

Romanticizing Illness: The Representation of Love and Disease in the Movies *Midnight Sun* and *Meet Me after Sunset*

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to find out how love and disease are represented as discourse in the movies entitled *Midnight Sun* (2018) and *Meet Me After Sunset* (2018). How the discourse of disease and love is constructed simultaneously in the stories of two characters with different social and cultural backgrounds is crucial to probe because discourses convey and create power and hierarchy. This study compares two characters who suffer from a rare disease named *xeroderma pigmentosum*. The disease makes them sensitive to sunlight in the teenage phase during which they experience falling in love. The main objects of comparison are the movie characters Katie from *Midnight Sun* and Gadis in *Meet Me After Sunset*. This study employs comparative methods which are appropriate to analyze how different socio-cultures can influence the discourse on love and illness. Discourses and constructs regarding love and illness in popular literature, including movies, cannot be fully understood without referring to gender and socio-culture. Illness is romanticized in *Meet Me After Sunset* and *Midnight Sun*. In the Indonesian context, the discourse of love as freedom is less obvious. In contrast, the discourse of isolation and the lack of agency are more advocated compared to the American counterpart. It is due to the differences in cultural patterns that operate in both movies. The discourse of illness in both stories leads to a binary gender hierarchy that associates masculinity with health, while femininity is associated with illness. The isolation caused by disease can also be associated with domestic femininity, which then becomes the idealized value of femininity in both movies.

Key words: America, comparative studies, disease, love, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Midnight Sun, an American film directed by Speer (2018), and *Meet Me After Sunset*, an Indonesian film directed by Rifki (2018), are two movies with the theme of love and disease. These films depict the romance of teenagers who fall in love yet suffer from a severe illness. In particular, these films highlight the journey of love that grows and flourishes despite the main characters' difficulties and obstacles with a serious disease. Love and disease are often perceived as two opposing entities. Love is often associated with happy and affectionate moments felt by a partner, best friend, or family. On the other hand, disease is often associated with sadness and emotional burden. Both love and disease have a significant impact on human life. In the context of this study, two female characters facing rare diseases are examined, and how these health conditions are associated with the dynamics of love relationships presented in both films. In fiction, love can also essentially be viewed as a metaphorical disease. According to the philosophers, love is a disease that has to be treated Caston (2006). Thus, love and disease discourses share the same focus—the body—and even a common vocabulary (Cokal 1999). Thus, the conflation of discourses of love and disease is critical to probe as well as interesting, although it is not easy to see how the disease could have been romanticized at all (Latimer 1990).

Fictional representations of disease and love have been found in old Greek poetry (Shmidt 2018). Literature provides a symbolic environment in which illness and health, concepts of being sick or feeling well, suffering, and healing intentions are all represented and connected to other cultural concepts (Kottow and Kottow

2007). Love as an illness had a well-established medical history by the sixteenth century in Western Europe, both as a phenomenon described in literature and as a reality experienced by many patients (Collins 2020). The complexity of the relationship between love and disease in the fictional realm continues to be discussed for its significance. Disease not only symbolizes the character's health but also ethos, identity, and the reader's interest in the disease narrative (Bey 2017). The way the lover is portrayed, how love is compared to a disease, and how much focus is placed on finding a treatment (Caston 2006). Disease is likely to result in death (a type of ending) or even a cure (which is still a type of change, an ending, a new beginning, a sort of conversion) (Magnarelli 1986).

