

THE CONSTRUCTION OF CHILDREN'S GENDER IDENTITY IN THE FILM *MONSTER* (2023): SOCIO-CULTURAL REPRESENTATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR GENDER ORIENTATION FORMATION

Kirani Al Zahra

iranialzahra@gmail.com
Islamic Plus Adzkia High School, Medan

Abstract. The development of the film industry in the digital era serves not only as a means of entertainment but also as an ideological medium that plays a role in shaping society's views on gender construction. This includes issues of homonormativity due to the absence of a father figure, social pressure, and experiences of bullying. This phenomenon is relevant to Hirokazu Kore-eda's film *Monster* (2023). The film depicts how identity confusion, loneliness, and inner conflict in children arise due to societal stigma and stereotypes. This study aims to analyze the representation of children's gender identity in *Monster* (2023) through John Fiske's semiotic approach, which encompasses three levels of analysis: reality, representation, and ideology. In the Islamic context, the freedom of identity as depicted in the film needs to be directed toward a balance between self-expression and the preservation of human nature. Islam emphasizes that true identity is formed through self-awareness based on the values of monotheism, morality, and social responsibility, not solely through unlimited freedom.

Keywords: *Gender, Homonormativity, Patriarchy, Islamic Perspective.*

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital age, the film industry has rapidly grown into one of the most powerful mediums in shaping the worldview of society (Evrita, 2025). Movies are no longer just entertainment, but ideological vehicles that can reflect, criticize, and even shape social norms, including the construction of gender identity. Through the visuals of the images displayed in films, they have the power to influence audiences. Since the early 20th century, cinema has been a mirror of social change, from the feminist movement in classic Hollywood to the exploration of queer identity in contemporary cinema (Inayah & Fauzi, 2024). However, behind the technological advances and stunning visual aesthetics, films often reinforce gender stereotypes that are rooted in patriarchal and heteronormative structures. This is particularly evident in the representation of children, whose gender identities are often shaped by external pressures such as family, school, and social norms, which can lead to inner conflict and difficulty in self-expression (Fauzan et al., 2024).

One crucial issue that arises in this context is homonormativity, a concept that describes how dominant heterosexual norms not only suppress non-normative expressions of sexuality, but also shape children's gender identities from an early age (Butar-butur, 2024). Homonormativity, as explained by experts such as Lisa Duggan in her work *The Twilight of Equality?* (2002), is not merely about the rejection of homosexuality, but rather a process of internalizing norms that make individuals feel "normal" only if they conform to heterosexual standards. In children, this is often exacerbated by factors such as the absence of a father figure, social pressure from peers, and traumatic experiences of bullying (Febrianti et al., 2024). For example, research from American Psychological shows that children who experience gender-related bullying tend to develop identity confusion, social isolation, and even mental health risks such as depression and anxiety. This phenomenon occurs not only in the West, but also in Asian societies (Susanti et al., 2018).

These socio-psychological factors are further exacerbated by gender dynamics in schools, where boys are often forced to display masculinity such as physical dominance or emotional rejection, which can trigger disorders such as performance anxiety and self-depression, while girls are encouraged to conform to passive femininity norms, such as obedience and excessive empathy, which often result in feelings of helplessness and chronic depression (Safinah, 2024). In addition, gender pressure from social and family pressures reinforces this polarization, where children who do not conform to heteronormative gender norms face prolonged psychological stigmatization such as internal shame, social anxiety, and decreased self-esteem, which in turn can develop into gender identity disorder or even the risk of suicide. In a psychological context, these gender stereotypes not only shape external behavior but also influence children's personality structure through mechanisms such as internalization of norms, where children learn to suppress expressions of self that are considered "abnormal," resulting in psychological trauma that persists into adulthood, such as eating disorders, addiction, or difficulty forming intimate relationships (Hafid et al., 2025). Gender and psychological factors are closely interrelated, with patriarchal norms triggering internal conflicts that are exacerbated by social environments, such as peer bullying, which is often gender-based. According to a longitudinal study from the Journal of Adolescent Health (2020), this increases the risk of depression threefold in adolescents who experience gender discrimination (Sofiani, 2008).

