



The Abuses of Power in *Autobiography* (2022) Film Directed by Makbul Mubarak

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Abstract. Film effectively addresses social issues by exploring inequity, justice, and cultural conflict through visual and narrative storytelling. The Indonesian film *Autobiography* (2022) examines complex power relations within a sociopolitical context. It follows Rakib, a young man who works for Purna, a retired military general previously served by Rakib's father, and gradually witnesses how Purna exploits his authority. This study analyzes the representation of power abuse in Makbul Mubarak's *Autobiography* using a qualitative approach through scene analysis and thematic review. Louis Althusser's theories of Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) provide the theoretical framework for examining how authority is exercised through narrative, visual elements, and character interactions. The findings reveal that Purna employs ISAs by manipulating villagers to encourage obedience through social manipulation, interpellation, and subtle influence, reinforcing hierarchy and nepotistic corruption. He also exercises RSAs by using intimidation, direct violence, and verbal abuse to maintain control after his military career. Future research could examine the relationship between ruling and subordinate classes in *Autobiography* through Marxist theory to better understand class-based power dynamics. Additionally, applying Althusser's ISA theory to *Kupu Kupu Kertas* (2024) may provide further insights into ideological influence and power structures in 1960s Indonesia.

Keywords: Althusser's theory; Autobiography; Ideological State Apparatuses; Power abuse; Repressive State Apparatuses.

1. BACKGROUND

Film has long been recognized as a powerful medium for addressing complex social issues, offering a unique platform for audiences to engage with topics such as inequality, justice, and cultural conflict. According to Igartua and Frutos (2017), the visual and narrative elements of cinema play a crucial role in allowing viewers to emotionally connect with societal challenges, fostering a deeper understanding and empathy. Jones and Dawkins (2018) further emphasize that a film's ability to evoke strong emotional responses can trigger critical discussions, raise awareness, and inspire social change. This emotional engagement, combined with compelling storytelling, positions films as significant tools for education and activism, enabling filmmakers to address pressing societal issues and encourage reflection on them.

A striking example of this potential is the Indonesian film *Autobiography* (2022), directed by Makbul Mubarak, which explores the intricate dynamics of power within a socio-political context. The film follows Rakib, a young man who begins working for Purna, a retired military general, and soon becomes entangled in a web of corruption, manipulation, and coercion. As Rakib witnesses firsthand the abuse of power by his employer, the film delves into the ethical dilemmas and moral compromises involved in navigating a system built on exploitation. *Autobiography* portrays the lasting influence of the military in post-authoritarian

Indonesia, highlighting how institutional power can be manipulated for personal gain and the broader societal consequences of such abuse.

Despite its critical acclaim and success at various international film festivals, including the Singapore International Film Festival and the Venice Film Festival, *Autobiography* has received limited academic attention, making it an important subject for further exploration. This study aims to analyze how the film depicts the abuse of power, utilizing Louis Althusser's theories of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) to understand the film's critique of Indonesia's political and social systems. By applying these theoretical frameworks, the research seeks to examine how the film portrays practices such as coercion, interpellation, and corruption, while shedding light on the ways in which power is maintained and perpetuated within institutional structures, particularly the military, in contemporary Indonesia.

2. THEORETICAL STUDY

Althusser's Concept of ISAs and RSAs

Louis Althusser (1918–1990) is one of the most influential Marxist philosophers whose work extended Marxist theory by explaining how capitalist societies reproduce and maintain power through both ideology and repression. While Marx argued that the ruling class sustains its dominance by controlling the means of production and shaping political and ideological systems through the economic base (Marx & Engels, 1848), Althusser (1970, 1971) emphasized that power is also maintained through institutions that reproduce existing social relations. His theory distinguishes between Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs), which together preserve the interests of the ruling class.

According to Althusser (1971), ISAs include institutions such as the family, education, religion, and the media that disseminate ideology and encourage individuals to accept dominant values voluntarily. Ideology is embedded in everyday practices, institutions, and rituals, shaping how individuals perceive reality and legitimizing existing power structures. Through this process, individuals often view social inequalities and hierarchical relations as natural, thereby reproducing the prevailing social order. In contrast, RSAs comprise institutions such as the military, police, judiciary, and government, which primarily maintain state authority through coercion, including physical force, intimidation, and legal enforcement (Althusser, 1970). Although RSAs function predominantly through repression, they also employ ideology to reinforce their legitimacy.