Both the main characters of the two movies, Katie and Gadis, suffer from the rare disease *xeroderma pigmentosum* (XP), which makes them very sensitive to sunlight. XP is characterized by a high level of sensitivity to sunlight, which causes sunburn, pigment changes in the skin, and a significantly increased incidence of skin cancer (Lehmann 2011). Katie and Gadis only left the house at night and isolated themselves during the day which then leads to social isolation. Loneliness is defined as the gap between a person's desired and actual quality and quantity of social relationships. Katie and Gadis get their parental figures from their fathers, as their mothers died when they were young. Although only cared for by one parent figure, the father's role is not considered insignificant. Katie and Gadis initially tried to avoid men who were attracted to them. They initially tried to avoid it since they believed the disease, they were suffering from was a disgrace. Health anxiety refers to the fear and worry that come as a result of living with a chronic condition (Lebel et al. 2020). XP became an obstacle not only in their lives but also in their love story. In addition, the love and disease constructed in such a way need to be discussed. The social relationship between the sick and the healthy becomes unique. Sick people communicate their disease to others, and the recipients respond in a variety of ways (Dantzer 2021). Secure social relationships and love are essential for overall health and illness prevention (Carter and Dantzer 2022).

This situation is not just a disease that causes physical suffering but also mental isolation that makes sufferers have a double burden and complexity in their psychological responses. Social isolation and disconnection can increase the risk of mental health problems such as sadness and anxiety (Santini et al. 2020). There is a clear link between chronic stress and health outcomes, such as biomarkers of disease, early disease states, and, in some circumstances, mortality (Epel et al. 2018). Suffering has a negative effect on a person's mental health (Stilwell et al. 2022). Physical suffering frequently includes feelings of pain, and psychological suffering may include feelings of despair, anxiety, or wrath (Vander Weele 2019). Interactions with others are an important component of what makes humans human (Litt et al. 2020). Social interactions are more than just enjoyable social behaviors; they can influence key life outcomes such as how quickly people heal and how long they live (Litt et al. 2020). According to a prior study, minimum social interactions promote subjective well-being, and this impact is mediated by an increased sense of belonging (Ishiguro 2023). Since chronic illness can have a long-lasting negative impact on a person's mental health, enhancing psychosocial well-being has been the main goal of many interventions (Merolli, Gray, and Martin-Sanchez 2013).

This study aims to investigate the discussion into a single study that focuses on comparing two elements into two different objects of study. George Paizis' model from the book *Love and the Novel* (Paizis 1998) is the analytical lens to probe the selected romantic fiction. The theory outlines how the steps while

falling in love occur. Therefore, this study uses the theory of types of love based on this perspective. Kravitz's (2010) book *Representation of Illness in Literature and Film* provides a fundamental basis for analyzing the illness represented in both films. In that, this study focuses specifically on films with the discourse of love and disease, as the integral concept of representation, that occur in different cultural background.

Apart from the universal construction and complexity of the discourse on love and illness in these two films, socio-cultural differences will also increasingly nuance this discourse. This study argues that: (1) comparative methods are very important in how different socio-cultures can influence the discourse on love and illness; (2) Discourses and constructs regarding love and illness in popular literature, in this case films, cannot be fully understood without referring to gender and socio-culture. In what follows, the study will elicit how the construction of love and disease manifest into discourses, which show how gender dynamics play a critical part. Those are love as freedom, disease as isolation, and disease as incompleteness of agency. From those three discourses, gender dynamics will be read.

There are several previous discussions of *Midnight Sun*: Al Haniya (2021) analyzed the same object but with different theories. The research focuses on analyzing *xeroderma pigmentosum* disease, and explaining the illustration of how *xeroderma pigmentosum* disease is depicted and shown in the movie. Meanwhile, the research of Herliana and Suhedi (2021) investigates the personal motivation of the main character in the same movie. In addition, with the same research, object, Putri (2020) determines the types of conversational implicature and maxims, whereas Aprilia, Kamma, Natsir, and Lubis (2023) describes the personality of Katie's character by using Sigmund Freud's theory. While previous studies have explored related areas, this research addresses a gap that has not yet been examined, thereby offering a novel contribution to the field.

This study employs a comparative point of view. It was designed using a descriptive-qualitative method discourse of love and disease. The data were taken from American and Indonesian movies entitled *Midnight Sun* and *Meet Me after Sunset*, which were technically collected by focusing on how love and disease are represented in both films as discourse. The techniques of collecting the data were based on the variables of meanings, contexts, structure, social relationships, and power dynamics.