In this landscape, film as a narrative medium plays an important role in revealing social realities that are often hidden. One notable work is the film *Monster* (2023), a film by renowned Japanese director Hirozuka Kore-eda, known for his humanistic films such as *Nobody Knows* (2004) and *Shoplifters* (2018), who once again explores themes of family, trauma, and identity through a complex non-linear narrative (Zahara, 2018). *Monster* follows the story of two boys, Yori and Minato, who are trapped in a search for their identities. This film is not just a teen drama, but a sharp critique of social structures that suppress children's emotional expression, especially in the context of gender. Hirokazu Kore-eda depicts how the stigma against feminist behavior that is considered non-normative can worsen psychological conditions, creating loneliness and deep inner conflict. Through symbols such as glass that reflects self-distortion in a closed space that symbolizes alienation, this film illustrates how children struggle against the still strong patriarchal and heteronormative pressures (Parameswara & Tsuruya, 2024).

The relevance of *Monster* (2023) in discussions about children's gender identity construction cannot be denied. This film emerged amid a wave of discussions about gender fluidity and children's rights, as reflected in UNICEF's report on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's mental health, where social isolation exacerbates gender stereotypes (Lestari et al., 2024). In Indonesia, this context is increasingly relevant with the rise in cases of bullying in schools and discussions about inclusive gender education (Putri, 2025). However, this film also raises questions about the limits of identity freedom, such as whether unlimited self-expression can lead to liberation or cause moral chaos. This is where the Islamic perspective becomes important, because Islam offers an ethical framework that emphasizes a balance between human nature and social responsibility (Kurniawan et al., 2022). As mentioned in the Quran, Surah Ar-Rum verse 30: "So direct your face toward the religion of Allah (remain upon) the natural disposition of Allah in which He has created mankind. There is no change in Allah's nature. (That is) the straight religion, but most people do not know," this verse emphasizes that humans are created with a pure nature, which must be preserved so that it is not distorted by social norms that contradict divine values.

In this context, Islamic scholars such as Imam Al-Ghazali in his book *Ihya' Ulumuddin* explain *fitrah* as the innate potential of humans that must be developed through education and an environment in accordance with Islamic teachings, so that children's gender identity should not be left unrestricted, but rather directed towards a balance between self-expression and morality. Al-Ghazali emphasizes that children must be guided to recognize themselves through the values of *tawhid* and *akhlak*, so that they do not become trapped in confusion caused by external pressures (Rifai et al., 2021). Many factors distinguish this research from other journals, such as its rare integrative approach, where film semiotics analysis is combined with an Islamic perspective to explore children's gender psychology. Most previous studies focused on the West or pure gender analysis without a religious ethical foundation, while this study emphasizes the contemporary relevance of the impact of digital media and the pandemic, and provides moral alternatives to avoid identity distortion. This makes it more comprehensive and applicable for policymakers in Muslim societies.

In comparison, other journals, such as the one written by Devira Andrawina in “Gender Construction Through Digital Text Symbols in the Film ‘Monster’ (2023),” only focus on the analysis of gender and social stereotypes without a religious perspective, making them less thorough in ethical aspects. Research Lestari et al.,(2024) Entitled “Fighting for Affection and Same-Sex Love: Cultural Semiotics in the Film *Monster*,” this study discusses the perspectives of gay individuals in expressing affection and love, thus lacking depth in religious and cultural aspects. This research is unique in that it combines all these aspects, providing more holistic and innovative insights.

The results of the analysis show that on a realistic level, the film *Monster* (2023) reflects the life experiences of children who experience psychological and gender-based social pressure, resulting in bullying and stigmatization of feminine behavior, which is in line with American Psychological research on mental health risks. At the representation level, glass symbols and non-linear narratives depict identity distortion due to heteronormativity, reinforcing criticism of patriarchy. At the ideological level, this film criticizes rigid gender norms while raising questions about identity freedom, which is then examined through Al-Gazali's Islamic perspective to emphasize the balance of human nature (Lestari et al., 2024). The discussion reveals that the construction of gender identity in this film reflects global sociocultural realities, in which psychological factors such as the trauma of bullying exacerbate gender stereotypes (Pamungkas et al., 2024).

