

**FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON FILM “RAYA AND THE LAST DRAGON”  
(A STUDY OF RELATIONAL EMPOWERMENT)**

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**Abstract:** This study uses Jo Rowlands' idea of relational empowerment to examine feminist readings of *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021). The film presents empowerment as a collaborative attempt focused on trust, cooperation, and leadership, in contrast with typical narratives of lone female heroes. This study focuses at significant circumstances that highlight decision-making, resistance of gender norms, collaboration and reconciliation using qualitative analysis and library research. The results show that Raya's leadership, determination, and intelligence challenge gender stereotypes, and that the Southeast Asian setting of the film emphasize a collective approach to empowerment in contrast to Western individualist feminism.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Women Empowerment, Relational Empowerment, *Raya and the Last Dragon*

**Abstrak:** Studi ini menggunakan konsep pemberdayaan relasional Jo Rowlands untuk menganalisis pembacaan feminis terhadap *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021). Film ini menampilkan pemberdayaan sebagai upaya kolaboratif yang berfokus pada kepercayaan, kerja sama, dan kepemimpinan, berbeda dengan narasi khas pahlawan perempuan yang bertindak sendiri. Studi ini meneliti momen-momen penting yang menyoroti pengambilan keputusan, perlawanan terhadap norma gender, kerja sama, dan rekonsiliasi dengan menggunakan analisis kualitatif dan studi pustaka. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan, keteguhan, dan kecerdasan Raya menantang stereotip gender, serta bahwa latar budaya Asia Tenggara dalam film ini menekankan pendekatan pemberdayaan yang kolektif, berbeda dengan feminisme individualis Barat.

**Kata kunci:** Feminism, Pemberdayaan Perempuan, Pemberdayaan Relasional, *Raya and The Last Dragon*

## INTRODUCTION

Among the numerous things that were significant in education, literature was one of them. Literature served as a medium for expressing feelings, experiences, or concepts that might influence readers, viewers, or listeners. A literary work must have some essential components, including creativity, genre, style, structure, perspective, and theme. Aristotle claims that he articulated his thoughts on the foundations of literature in his work "Poetics" (Destree, 3:2020). In order to create compelling and successful narratives, he underlined the significance of story, character, topic, language, and spectacle. Literary appreciation is intimate activity to literary works seriously so that it can grow understanding, appreciation, and sensitivity of critical mind and sensitivity of good feeling to the literary works (Evy Tri Widyahening & Eko Wardhani, 2016). There were many different kinds of literature, including prose, poetry, and drama. One literary medium was film, and it was contemporary literature.

Film was also a form of popular literature, which used both visual and aural elements to tell a story. In their book, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (2024:2) discussed how film integrates sound, images, and narratives to create a seamless whole. They underlined how crucial it was for auditory and visual elements to blend together in order to deliver stories effectively. It was simple to obtain and watch the film with loved ones. Film is an example of various mass communication media presented using elements of technology and elements of art (Afriyanto & Widyahening, 2024). Action, comedy, drama, romance, horror, fantasy, science fiction (or sci-fi), thriller, biography, and animation were among the several cinema genres available.

The story of Raya was told in the film "Raya and the Last Dragon." "Kumandra" was the name of the fantasy world in this film. Heart Clan, Fang Clan, Talon Clan, Spine Clan, and Tail Clan were the five clans. In this planet, dragons and humans coexisted peacefully and harmoniously. After that, monsters known as "Druun" appeared out of nowhere one day. Any living thing can be turned to stone by this monster. "Raya" was Chief Benja's daughter. Heart Clan was led by Chief Benja. This gem served as the world's guardian, keeping monsters away. These monsters were called "Druun," and they were created by the bad emotions of people. This was the tale of how "Raya" brought five clans together to stop "Druun." Then, to release everyone from curses, particularly her father. In addition to her companion Sisu, who was The Last Dragon, Raya was not alone. In this film, Raya stands for the empowerment of women. Raya was a strong, responsible young lady who makes an effort to own up to her own negligence.

The film "Raya and The Last Dragon (2021)" by Qui Nguyen and Adele Lim reflected the empowerment of women through the courageous, self-assured, and witty

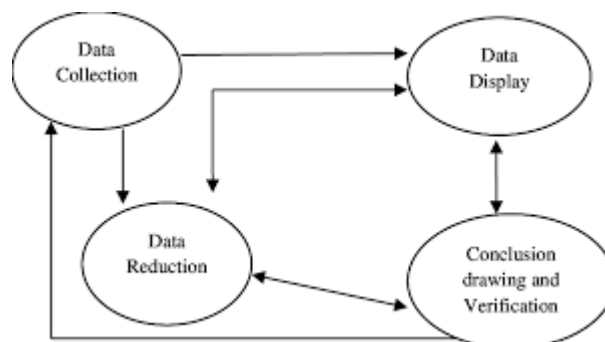
traits of Raya, the protagonist. In this study, the researcher used Jo Rowlands' notion of women's empowerment to investigate how Raya, the primary character, reflects women's empowerment. Through empowerment, women were able to improve their ability to navigate and affect their interpersonal relationships and the decisions made within them, or to negotiate and influence the nature of a relationship and its decisions.