DISCUSSIONS

Based on the results of this research, it was found that love was constructed differently in both films. However, there are also similarities in both films. First, love is associated with freedom. Secondly, the disease is associated with psychological and physical isolation which affects both physical and mental health. Thirdly, the disease causes the state of incomplete agency of the characters.

Bonding that Sets You Free: The Autonomy in Attachment

Love as freedom is shown in the movie because since the characters got close to a man, their moods have improved and they look happier. Love can provide a sense of freedom in the sense of acceptance and support. Partners may provide emotional, practical, and financial support, which may boost resilience to stress (White et al. 2021). Relationships can provide companionship and a sense of 'mattering to others' in addition to social support, all of which can reduce feelings of loneliness (White et al. 2021). According to Gleason and Selinger (2016), the act of love is fundamentally the same as the practice of freedom. When we choose

to love, we begin to progress toward freedom, acting in ways that liberate ourselves and others (Gleason and Selinger 2016).

The love depicted in *Midnight Sun* is typically classified a passion-love. Meanwhile, in *Meet Me after Sunset*, it is represented as marriage-love. The two types of love that appear in this romantic narrative refer to Balzac's classification, namely passion-love and marriage-love. At the beginning of the movie, it is shown that Katie begins to fall in love with Charlie at first sight.

KATIE : Until one day, I saw Charlie. And there he was. I was completely and utterly intrigued. I saw him every day. However, he didn't know I existed.

On the other hand, in *Meet Me after Sunset*, Vino was curious about Gadis even though he didn't know how she looked like. So, he approached Gadis not because he fell in love at first sight. But initially he was just curious about Gadis.

According to Paizis (1998), the characteristics of passionate love are closely related to the first impression felt by the protagonist, while the love that grows in the context of marriage is formed gradually. The implication of passion-love is sympathy, but the effect of marriage-love is esteem (Paizis 1998). As the table illustrates, there are two kinds of love in this model: love at first sight and gradual love.

Table: Balzac's Two Types of Love (Paizis 1998)

Type	Passion-Love	Marriage-Love
Nature	Thunderbolt	Gradual fusion
Origin	Destiny/Chance	Choice
Mode	Recognition	Knowledge
Effect	Sympathy	Esteem

Love at first sight, based on passion, is considered unpleasant because it implies giving up agency by surrendering to unknown forces, fate, or nature (Paizis 1998). In contrast, marriage-love or gradual love involves one's active choice and intervention, and it implies the use of conscious knowledge and rationality as well as control over one's emotions (Paizis 1998). This type of love promotes the self-esteem and autonomy that passion-love denies, making it appear anti-social. In the context of the movie, Katie and Gadis demonstrate a different type of love. The theme of love plays an important role in films as character motivation.

In Paizis' theory, the nature of passion-love is associated with the first sight of the protagonists, while the love that results in marriage has to develop gradually. The effect of passion-love is sympathy, but the effect of marriage-love is esteem. In this case, based on the events in both movies, one character experienced a type of falling in love at first sight, and the other character experienced a different type of falling in love. This scene also shows that the two characters have different ways of experiencing and responding to men who want to approach them.

In *Midnight Sun*, Katie fell in love with Charlie at first sight. The table shows that passion-love starts because of thunderbolt or falling in love at first sight. Katie began to be attracted to Charlie when they were children because she always watched him behind her window. One night, when Katie left the house to busk at the train station, Charlie coincidentally saw Katie. During the first meeting of the two protagonists, Charlie decides to approach and greet her. It shows that there has been an attraction to Katie since the first time he saw her indirectly. Charlie was fascinated by Katie's existence. It can be said that there is a

'recognition' that binds them together and this is usually included in the category of passion-love. Recognition of the specific object of desire (the hero) allows for resolution (Paizis 1998). In this case, however, the external force of attraction, which could have been their physicality, serves as a means to bring the protagonists together.