Althusser's framework provides a valuable perspective for examining the representation of power abuse in Makbul Mubarak's *Autobiography* (2022). The film illustrates how ideological influence and repressive practices operate simultaneously to sustain authority. Purna manipulates villagers through social influence and established hierarchies while also relying on intimidation and violence to preserve his dominance. Although Althusser defines RSAs as state institutions rather than individuals, this study argues that Purna's continued reliance on the authority, networks, and symbolic power acquired during his military career demonstrates the enduring influence of repressive institutions beyond formal office. His character reflects how ideological and coercive mechanisms intersect in maintaining unequal power relations, making Althusser's concepts of ISA and RSA an appropriate framework for analyzing the film's representation of power abuse (Althusser, 1970, 1971).

3. RESEARCH METHOD

In this study, the researcher applied a qualitative approach to investigate thThis study involves several key steps, including defining the research object, selecting the approach, gathering data, analyzing findings, and drawing conclusions. The material object of this research is the film *Autobiography* (2022), directed by Makbul Mubarak. The film was chosen for its exploration of power dynamics in Indonesia, portrayed through its fictional characters. Despite receiving critical acclaim and multiple awards at international film festivals, the film has not been extensively studied in academic literature, making it an important subject for further research. This gap offers an opportunity to explore its themes of power and how contemporary cinema reflects Indonesia's political and social realities.

The study will apply Louis Althusser's theories of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) to analyze power abuse in *Autobiography*. These frameworks will help unpack how the film depicts power dynamics: ISA will be used to explore how ideology is conveyed through societal norms, institutions, and characters' actions, while RSA will focus on scenes where power is maintained through coercion, intimidation, or legal authority. These theories will provide a comprehensive understanding of the film's critique of Indonesian power structures.

Data collection will follow Sugiyono's (2010) qualitative method, emphasizing close observation of the film's actions, visuals, and dialogue to examine how power is exercised and abused. To ensure accuracy, triangulation will be used by comparing the film's analysis with academic papers, critical reviews, and relevant sources. This multi-faceted approach will

provide a strong foundation for understanding the film's portrayal of power abuse and support the application of Althusser's frameworks.

Data analysis will focus on scenes that illustrate power abuse, using film studies techniques such as cinematography and dialogue analysis. Relevant scenes will be selected for in-depth analysis, with visual and textual evidence presented to highlight the film's depiction of power dynamics. Finally, the study will synthesize the findings to draw conclusions on how *Autobiography* portrays power abuse, addressing the critique of power structures in contemporary Indonesian society.

4. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Finding

The researcher looks at how General Purnal abuses power in the film *Autobiography* (2022) by focusing on scenes and dialogues that show acts of coercion, interpellation, and corruption. The scenes listed are reviewed using Althusser's theory of Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA).

Repressive State Apparatus (RSA'S)

Louis Althusser's analysis of the concept of the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) in the film *Autobiography* (2022) examines how institutions such as the police, military, and government enforce community authority through coercion and control. General Purna used coercive actions including intimidation, direct violence, and verbal harassment to maintain his power over others. The method of coercion of General Purnal can be seen in various forms as follows.

a. Intimidation

At the beginning of the movie *Autobiography* (2022), General Purna meets Rakib, his housemaid, for the first time. Rakib enthusiastically offers coffee as a sign of hospitality, but is responded to firmly by Purna in the following conversation.

Purna : Who said I wanted coffee?

Purna : Sit

Rakib : Sorry, sir, I–

Purna : Sit

Purna : Now, drink.

Purna : Drink.

(Source: Autobiography (2022), minutes 00:04:25 - 00:04:30)

The second scene is when Purna interacts with the angry workers in the village. Rakib driving Purna's car accidentally crashed into a mosque near the workers' location. Calmly, Purna gets out of the car and walks over to the workers, looking around for the person in charge of the mosque.

Workers : Hey! Open the door!, you hit the mosque, Get out!