## METHOD

This study was conducted at Slamet Riyadi University Library in Surakarta. The library was located in Kadipiro, Surakarta, Central Java, at Jl. Sumpah Pemuda No. 18. The study was conducted between January and February 2025.

In order to evaluate Raya and the Last Dragon (2021), this qualitative study uses a library research strategy, consulting books, journals, theses, and other literary sources. Denzin and Lincoln (2013) define qualitative research as an interpretive process that turns the world into a sequence of representations, whereas Braun and Clarke (2013) emphasize on using words and descriptions as data.

The film and its script serve as the primary source of data for this study, while books, journals, and earlier research on the subject matter serve as the secondary source. According to Jo Rowlands' theory of relational empowerment, the researcher collects data using a documentation approach, which involves closely viewing the film, reading the screenplay, and recognizing situations and dialogues that represent women's empowerment. The researcher uses a methodical approach, which begins with seeing the film several times for a better comprehension, making notes on important moments pertaining to women's empowerment, consulting the screenplay, and methodically organizing, condensing, and evaluating the information gathered. The four steps of Miles and Huberman's (1994) framework data gathering, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing were followed in the data analysis.



*Picture 1. 1 was about four steps to analyzing the data (by Miles and Huberman).*

After gathering information, the researcher classifies the data from the film into four major themes: decision-making in relationships, overcoming gender roles, cooperative problem-solving, and trust and reconciliation. Following a summary and filtering of the most pertinent results, the data was condensed and presented in a structured manner to aid in analysis and interpretation. Lastly, conclusions were made and the correctness and dependability of the findings were confirmed. As recommended by Creswell and Poth (2017), data triangulation was used to guarantee the validity and credibility of the study. Data triangulation involves using multiple sources within the film to examine the same phenomenon, ensuring consistency and enhancing the reliability of the findings. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of women empowerment as depicted in *Raya and the Last Dragon*, reinforcing the study's validity and contributing to feminist film analysis.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In particular, relational empowerment emphasizes trust, collaboration, and mutual support, emphasizing that social ties and community-based initiatives, rather than individual action alone, are the most successful ways to empower women. By demonstrating that empowerment can vary depending on the cultural and socioeconomic structure, it undermines Western individualistic feminist viewpoints.

### 1. Raya's character as an empowerment symbol

Context: The Gem was taken from the Fang Palace by Raya.

This moment demonstrates Raya's fortitude, wit, and self-reliance. Raya takes the initiative to regain the missing Gem piece by infiltrating Fang on her own, in contrast to traditional female protagonists who depend on male heroes. Her initiative and fast thinking highlight how she actively shapes her own fate, supporting feminist principles that go against gendered norms of passivity.

**Sisu** : Are you sure about this plan? Breaking into Fang is one thing, but facing Namaari?

**Raya** : I have no choice. If we want to save Kumandra, we have to take the risk.

A fundamental principle of empowerment theory, which holds that power was deliberately acquired rather than given, was reflected in Raya's reaction. She demonstrates the agency and self-determination that feminist discourse promotes for women by refusing to wait for assistance.

Context: The battle between Raya and Namaari

In this scene, symbolizes both political and personal issues, reflecting actual challenges faced by women in leadership positions who must deal with betrayal, trust, and reconciliation. Because of past betrayals, Raya was first reluctant to trust Namaari. However, this experience makes her consider if true empowerment comes from forgiveness and rebuilding or from strength alone.

**Namaari** : You still don't trust me, do you?

**Raya** : Trusting you almost got my father killed.

**Namaari** : And not trusting each other broke the world.

The intricacy of female rivalry and solidarity was shown in this moment. Women were frequently positioned in competition with one another, but genuine empowerment arises when they unite and conquer division, according to numerous feminist narratives. Namaari's statement, "Not trusting each other broke the world," exemplifies how female discord may impede success as a group.

## 2. Relational empowerment in action

Context: Raya and Sisu conversation about trust

As a guiding force, Sisu questions Raya's understanding of trust and serves as a reminder that connection building was just as important to empowerment as personal strength. This was consistent with the relational empowerment theory of Jo Rowlands, which emphasizes that cooperation and mutual support, rather than isolation, were the foundations of true empowerment.