In the scene during the third meeting between Katie and Charlie, they decide to go to a party with their friends. This scene was their first time hanging out together after two brief encounters. The scene shows Charlie kissing Katie, and there is no rejection from her. The terms 'sympathy' and 'passion' are fundamentally interchangeable, with their typical mode being spontaneous and sudden (Paizis 1998). The scene shows 'sympathy' in how the two of them did it spontaneously because their first and second encounters looked very awkward with each other. The heroine's eager response to his kiss is legitimated by her 'dream', the possibility of the successful outcome to passion-love: 'destiny, recognition, sympathy' (Paizis 1998). Passion-love' presupposes a natural attraction between men and women and at the same time, makes its gratification impossible for 'social' reasons (Paizis 1998). Based on the types of love described by Paizis, the movie *Midnight Sun* depicts a passion-love.

On the other hand, in *Meet Me after Sunset*, Gadis shows rejection at first when Vino comes into her life. But over time, Gadis began to get used to and comfortable with Vino's presence. This shows the stages of love or 'gradual fusion' in marriage-love. There's the gradual finding of attraction, and then there's the lightning bolt that strikes you like heavenly grace did Saint Paul (Paizis 1998). In the movie *Meet Me after Sunset*, the person who first showed interest was Vino. He noticed someone in a red hood at night and wanted to follow her out of curiosity. Vino followed her to the hill despite his ignorance of the red-hooded person's appearance. It turned out that the girl who was attempting to catch fireflies was a pretty, and Vino attempted to talk to her. The girl avoided him despite his attempts to get to know her. In this case, their first meeting can be considered a 'choice', as Vino chose to follow Gadis out of curiosity and tried to get to know her name. Vino was curious about the person from the beginning, even though he did not know how she looked. Therefore, he approached the girl not because he fell in love at first sight. Gadis tries to avoid Vino even after their first meeting. At the first meeting, 'marriage-love' is described only implicitly (Paizis 1998). What she rejects or condemns connotes what the narrative aspires to (Paizis 1998).

Vino began to feel an interest in Gadis that went beyond mere curiosity. Gadis felt that Vino just wanted to mess with her, which is why Gadis always avoided Vino. But over time, when Vino proved that he was sincere with her by realizing Gadis' dreams one by one. Since then, Gadis began to accept Vino after several times of avoidance. It shows that there is a stage of esteem and 'knowledge'. Esteem, on the other hand, is not spontaneous but a deliberate evaluation of the other person's worth - based on knowledge of the other person, not from first sight (Paizis 1998).

One of Vino's ways to realize Gadis' dream is by inviting Gadis' father and his schoolmates to prepare it. This shows the interaction between individuals and society. 'Marriage-love' expresses the means of harmonizing the individual with society (Paizis 1998). Based on the types of love described by Paizis, the two movies have different types of love. As already explained, in the movie *Midnight Sun*, it can be seen that the type of love shown is passion-love. Meanwhile, in the movie *Meet Me after Sunset*, the type of love presented is marriage-love.

From the description above, both passionate love and married love have a liberating type. Concepts such as chance, choice, recognition, knowledge, sympathy, and esteem all have a connection with freedom. However, if we read it further from a gender lens, the freedom those female characters get from marriage and passionate love is reciprocal. In other words, women need another party, namely men, to gain their freedom. This means that, on the one hand, this dependency is precisely what deconstructs this freedom. The autonomy-oriented support of some male feminists risks reinforcing the gender hierarchies they seek to dismantle (Wiley and Dunne 2019).

Midnight Sun has elements of American culture and teenage romance. Aspects such as teenage love, love at first sight, and obstacles in relationships are examples of cultural characteristics that are often idealized in American films. In contrast, *Meet Me after Sunset* is influenced by Indonesian culture, which generally faces several restrictions in teenage romance. This is due to the deep and growing religious values in Indonesian society, which is known for its grace and high respect for religious values. In *Midnight Sun*, the relationship between Katie and Charlie feels more intimate than the relationship between Gadis and Vito in *Meet Me after Sunset*. It can be clearly explained using cultural patterns in Indonesian cinema expressed by Heider (1991) that Indonesian cultural patterns lead to social embeddedness and the family group so that romantic relationships that tend to lead to individual autonomy, as in *Midnight Sun* will not be acceptable.