From an Islamic perspective, Al-Ghazali offers an alternative moral guidance to avoid chaos, suggesting that the film not only reflects on the issue but also encourages ethical reflection (Bahri, 2022). This finding contributes to gender studies by emphasizing the integration of Islamic values in film analysis, although it is limited to a single film sample and requires further research for other cultural contexts (Maula et al., 2024). In conclusion, this study confirms that films such as *Monster* can be a tool for social criticism, but they require an ethical foundation to avoid distorting identities. This background underscores the urgency of this research in an era where digital media increasingly influences the younger generation. Through an analysis of the film *Monster* (2023), we can understand the complexity of children's gender identity and encourage more inclusive discussions, while also reminding us of the importance of moral values in navigating identity freedom.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research methodology uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological perspective on social religiosity in the context of film studies to understand the meaning and emotional experiences depicted in Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Monster* (2023). This approach seeks to describe the moral values, empathy, and spirituality reflected through the social relationships between characters and the emotional dynamics that frame the story. To maintain data validity, triangulation techniques were used by comparing the results of film observations with the social and cultural context of Japan. The analysis was conducted descriptively, interpretively, and semiotically, examining narrative and symbolic elements to reveal representations of masculinity, power relations, and the inner conflicts of the characters.

The analysis began with in-depth observation of the film and recording of key scenes that depicted social tensions, human values, and the dynamics of relationships between children, parents, and the environment. The results of the study show that *Monster* represents the complexity of social relations and human morality through symbols and narratives rich in human values, making it a profound reflection on empathy, compassion, and the search for meaning in the midst of social pressure.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

In the digital age, films serve not only as entertainment, but also as a medium for social, cultural, and humanitarian reflection. Advances in cinema technology have opened up opportunities for filmmakers to explore more diverse and profound issues (Aldo et al., 2023). Films now often contain

social, moral, gender, and spiritual values that depict the dynamics of human life amid changing times. Through powerful visual narratives, films have become a means of critiquing social realities such as inequality, alienation, symbolic violence, and power relations within families and society (Handayani et al., 2023).

In addition, digital cinema also highlights issues of identity, empathy, and human relations. Issues such as gender, equality, and social class differences are increasingly being raised, showing that films play an important role in shaping public awareness of human values. In this context, films function as cultural texts that not only portray reality but also reconstruct society's views on the moral, ethical, and spiritual values of modern humans (Ainiyah, 2025).

Contemporary cinema, especially in Japan, emphasizes a more intimate, emotional, and reflective approach, presenting stories rooted in everyday life but rich in philosophical meaning (Anam & Istifadah, 2025). Modern Japanese films often explore inner conflicts, family relationships, loneliness, and the search for meaning in life, making them a profound portrait of the social and psychological condition of humans amid technological advances and cultural changes.

In this context, *Monster* (2023) is a Japanese film released on June 2, 2023. *Monster* (2023) is directed by Hirozuka Kore-eda from a screenplay written by Yuji Sakamoto. Kore-eda is not the first artist to focus his attention on children, but he has a unique way of exploring a child's perspective. By combining adults' and children's understanding of the world, his films are very complex because they convey the reality of life and even explore the most basic human nature (Lestari et al., 2024). This film heightens the intensity of emotions, making them more real and clear.

Almost all of Kore-eda's films feature child characters. The screenplays focus on the perspectives of adults with all their morals and thoughts from their world. However, Kore-eda rejects this idea, often offering a new point of view. Children are presented as victims of the reality imposed by adults and often depict the complex world of childhood.

Although this is not the first time Kore-eda has used children as actors for his characters, in the film *Monster* (2023), the intensity and level of complexity are greatly increased. Kore-eda includes an LGBTQ plot played by the child characters Soya Kurokawa and Hinata Hiiragi. This proves that as a veteran director, the pacing in *Monster* is also well-regulated, neither too fast nor too slow. Without using music that draws too much attention, *Monster* successfully creates tension through the natural sounds created by the actors in the film. By depicting three different perspectives, it certainly provides an interesting and unique experience. However, there is one thing that needs further attention, namely that this film requires extra attention to every detail so as not to cause confusion. This is because the film presents at least three different points of view, and of course, each point of view has its own flashback to the initial events.