**Sisu** : You know what's amazing about this world? You can change it. Trust someone.

**Raya** : That's easy for you to say. You weren't betrayed.

**Sisu** : Neither were you. You just stopped believing.

Because it transforms empowerment from a solo endeavor to a relational one, this moment was important. Bell Hooks and other feminist thinkers contend that female solidarity was crucial to the overthrow of patriarchal systems. Sisu's encouragement suggests that reestablishing faith in others was a crucial step toward empowerment, while Raya's hesitancy to trust illustrates how prior experiences of betrayal can make collective action challenging.

Context: Raya and Namaari reconciliation

Raya shows maturity, leadership, and emotional intelligence by taking the initiative to make amends after their heated argument. Raya's decision to put her trust in Namaari was a prime example of relational empowerment, demonstrating that women's strength was increased when they cooperate rather than compete.

**Raya** : Someone has to take the first step. I trust you, Namaari.  
**Namaari** : I... I don't deserve this.  
**Raya** : None of us do. But Kumandra does.

This act deconstructs the trope of the 'lone strong female hero' and instead champions a more inclusive, community centered model of empowerment. Raya's words acknowledge that while no individual was perfect, collective action can still lead to meaningful change. In feminist discourse, where progress was not just about individual empowerment but about uplifting entire communities.

### 3. Cultural and Feminism in real life

Context: Raya make decision in the final scene

Three female characters Raya, Namaari, and Sisu drive the resolve in the film's climax. This is a story in which women's leadership was crucial, challenging the conventional male-dominated hero's journey.

**Namaari** : We can do this, together.  
**Raya** : For Kumandra.  
**Sisu** : Let's bring everyone home.

In contrast to many Western feminist films that emphasize individual success, Raya and the Last Dragon take a collective stance that was more in line with Southeast Asian ideals. This was in line with cultural feminism, which prioritizes community, relationships, and shared leadership over power or conquest.

Context: The revival of Kumandra

In an act of trust, solidarity, and shared leadership, Raya, Namaari, and the others put aside their disagreements and give up their Gem pieces, marking the film's final resolution.

**Raya** : We need to stop fighting. We need to trust.

This instance represents the overthrow of patriarchal systems that profit from rivalry and division. The characters share power rather than concentrating on power dynamics, which was consistent with feminist ideals of collaborative leadership and reciprocal empowerment.

## DISCUSSION

### 1. Raya's character as an empowerment symbol

Raya defies gender stereotypes by being a resilient, intelligent, and capable leader. She actively shapes Kumandra's future and takes charge of her own fate, in contrast to passive female protagonists who depend on outside saviors. Her quest to recover the Dragon Gem was characterized by fortitude, flexibility, and strategic thinking, demonstrating that she was not only a fighter but also a self-reliant leader.

### 2. Relational empowerment in action

Instead of portraying empowerment as an autonomous process, the film shows it as a relational one. Raya was incredibly intelligent and skilled, but she gains more empowerment when she learns to work with others and trust them. At first, she was unable to reach her full leadership potential because of her cynicism toward people, especially Namaari. This skepticism was indicative of a broader problem in feminist discourse how mistrust, which was frequently influenced by patriarchal norms, can prevent women from forming partnerships that have the potential to bring about significant change.

### 3. Cultural and Feminism in real life

In contrast to Western feminist narratives that frequently place an emphasis on autonomy, the Southeast Asian setting of the film offers a novel viewpoint on feminist empowerment. Raya and the Last Dragon has a collectivist viewpoint, reflecting principles ingrained in Southeast Asian cultures, such as community, solidarity, and harmony, in contrast to many popular feminist tales that center on a single woman shattering social barriers.

## CONCLUSION

By highlighting leadership, trust, and collectivism, Raya and the Last Dragon offers an influential feminist narrative that interprets empowerment. By demonstrating determination, knowledge, and strategic leadership, Raya's character defies gender stereotypes and demonstrates that empowerment was about having the ability to take initiative rather than being dependent. But as

she learns to trust and work with others, overcoming the barriers of mistrust created by patriarchal pressures, her journey also demonstrates that true strength was not attained in isolation but rather via relational empowerment.

Additionally, by fighting for a collectivist mindset instead of to the Western emphasis on individualism, the film's Southeast Asian cultural perspective enhances feminist discourse. It emphasizes how crucial peace, community, and solidarity whereto the empowering process. In the end, *Raya and the Last Dragon* was both a critique and a development for traditional feminist narratives, demonstrating that empowerment works best when it was based on collaboration and teamwork rather than individual battles.

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