**Confined by
Condition:
Sickness
Severs Social
Ties**

This part discusses how disease as isolation is represented in both films based on Bennett Kravitz's *The Representation of Illness in Literature and Film*. The book investigates the importance of including illness or disorder in literature, taking examples from works that repeat historical patterns. Pain is closely linked to cultural factors, as "it [pain] does not have the same throughout the ages or across different civilizations" (Kravitz 2010, 8).

In both of the films, pain is unusual because, to different degrees, it is a rare disease that the sufferers must overcome as they learn to harness their pain to survive and create a better life for themselves. In *Midnight Sun*, the main character not only suffers from a rare disease but also has to isolate herself during the day. Katie explains that because of her disease, she cannot go out like other people. That's why she explained this at the beginning of the movie. Katie mentioned indirectly that she could die at any time because of her rare disease. The discourse of life and death is clearly expressed. The implication is that the speaker separates from people who are normal or without illness. Katie desires to survive and to create a better life for themselves. Another scene shows the impact of her illness. Katie's condition confines her indoors, making her unable to engage in daytime activities. Her confinement is emphasized by her limited interactions with the outside world and her inability to participate in normal daytime social activities.

Her illness completely changed Katie's life from an average teenager. The implication is that Katie wants to show that besides not being allowed to leave the house, she also has to have a special window to see the situation outside her home. Katie's interactions with others are mainly limited to her best friend, Morgan, and her father. Her condition prevented her from forming typical social relationships with classmates or neighbours, which contributed to her sense of isolation.

The disease that Katie suffers from causes her to isolate herself at home both mentally and physically. Although disease is an obstacle on the one hand, on the other hand, it strengthens the bond between father and daughter. The movie

shows how the disease that Katie suffers from has a good impact on the relationship between her and her father. In general, social support from family members influences the outcomes of serious diseases (Roslan, Heisler, and Piette 2012). The family plays a significant role in creating cultural environments that promote health (Ho et al. 2022). Relationships can become stronger in some families as family members work together to aid each other and become more tightly bonded (Golics et al. 2013).

This movie exposes the harsh realities of life living with chronic pain, not only for people suffering from pain.

KATIE : If the sun hits my skin, I get skin cancer, my brain starts to fail and I could die.

The utterance shows how the disease has a huge effect on Katie's life, not only physically but also mentally. Because the sufferers always hide their illness, many people think they are strange because they don't go to school or leaving the house, like the following utterance from Dadang, which is Vito's friend, who assume that Gadis is strange.

DADANG : *Gadis hidup di dunianya sendiri. Dunia yang aneh.*
(Gadis lives in her own world. A strange world.)

Jack, Katie's father, also felt the impact of the rare disease that his daughter suffered. He feels sorry for his daughter, who has to isolate herself every day. Jack feels guilty because ever since Katie was a little, she has been begging him to go out, but Jack has to refuse her. From then on, Katie had to accept the situation where she had to stay in the house no matter how she begged her father. This shows that isolation has a negative impact on both mental and physical health. It affects not only the sufferer but also everyone around her. Despite her isolation, Katie craved connection and normalcy. This desire becomes apparent when she enters into a romantic relationship with Charlie, a boy she secretly admires from her bedroom window. This relationship opens up new possibilities but also highlights her isolation due to the challenges posed by her condition.

On the other hand, in the movie *Meet Me after Sunset*, the disease is rarely shown. At the beginning of the movie, it is only shown that Gadis often goes to the hill every night to write short stories in her diary. Then, during the day, she is always inside the house, with the windows closed tightly. Throughout the movie, Gadis' illness only appears when she returns home at sunrise with Vito. The scene shows that Gadis was exposed to sunlight and was immediately taken by her father to the hospital. Then Vito, confused about what happened, asked Gadis' best friend, Bagas, who was there. Bagas said that Gadis has XP. And all her life, she couldn't be exposed to sunlight. If she was exposed to even the slightest ray of sunlight, it would cause Gadis' harm.