This concept is also adapted in the film *Monster* (2023), which tells the story of Minato, a fifth-grade elementary school student raised by his single mother, Saori. After his father's death, Saori begins to notice a series of suspicious behaviors in Minato, including cutting his own hair, coming home with only one shoe, and often complaining of earaches. Minato's behavior becomes increasingly uncontrollable, such as exploring abandoned tunnels alone and jumping out of moving cars, further strengthening Saori's concerns. These incidents lead Saori to suspect that Minato may be experiencing bullying at school.

The film also explores the story of Yori Hoshikawa, Minato's cheerful classmate, who is slim and delicate and often wears clothes considered feminine. These gender non-conforming traits cause Yori to be ostracized by the other boys at school. He lives with his father, a man marked by alcoholism and aggressive behavior. Seeing the bullying Yori faces, Minato eventually chooses to befriend him and stand up against discrimination. However, this act of solidarity makes Minato a target of ridicule himself. Afraid of being isolated by his friends as well, Minato asks Yori to keep his distance during school hours. Outside of school, however, their friendship improved. The two often spent time playing and laughing together, creating a safe space away from the adult world that consistently failed to understand them. As their bond deepened, Minato began to experience confusing emotions, such as feeling anxious about Yori's closeness, and eventually concluded that he might "like someone." The film subtly criticizes the rigid norms of a masculine and heteronormative society. Throughout the narrative, Minato is repeatedly told by adults, especially

teachers, about strength and masculinity. Meanwhile, Yori becomes a victim of toxic masculinity, bullied by his friends and subjected to emotional abuse by his father.

This study focuses on two categories: the portrayal of toxic masculinity in the film *Monster* (2023). The second is analyzing the impact of toxic masculinity and social pressure as illustrated through social interactions between characters in the film. The film uses components such as images, dialogue, object placement, body language, and facial expressions.

Masculinity is often shaped by the need for male approval, driven by social norms that define “real men” as tough, emotionally distant, dominant, and controlling of women (Utari & Hikmah, 2024). These expectations not only restrict men but also reinforce harmful gender norms through a dominant ideal of hegemonic masculinity that suppresses other expressions of masculinity. In *Monster* (2023), Kore-eda criticizes this toxic masculinity by depicting how social pressure to conform to rigid male roles encourages emotional repression and physical toughness, hostility towards femininity, and homophobia. Here is one of the key scenes in the film that reflects this:



Figure 1 Minato falls during physical training with Mr. Hori [00:49:54-00:49:59]

The incident in which physical education teacher Hori insults Minato by saying, “You call yourself a man?” after Minato fails to lift his friends, illustrates the internalization of hegemonic masculinity. At that moment, Hori associates masculinity with physical strength and athletic ability, which indirectly suggests that men who fail to meet these expectations are considered unmanly. Such comments not only damage Minato's self-esteem but also reinforce the idea that physical weakness signifies a failure to live up to masculine ideals. This kind of pressure can cause significant psychological stress, as boys like Minato may feel compelled to conform to rigid gender norms. This dynamic reflects Michael Kimmel's (2013) theory of toxic masculinity, which argues that men are often expected to constantly prove their masculinity, particularly through demonstrations of toughness and strength.

The scene shows how the construction of hegemonic masculinity works through the internalization of social values about “manliness.” Hori's comment represents the view that masculinity is synonymous with physical strength and dominance, so failure in this regard is considered a failure to be a “real man.” This is in line with Michael Kimmel's (2013) theory of toxic masculinity, which explains that men are often burdened with the need to constantly prove their toughness and reject weakness in order to be recognized as masculine. This pressure can cause psychological stress and limit men's self-expression outside of rigid gender norms.



Figure 2 Yori refuses to report bullying to Mr. Hori [01.29.58-01.30.03]

Minato: "Why didn't you tell Mr. Hori? He's nice."

Yori: "He just said I didn't act like a man."

Yori's statement, "He just said I don't act like a man," shows that he has often received negative judgments regarding his masculine identity. Yori is considered unmasculine because he is unable to fight back against the bullies as expected of a boy. He worries that Mr. Hori will not support him, but instead humiliate him like the other adults around him, because he does not meet the standards of strong and dominant masculinity.

