons such as economic conditions, natural disasters, or social policies (Gans, 1962; Marcuse, 1976). Forced displacement occurs when individuals are moved against their will due to external factors like war or economic policies. This can lead to significant psychological trauma and social disruption (Gans, 1962). The portrayal of displacement also felt in Fen as the main character in the movie "American Girl 2021" by Feng I Fiona. The film follows Fen Liang, a teenager who moves from Los Angeles to Taipei due to her mother's illness and the need for more affordable medical care. Fen faces significant challenges

as she adjusts to a new environment that is very different from her previous home. Fen struggles with adapting to her new school, connecting with people, and managing family tensions, including her strained relationship with her mother and the misdiagnosis of her younger sister. These difficulties highlight how moving to a new place can disrupt one's sense of home and emotional stability.

Feng I Fiona, the director of the movie received her Directing MFA degree from AFI and was previously trained in classical Chinese Literature at National Taiwan University. Her debut feature, *American Girl*, was shortlisted in the 2021 Tokyo International Film Festival's Asian Future section. The film won four Golden Horse Awards, including Best New Performer for Caitlin Fang, Best New Director for Feng-I Fiona Roan, Best Cinematography for Giorgos Valsamis, the Audience Choice Award, and the FIPRESCI Prize during the 58th Golden Horse Awards. "*American Girl*" also won the FIPRESCI Prize during the 58th Golden Horse Awards, Best Narrative Film at the 24th Taipei Film Festival, and Best Asian Chinese-Language Film at the 40th Hong Kong Film Award.

In this paper, the writer chose the title of the portrait of homelessness felt by the main character Fen Liang. Homelessness, like home, is therefore an ideological construct, but to say this is not at all to dismiss it as 'unreal' or intellectually defective. Homelessness is ideologically constructed as the absence of home and therefore derivative from the ideological construction of home. As with home, then, the construction is one of both logic and emotion. People distinguish between the absence of 'real home' (ironically meaning a failure to experience Homelessness and the meaning of home in an ideal sense) and the lack of something which can be called home for them (meaning lack of abode). The meaning of homelessness, however, cannot be determined outside of the processes of ideological construction which give rise to such distinctions: there is no 'reality' of homelessness beyond the structures created by our intellects, experiences and imaginations. The writer wanted to prove and examine that Fen did not feel the atmosphere of home (homelessness) when she returned to her home country, Taiwan. Fen felt unfamiliar in Taipei and more connected to the American values that she grew up with in Los Angeles.

"*American Girl*" movie hasn't been analyzed yet by previous researchers. However, some previous studies used the concept of "home" as a space (de Moraise, 2010; Saragih, 2020). The difference between "*The American Girl*" movie and the previous studies is this movie portrays the opposition of home or the concept of homelessness. Fen feels disconnected and homeless after moving from Los Angeles to Taipei due to her mother's illness. Using deconstruction of Derida in Saragih (2020) Harlem which was initially symbolized as African American's ideal home fails to meet all of blacks' needs racial equality as well as their physical, mental, intellectual, and emotional freedom. Similarly with Fen the main character from *American Girl* movie who felt displaced in her hometown, Taiwan. The film highlights key signifiers of homelessness experienced by Fen, such as lack of hearth, heartlessness, lack of privacy, and rooflessness caused by differences between American and Taiwanese values.

## **Methodology**

Using a qualitative descriptive method, the portrayal of homelessness will be analyzed using Somerville's homelessness theory combined with cinematography elements. After watching the film several times, the writer tries to identify the plot using Somerville's key signifiers of homelessness. The chosen key signifiers are proven by giving the evidence through related screenshots and dialogues. Finally, analysis of each key signifier is done systematically and comprehensively.

## Results and Discussion

The concept of home can be understood through several dimensions, each represented by key signifiers: shelter, hearth, heart, privacy, roots, abode, and possibly paradise. Each signifier has its own symbolic significance, connotation of security, and way of relating to oneself and others (Somerville, 1992). Watson and Austerberry's empirical research agree to these signifiers: 'shelter' pertains to material conditions; 'hearth' relates to emotional and physical comfort; 'heart' reflects loving and supportive social relationships; 'privacy' denotes control over one's personal space; and 'abode' refers to a place where one lives or sleeps. Additionally, 'roots' indicate a sense of identity, while 'paradise' represents an idealized vision of home beyond daily reality (in Somerville, 1992).