The discourse of life and death is clearly stated. The implication is that Bagas is giving a warning that Gadis' illness could threaten her at any time. The movie shows that Gadis' life is only inside her house with closed windows. Her illness is only explained once in the movie. In contrast to *Midnight Sun*, the relationship between father and daughter in *Meet Me after Sunset* is rarely shown. *Meet Me after Sunset* shows that Gadis' father, Mr. Sastra, is a high school teacher in the village. In addition, Gadis spends time alone in her house every day. The father's involvement in this movie is minimal. Her isolation led to an emotional disconnect with friends and the outside world. Gadis yearns for a normal life but feels unable to realize it due to her condition, leading to feelings of loneliness and isolation. She entertains herself by writing short stories in her diary and dreams of writing

a novel. Gadis also finds peace in walking to the hills after sunset because it is her comfort zone.

Katie and Gadis show the same effects of their forced isolation. Because of the disease they suffer from causes both mental and physical isolation. Physical isolation may be linked to different mental health changes than previously recognized social isolation (Joseph et al. 2022). The impact of isolation has substantially reduced the amount of regular physical exercise, emphasizing the risks and negative impacts on mental health (da Cruz et al. 2022). A lack of social understanding and support can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and isolation. In addition, limited access to outdoor activities can affect their participation in education and their future.

The disease affects how Katie and Gadis respond in social or individual interaction relationships. The movie shows that they initially avoid men who want to be close to them. This study assumes it's all because of the isolation they've been subjected to daily for a long time. Isolation could harm patients, such as an increased risk of anxiety, depression, and falls, and it was considered that more should be done to control these dangers (Pursell, Gould, and Chudleigh 2020).

Illness causes changes in patients' lifestyles and limits, which often result in psychological suffering (Valeria, Daniela, and Lara 2014). Apart from physical suffering, sufferers also experience mental suffering which creates a double burden. The chronic disease seemed to have strengthened how people viewed their spirituality (Tanzi et al. 2023). Despite their illnesses causing a double burden, both characters show their spirit to live their lives in the movie.

The diseases in the films can also be seen as metaphor or as well as gendered disease. According to Sontag, illness can be defined as a combination of science and metaphor, as both the actual disease and a reflection of the patient's personality (Sontag 1978). Based on this cultural metaphor, Sontag (1978) argues that disease develops a passion that swallows everything and discloses a person's secret desire. The ill individual acts on these previously undisclosed urges, and therefore the resultant relationship derives from the illness, giving rise to the concept of disease romance (Sontag 1978).

Both films tell stories using masculine discourse because men in the films are depicted as hierarchically healthier and, therefore, more dominant.

CHARLIE : What I can't do, I can't stop being with you. Katie I've looked up XP. I know what it is. I know what you went through. but we're not a couple that won't try it. You know it better than I do. You changed my life, Katie.

Not just from their lover, both Katie and Gadis only lives with their father and it shows the contrast between them. The discourse about 'women's diseases' is dominated by men and it contributes to gender inequity (Goepper 2016). The physical isolation experienced by the two female antagonists can be read as a narrative positioning of women in the domestic realm. Women are pathologized in terms of their bodies, which then not only affects their social relationships but also affects the characters' relationships with themselves. So, it is not an exaggeration to say that women are imprisoned in their own bodies. The use of disease metaphors casts society as oppressive rather than out of balance (Sontag 1978).

XP is primarily a genetic disease and not a gendered one, but as female XP patients like Katie and Gadis, society's expectations and beliefs about women are affected. Their father, who was very protective, imposed restrictions that limited their freedom. These restrictions reinforced stereotypes of women as passive and vulnerable individuals. XP forces restrictions on Katie and Gadis' ability to fulfill

expected female gender roles fully, such as being active in society or forming their own families. The isolation they experience can be linked to the social idea that women are highly dependent on men and relationships, so the isolation is detrimental to them. XP is not gendered, but the movie portrays the impact through a gender lens because of its themes, roles, and common issues that women face.