Purna : What's the problem? Which one of you is in charge of the mosque?

Workers : Sorry. We didn't know it was you, sir.

Purna : So? If it hadn't been me, what were you going to do?
Harasses us? Demand money?



Figure 1. The general subtle intimidation of the workers.

(Source: Autobiography (2022) minutes 00:21:19 - 00:21:45)

The workers who were initially angry immediately apologized after realizing Purna's presence. The power differential between Purna and the workers is emphasized in Figure 1 which shows how the workers bowed their heads and avoided eye contact when Purna got out of the car and tried to interact with the workers.

Another example of Purna showing intimidation is when he orders Rakib to remove a piece of his damaged campaign banner. Purna uses a high tone, which suggests power and authority, forcing Rakib to carry out the order.

Rakib : Going home sir?

Purna : What's in your pocket?

Rakib : Nothing

Purna : Give it to me

Rakib : It's nothing

Purna : Give it to me!



Figure 2. Purna ordered Rakib to take out the items from his pocket.

(Source : Autobiography (2022) minutes 00:38:05 - 00:38:35)

In Figure 2 the close-up of Purna's angry face reinforces the dialogue by accentuating his emotions, drawing the viewer into his tension and authority. Meanwhile, Rakib's blurry shot emphasizes Purna's dominance by focusing attention entirely on her expression.

b. Direct Violence

Direct violence becomes the main means of control in Purna's interactions, especially to silence people who challenge his authority. Purna used physical violence against Agus, the perpetrator of vandalizing his campaign banner, by hitting him on the head.

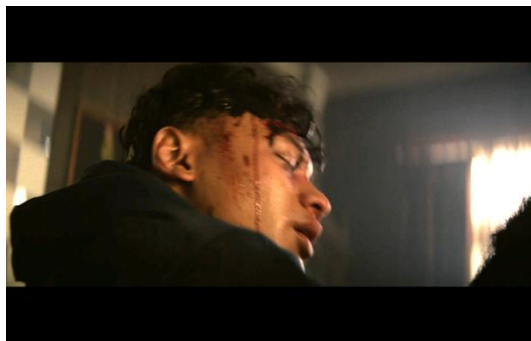


Figure 3. Agus' head was hit by Purna.

(Source : Autobiography (2022) minutes 00:59:27-00:59:31)

The close-up of Agus' face shows his sense of defeat and helplessness which reinforces the impression of his emotional and physical suffering. This scene does not show the moment the bottle hits Agus' head or the sound of the impact to create silence, which makes the act of violence even more disturbing.

c. Verbal Abuse

After retiring as a general, Purna ran for district head and promoted the hydropower project to solve the village's electricity problem, despite opposition from some residents due to the impact of land clearing. Agus, a high school student, protested against the project by reading out a letter from his mother asking for a halt to the eviction of their family's coffee plantation.

Purna : What does your father do?, stand up

Agus : He passed away sir

Purna : So you live alone with your mother?

Agus : And my stepfather

Purna : Oh, she has already found another man? That was quick

Purna : Your mother must be very pretty

“The villagers in the hall let out a mocking, disrespectful laugh”

(Source : Autobiography (2022) minutes 00:15:44-00:16:15)

Instead of responding seriously, Purna mocked Agus and his mother in public, using degrading humor. The villagers laughed at Purna's comments, creating an atmosphere of public humiliation.

d. Force

After realizing Purna's abuse of power, including murder to maintain his authority, Rakib attempted to escape by becoming an illegal migrant worker. However, Purna learned of his plan and ordered soldiers to arrest Rakib at the bus station. Rakib was then subjected to intimidation during the return journey, including an attempt by soldiers to forcibly search his personal bag.

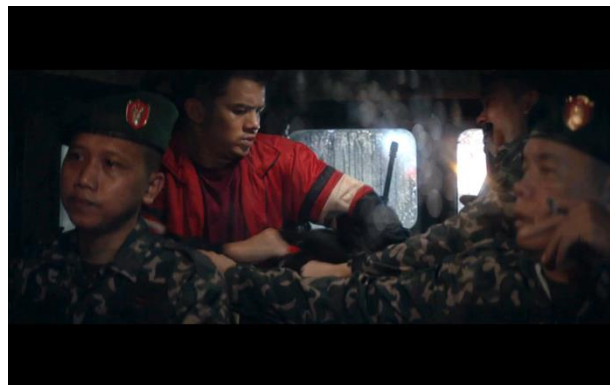


Figure 4. Soldiers intimidation and force to Rakib.