This situation illustrates how hegemonic masculinity shapes boys' self-perceptions and behavior. Social pressure to appear tough and not show weakness causes Yori to refrain from seeking help, even when he is in a dangerous situation. This is in line with Michael Kimmel's (2013) theory of toxic masculinity, which explains that men often judge their self-worth based on their ability to maintain strength, control, and courage, as well as avoid any form of behavior that is considered "weak." This concept shows that rigid masculinity norms can create psychological distress and reinforce the cycle of violence among men.



Figure 4 Yori mentions the name of the flower she saw in the forest. [01.23.35 - 01.23.52]

Yori: "Primrose! Blue star creeper!"

Minato: "How do you know the names of flowers?"

Yori: "Because I like them."

Minato: "Mom says girls like guys who don't know the names of flowers."

Yori: "That guys who know the names of flowers are creepy?"

Minato's reaction to Yori shows that he has absorbed the construction of masculinity passed down by his mother, namely the view that men must behave in a certain way in order to be accepted by women: be assertive, don't show emotion, and avoid things that are considered feminine, such as flowers. Minato's perception of Yori illustrates how the ideology of toxic masculinity shapes men to reject their humanity, which is associated with weakness or femininity. This phenomenon shows

a form of toxic masculinity rooted in a fear of femininity, where sensitivity and gentleness are considered contrary to the image of “ideal masculinity.”

Thus, Minato's behavior not only reflects the socio-cultural influence of gender roles, but also shows how toxic masculinity works subtly through the internalization of family and social environment values that normalize the rejection of male emotional expression.



Figure 5 Yori's father calls his son a “pig brain.” [00:55:12 - 00:55:14]

Mr. Hori: “About Yori.”

Kiyotaka: “I'm sure he's troublesome, you don't need to tell me about him. I'll take responsibility for him.”

Mr. Hori: “He's not troublesome, he's a great kid.”

Kiyotaka: “No, he's not. He's... a monster.”

Mr. Hori: “What?”

Kiyotaka: “His brain isn't human, it's a pig's brain. That's why I plan to turn him back into a human.”

Yori's father treats his son as if he has lost his humanity by calling him a “monster” and saying he has a “pig's brain.” These words reflect a strong rejection of Yori's identity and show how fear and hatred can replace parental love. Although Mr. Hori describes Yori as a “good boy,” the father's perception is shaped by concerns about deviation from social norms that demand conformity to conventional constructions of masculinity.

His statement that he wants to “change him back into a human being” implies a desire to conform Yori to society's expectations of an ideal, heterosexual man. This illustrates an attempt to erase differences in order to maintain the gender order that is considered correct. This phenomenon is in line with Michael Kimmel's (1997) concept of masculinity as a form of homophobia, namely men's fear of being considered weak, unmanly, or too feminine.

Yori's father's attitude shows how cultural pressure shapes a person's behavior and views on masculinity. His rejection of Yori stems not only from personal conflict, but also from the influence of social norms that demand men conform to the image of a “real man.” Thus, Yori's father's character represents how toxic masculinity operates through the affirmation of narrow gender roles and the rejection of any form of identity that does not conform to this construct.



Figure 6 Minato pushes Yori away after she hugs him [01:37:06 - 01:37:31]

Minato: "Wait, wait, get away! Get away!"

Yori: "It's okay, it happens to me sometimes."

The dialogue and nonverbal expressions in this scene reveal Minato's inner struggle between his affective urges towards Yori and his fear of the meaning behind those feelings. When Yori responds gently, "It's okay, it happens to me sometimes too," she displays sincere empathy while revealing the possibility of similar emotional experiences. However, despite Yori's acceptance and calmness, Minato is unable to acknowledge his feelings. Instead, he withdraws even further and becomes defensive as a form of self-protection against guilt and fear of social judgment.

The inner conflict experienced by Minato shows the impact of internalized homophobia, a condition in which individuals internalize society's negative views of orientations that are considered deviant from heterosexual norms. Minato grew up in an environment that instilled the view that expressions of same-sex affection were inappropriate for a man. This rigid norm of masculinity shaped the perception that gentleness, empathy, and emotional intimacy are characteristics that contradict the image of a "real man."

Minato's reaction of distancing himself and trying to deny his feelings can be understood as a form of compliance with social and patriarchal pressures that demand men to suppress their emotional side. This action does not merely show rejection of Yori, but is an attempt to maintain a masculine identity that has been constructed by culture.