American cultural values are known as easy-going and individual autonomy (Heider 1991). These ideals are reflected in Katie's emotional journey in the movie *Midnight Sun*, which shows her overcoming discomfort and embracing her first love. On the other hand, in the movie *Meet Me after Sunset*, Indonesian people are known for their hospitality and openness or, in Heider's (1991) terms, social embeddedness and interaction. In researcher's opinion, it is very difficult for Gadis to deal with her illness, which should limit her from socializing in her environment.

**No Exit:
Illness as
Lack of
Agency**

The disease the movie characters suffered led to incomplete agency charges. This type of power or capability is known as human agency, and it is a crucial concept in explaining numerous elements of human cognition and action (Lin 2019). Human agency is positioned as socially mediated by practice theories and frameworks, which presuppose that people have the capacity to influence their own circumstances (Parsell, Eggins, and Marston 2017). The critique assumes that emphasizing on the agency of those suffering disadvantage, especially if that agency represents them poorly, might weaken advocacy attempts to end social oppression (Parsell, Eggins, and Marston 2017).

In *Midnight Sun*, there is a scene that shows Katie behind a window receiving mocking from a group of children her age. They see Katie from the front of her house and mock her as a vampire because she never leaves the house. This shows that Katie's disease has given her a mental burden even since she was a child. She had to deal with others making fun of her and giving her nicknames as a result. The implication is that the disease not only hurts her physically but also mentally. Vampires are evil, which means they label Katie as evil because they think she's afraid of the sun. The label is a result of her behavior and appearance, as she avoids sunlight and has a pale complexion, leading her elementary school peers to mistakenly perceive her as a real-life vampire. Agency has not been intact for Katie since she was a child, because she could not go to school like other children in general.

On another subject, in the movie *Meet Me after Sunset*, Gadis labels herself as a vampire. The scene shows that Vito is trying to get Gadis to go for a jogging in the morning. Because Gadis tried to hide her illness from him, she said that she was a vampire. In addition, Gadis had to accept accusations of incomplete agency from other people, namely Vito's classmate named Dadang. He considers Gadis an abnormal person. Katie felt helpless due to bullying and rumors, leading to her being labeled a 'vampire' in her teenage years. Gadis, on the other hand, was distant from society due to the stigma surrounding her condition.

CONCLUSIONS

Illness is romanticized in the love stories of *Midnight Sun* and *Meet Me after Sunset* films. In the Indonesian context, the discourse of love as freedom is less obvious. In contrast, the discourse of isolation and the lack of agency are more advocated compared to the American counterpart because of the differences in cultural patterns that operate in both films. The construct of love is very dominant in both stories. However, the construct of disease or illness leads to a more crucial discourse.

The discourse of illness in both stories leads to a binary gender hierarchy that associates masculinity with health, while femininity is associated with illness. The isolation caused by disease can also be associated with domestic femininity, which then becomes the idealized value of femininity. The efforts made by male characters to make female characters more autonomous actually seem to make the gender hierarchy more amplified, which reminds us of Jules Michelet's expression that 'to be a woman is to be ill.

The findings emphasize how illness narratives in romantic films often reinforce rather than challenge patriarchal constructions of gender. By associating femininity with fragility and passivity, and masculinity with vitality and agency, such films subtly normalize gender expectations under the guise of love and care. The romanticization of illness not only shapes the aesthetics of storytelling but also influences cultural perceptions of what it means to be loved, sick and gendered within the framework of a particular society.

For future research, it would be valuable to expand the film corpus and include diverse cultural contexts to explore whether similar gendered representations of illness persist in global media. Scholars, filmmakers, and educators must become more critical of how gender and illness are intertwined in popular narratives. By challenging reductive tropes and encouraging more colorful representations, we can move toward cinematic representations that affirm the multifaceted experience of illness-beyond the confines of romantic tragedy and gender stereotypes.

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