(Source : Autobiography (2022) minutes 1:22:08 - 1:23:15)

Purna, despite his retirement, continued to use his influence in the military for personal gain, such as ordering low-ranking soldiers to arrest the fleeing Rakib.



Figure 5. Soldiers salute Purna.

(Source : Autobiography (2022) minutes 1:22:08 - 1:23:15)

Figure 5 shows this power dynamic where the middle shot shows Purna standing dominantly in the foreground, while the soldiers in the background salute as a symbol of obedience and respect.

Ideological Apparatus (ISA'S)

Louis Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) is analyzed through this film to show how Purna utilizes ISA to maintain power, including social manipulation, concealment of violence, and nepotism that reinforces hierarchy. One of Purna's main tactics is interpellation, which is a manipulative technique to shape ideology in his favor. In this way, he subtly leads individuals to accept domination as natural. The forms of interpellation in the movie *Autobiography (2022)* can be divided as follows.

a. Social Manipulation and Interpellation in Hiding Violence

After hitting Agus with a bottle causing serious head injuries for damaging his campaign banner, Purna ordered Rakib to take Agus to the hospital without witnesses.

Purna: Take him into hospital, no witnesses

(Source: Autobiography (2022) minutes 00:58:39-00:58:46)

Purna managed to cover up his violent behavior and avoid consequences. However, despite Rakib taking Agus to the hospital, Agus could not be saved and passed away.

After Agus' death, Purna attended his funeral without anyone suspecting his involvement. Many people suspected Agus' death was related to a conflict over a tender for a project to evict his family's coffee land. To reinforce his image and control the narrative, Purna gave a laudatory condolence speech in front of the villagers.

- Purna : Assalamualaikum wr.wb
- Purna : To my fellow friends, and all those gathered here.
- Purna : Please allow me to express my condolences, regarding the passing of our son, Agus.
- Purna : Agus was a great young man, he was hardworking and creative, and he had great ideas for progress for our community.
- Purna : Unfortunately, he left us for a better place

Source: Autobiography (2022) 01:10:00 - 01:10:35

b. Subtle Influence to Maintain Hierarchy

Purna and Rakib visit the prison to meet Amir, Rakib's father, who is imprisoned for sabotaging the heavy equipment of a land eviction project. Amir is surprised by their visit. During the conversation, Purna offers to help, but Amir refuses because he feels that his family has become too dependent on Purna's family.

- Amir : my father worked for your father, my grandfather worked for your grandfather, I worked for you sir. My family already owes you enough.
- Purna : Amir, it's 2017, forget about hierarchies. We are friends

(Source: Autobiography (2022) minutes 00:27:00 - 00:27:33)

In scenes 00:27:00 to 00:27:33, the power imbalance between Purna and Amir is highlighted using mise en scene. Purna tries to convince Amir by saying that they are friends, no longer superiors and subordinates.



Figure 6. Manipulation of friendship to maintain control between Amir & Purna.

(Source: Autobiography (2022) minutes 00:27:00 - 00:27:33)

c. Nepotics Corruption

After retiring, Purna returned to his village and ran for regent. When his campaign banner was vandalized, Purna invited Soewito, a police officer, to dinner and requested an investigation. During the conversation, Soewito downplayed the matter, but Purna firmly reminded him that he was the one who recommended Soewito to enter the police academy, even though Soewito was not qualified.

Soewito : It was just a prank, let it go sir.

Purna : Do you remember?

Purna : That I was the one who got you into the police academy?

Purna : You couldn't even swim.

Purna : Back then, you wouldn't dare talk to me like this.

(Source: Autobiography (2022) minutes 00:39:50 - 00:40:20)

This dialog shows the power imbalance between Purna and Soewito, as well as the practice of nepotism and corruption. Purna uses his influence to give positions to unqualified people, showing how power and connections are used for personal gain.