Home as shelter signifies the physical structure that provides protection and appears to others as a basic roof. Home as hearth conveys the warmth and comfort that make a place inviting and cozy. The heart of the home focuses on emotional security and health, emphasizing supportive and affectionate relationships. Heidegger (in Somerville, 1992) states that privacy is about having control over one's personal boundaries and being able to exclude others and prevent surveillance. Roots refer to one's sense of identity and connection to a broader cultural and social framework, providing a feeling of 'ontological security' or a grounded sense of being in the world. Abode is the most basic definition of home, simply a place where one resides, whether it is a palace or a park bench, signifying minimal security associated with having a definite spatial location. Paradise represents an idealized home, integrating all positive aspects of home, though it may be seen as an abstract or personal ideal rather than a tangible reality.

In contrast, the negative aspects of home can be understood through the absence of these key signifiers: lack of shelter, hearthlessness, emotional coldness, absence of privacy, rootlessness, lack of abode, and possibly a state of 'purgatory' or 'hell.' This reflects how homelessness is not merely the opposite of having a home but rather involves a profound lack of essential security features. For the homeless, the ideal notions of home, such as hearth and heart, might persist even when their material circumstances are dire. This disparity often results in the real suffering of homelessness being overlooked, with policies focusing mainly on addressing the needs of those without shelter or basic protection. Homeless individuals may experience their situation as cold and indifferent, which can lead to fatalistic attitudes. Nevertheless, as Biebuyck (1982) observed, some may still find a semblance of the emotional and physical comfort associated with the concept of home despite extreme adversity.

The writer found several key signifiers to analyze the the opposite of home, which is homelessness concept through this movie. This analysis explores, by proving cinematography that illustrates the key signifiers of homelessness through the lens of the 2021 movie "American Girl", highlighting the themes of lack of hearth, heartlessness, and lack of privacy. Through the experiences of the main character Fen Liang, this analysis reveals the complexities of home as a physical and emotional space, and how it can be a source of discomfort, unease, and disconnection. By examining the cinematic of the film, this analysis aims to shed light on the ways in which home can be a site of struggle, conflict, and transformation.

### 1. Lack of Hearth

'Hearth' corresponds to 'emotional and physical well-being' (Watson and Austerberry's 1986). When we think of home, we usually imagine a place that is warm, cozy, and comforting. It's a place where we feel safe and relaxed. However, when a home lacks this warmth and comfort, it can create a very different experience. Instead of feeling cozy and welcoming, such a home can feel uncomfortable and unsettling. It can make us feel like we don't quite belong or that we're not welcome. When a home doesn't provide the sense of warmth and security we expect, it can lead to feelings of unease and discomfort. We might feel out of place and have trouble relaxing because the environment doesn't invite us to feel at ease. Instead of being a haven, the home can become a source of stress and anxiety, making it difficult to feel settled and content.

This lack of warmth turns what should be a comforting space into one that feels foreign and uninviting. The portrait of the lack of hearth, where Fen feels displaced and uncomfortable with the new environment, especially when her father drop her at school for the first time.



Picture 1 Minutes 09:57



Picture 2 Minutes 01:19:40

In picture 1, the cinematography uses a bird’s eye view, or an overhead shot, to present a broader perspective of Fen’s new environment. This angle, which looks down from above, makes Fen appear small and insignificant against the vastness of the background. This technique is often used to introduce a new location, helping the audience understand the setting and its scale relative to the characters. From picture 1, it is shown through Fen’s experiences in adapting to a new and different environment. She has to adapt to a different education system, culture, and language in Taiwan, which makes her feel like she is not at home and does not have the right place to be. In Picture 2, the camera is positioned directly above Fen’s head, providing an overhead shot that focuses on the details of her immediate surroundings and interactions. This angle is effective for capturing more intimate and personal moments, offering insight into Fen’s emotional state. She is crying because she has to deal with the different opinions and cultures of the people around her, which makes her feel like she is not at home and does not have the right place to be. In this scene, her father, who is supposed to be her protector, slaps her because of her disrespectful attitude.

In picture 2, the lack of hearth is clearly shown. Fen is crying because her father was angry, slapped, and hit her. She is crying because she has to deal with the different opinions and cultures of the people around her, which makes her feel like she is not at home and does not have the right place to be. The way Fen reacts to her displacement to the new environment brings her act bad to her parents. Their bad communication makes the situation between them worse. The camera is positioned directly above Fen’s head, providing an overhead shot that focuses on the details of her immediate surroundings and interactions. This angle is effective for capturing her opposing action to her parents. The eye close up shows that Fen defends herself and shows her dislikes to her parents’ complain. However, picture 2 also shows that Fen felt stress and difficult to feel settled and safe at her home.