Discussion

The film *Autobiography (2022)* is analyzed using Louis Althusser's Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) theories to explore how power is maintained through coercion and interpellation. The RSA, which includes physical forces such as the military and police, is used by Purna, as a retired general to enforce control. Purna's power is also maintained through ISA which focuses on ideological control through acts of interpellation, such as social manipulation, subtle influence, and nepotism.

Purna's practice of intimidation is demonstrated through short command words such as "Sit" and "Drink", which assert his authority (Huntley, 1984). This dominance reflects a hierarchy that influences behavior and interaction based on social class (Romme, 2021). The scene of the workers bowing their heads and avoiding eye contact as Purna gets out of the car depicts submission and guilt, revealing a power imbalance maintained through authority and intimidation rather than physical violence (Rakici, 2023; Khalid, 2021). Purna's high tone when commanding Rakib shows his control and urgency, making his intentions clear (Kester et al., 2022). The use of medium shots strengthens the visual dynamics by accentuating the characters' conversations and emotions, while close-ups of Purna's angry face add to the tension and help the audience feel the intensity of those emotions (Woolcott & Unwin, 1983). Direct violence also becomes Purna's main tool to control the situation especially when he tries to silence

people who oppose his authority Direct violence refers to the deliberate use of physical force to hurt or control others by hitting and striking (Mento et al., 2020).

Purna's verbal abuse practices are carried out with insults that can damage self-confidence and worsen social dynamics. According to Howells & Johnson (2000), derogatory words, even in the form of jokes, can humiliate a person and create an imbalance of power. Public humiliation, as described by Elshout et al. (2017), combines a sense of powerlessness with injustice, leading to anger and shame. Laughter from the audience also exacerbates feelings of worthlessness (Mann et al., 2017). Meanwhile, coercive actions with the deployment of force such as the forcible action to check her personal bag indicate a violation of her autonomy and rights. This action reflects the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) mechanism, which operates through physical or psychological coercion to control individuals (Ramdani, 2024).

The act of interpellation by social manipulation is seen when Purna attends Agus' funeral and gives a respectful condolence speech, praising Agus as a creative and hardworking young man, to divert attention from his involvement in the murder. This strategy of politeness reflects the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), where community traditions, values and beliefs are used to shape perceptions without direct coercion, maintaining control and preventing suspicion of Purna's abuse of power (Isnaini et al., 2015).

The act of subtle influence was seen when Purna and Rakib visited the prison of Rakib's father, Amir, who was imprisoned. In the conversation, Purna exercised subtle influence in the form of choice structuring, Purna rearranged their relationship, creating the impression of equality to influence Amir's decision without directly forcing him (Steinel & De Dreu, 2004). Purna uses the narrative of friendship to challenge the inherited subordinate role in Amir's family, still maintaining her influence subtly (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019).

Purna's act of nepotism occurred when Purna was running for regent and asked Soewito, a policeman whom he helped enter the academy despite being ineligible, to investigate the destruction of his campaign banners. In the conversation, Purna reminds Soewito of past indebtedness, demonstrating the abuse of power through nepotism. Nepotism, a form of corruption where positions are awarded based on connections, undermines fairness, morale and the performance of institutions. Purna uses his influence to maintain control reflecting Althusser's Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) theory, where institutions such as the police are used to perpetuate social inequality and hierarchy. This normalizes patronage, obscures the value of meritocracy, and maintains an order of power that benefits the elite (Gjinovci, 2016; Bekesiene et al., 2021).

5. CONCLUSION

From the findings and discussion, Makbul Mubarak's *Autobiography* (2022) depicts the abuse of power through Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) according to Louis Althusser's concept. Purna utilizes RSA with intimidation, verbal abuse, direct violence, and force to impose compliance directly and quickly, reflecting his authority as a former general. Meanwhile, ISA is used for long-term control through ideological influence, such as social manipulation, subtle influence, and nepotism to create loyalty and social hierarchy that supports his power. Through a combination of RSA and ISA, Purna managed to maintain dominance over subordinate groups, including villagers, workers, assistants, and low-ranking military and police officers.

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