## 2. Heartlessness

‘Heart’ means ‘loving and caring social relations’ (Watson and Austerberry’s 1986). Gurney recognizes that the experience of home can vary greatly depending on individual circumstances and cultural contexts. He suggests that home can be a source of both joy and distress, depending on the individual's experiences and relationships (Gurney, J.1990). Home can also be a source of distress due to conflicts or stress within the household, like a family might experience tension and arguments over various issues, making the home environment uncomfortable. However, home should be a place where we feel safe, loved, and stable. But in some cases, a home can feel very different. Instead of being warm and comforting, it can

be cold and full of arguments, lacking in support and kindness. In the movie, the main character, Fen, feels this lack of warmth and security in both her home and school. Her home is filled with tension and conflict, and there is no real support or love from her family. This makes her feel unhappy and unsettled. At school, Fen also struggles to fit in and feels out of place. The problems at home and school make it hard for her to feel comfortable or at ease. The film shows how Fen’s new life lacks the comfort and stability she needs, making her feel like she doesn’t truly belong anywhere.



Picture 3 Minutes 49:46

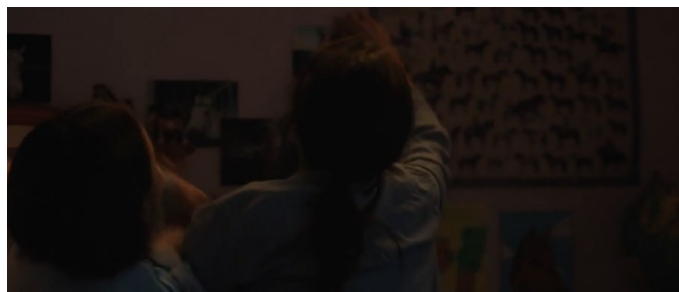


Picture 4 Minutes 01:18:47

In the picture 3 and 4, the cinematography choices of key low lighting and wide shots play a crucial role in creating a dramatic and emotionally charged atmosphere. In the picture 3, the dark lighting makes the scene feel very dramatic and sad. Fen is shown crying after her teacher hits her hand with a ruler because she got a bad grade. The wide shot shows Fen sitting alone and in pain, making her feel even more isolated. The dark shadows and wide view help us see how difficult and unfair the situation is for Fen. In the picture 4, the wide shot shows both Fen and her father in the same frame. This is important because it helps us see Fen’s reaction when her father, whom she thought was a protector, slaps her. The wide shot makes her father look big and imposing, which contrasts sharply with Fen’s surprise and hurt. It highlights how Fen feels shocked and betrayed because her father, who she believed was loving and caring, is now being aggressive. The shadows and darkness make the scenes feel more intense and highlight Fen’s feelings of sadness and betrayal. The wide shots show the full situation, making Fen’s pain and the changes in her relationships more clear. The figure of her father, who Fen has considered as a protector and loves her, becomes a trigger for Fen who never thought that her father would hurt by slapping her.

### 3. Lack of Privacy

‘Privacy’ to ‘control and privacy’ (Watson and Austerberry’s 1986). Home as lack of privacy does not involve the power to control one’s own boundaries, as there is no exclusive territory or right to prohibit surveillance by others. Instead, the home is a space where others can freely enter and monitor activities without restriction.



Picture 5 Minutes 01:18:47



Lack of privacy in the following part, felt by Fen. Horse riding and collecting equestria posters are Fen's hobbies. From picture 5, capture a red color in film lighting. Red color can be used to convey a more negative and serious feeling and often used to create a more serious, dramatic, and eerie atmosphere and also to create a powerful emotional impact. The color red is often associated with strong emotions such as anger, danger, and tension. Picture 5 shows the tension between Fen and her mother. When Fen's mother got angry, she (her mom) went into Fen's room and destroyed all the equestrian things and posters that she loved. Her mom destroys what is comfortable for Fen, which is important to her.

## Conclusion

The movie "American Girl" directed by Feng I Fiona portrays the complex and multifaceted concept of "homelessness" through the experiences of the main character Fen Liang. The film highlights the challenges of adjusting to a new environment, cultural differences, and the struggle to find a sense of belonging to her hometown, Taiwan. The movie shows the ideas of homelessness felt by the main character Fen, covering lack of hearth, heartlessness, and lack of privacy. Three key signifiers of homelessness are caused by her different perspectives of Taiwanese and American values. Fen's feeling of homelessness is caused by being forced to move and having to quickly adapt to a new environment (uprooted). Differences in the values of America and Taiwan that make her feel (disconnected). React by doing againts the rules and habits (forced acceptance). Being different from her community makes her feel disconnected from her social life. Feeling at home is a being to pursue not otomatically given.

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