From an Islamic perspective, this kind of behavior and conflict can be understood through the framework of fitrah and control of desires (Sofyan, 2019). Islam views that every human being is created with natural tendencies (fitrah) that must be guided through education, moral values, and spiritual guidance. Attractions or feelings that go beyond the moral boundaries of Islam are not merely a matter of social identity, but a challenge in maintaining purity of heart and morals. The Qur'an teaches a balance between compassion and moral boundaries, so that the expression of feelings remains within the ethical corridor that preserves human dignity (Kusumah et al., 2024).

Thus, Minato's conflict reflects the clash between moral values, social pressures, and human emotional needs. This scene not only reveals the social impact of toxic masculinity, but also emphasizes the importance of values education and spirituality so that individuals are able to understand, manage, and channel their emotions properly and with dignity in accordance with humanitarian principles and Islamic teachings.



Kau berteman dengan Hoshikawa?

Figure 7 Minato's classmates tease him about liking Yori [01:43:00 - 01:43:20]

Boy: "Are you being nice to Hoshikawa?"

Boy: "You like Hoshikawa? That's gross. You two are lovey-dovey."

The scene begins when Yori becomes the target of bullying by his male classmates. One of them deliberately spills paint on Yori's desk. When Yori tries to clean it up with a rag, the boy grabs the rag and throwing it until it fell near Minato. Instead of joining in the laughter Instead of humiliating Yori, Minato took the cloth and returned it to him. However, this simple act of empathy immediately sparked ridicule from his friends, who accused Minato of "liking" Yori.

Their remarks were not just teenage jokes, but a reflection of social discomfort towards men who show tenderness or caring, especially towards figures who are considered not to fit the dominant masculine norm. Minato's reluctance to engage in bullying behavior was a form of resistance against the social construct that being a "real man" means being strong, emotionally cold, and distancing oneself from anything feminine. In the eyes of the group, Minato's empathetic actions violated socially established boundaries of masculinity, making him the target of ridicule.

The response of his classmates who laugh at Minato reveals a form of homophobia inherent in masculine culture: fear or rejection of behavior that is considered deviant from heterosexual norms. In an effort to maintain their masculine identity, men often feel they must distance themselves from any form of expression associated with femininity or emotional vulnerability. Hirokazu Koreeda's film *Monster* (2023) subtly depicts this dynamic through the relationship between two boys who are trying to understand themselves amid social pressure and adult expectations. Through the interactions between Minato and Yori, the film shows how toxic masculinity norms can inhibit empathy and create psychological suffering in individuals who do not conform to dominant gender standards. Referring to Michael Kimmel's thinking, this kind of masculinity not only restricts men's freedom of expression, but also fosters a culture of violence and oppression against those who are considered "different." (Ainiyah, 2025).

This scene shows that toxic masculinity does not always manifest itself in physical violence, but can also take the form of social pressure that forces individuals to suppress their emotional side. Minato becomes a symbol of the struggle between conscience and social norms, while his friends' ridicule illustrates how society normalizes the rejection of empathy. Through this scene, Koreeda highlights that the preservation of traditional masculinity actually causes emotional wounds and distances people from true human values—compassion, empathy, and acceptance.

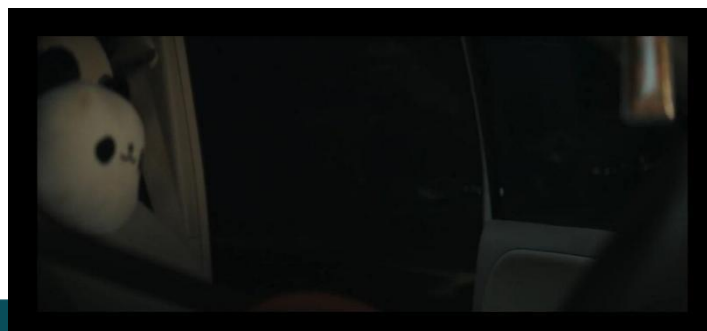


Figure 8 Minato jumps out of the car while his mother talks about marriage and having a family [00.11.23 - 00.12.07]

Minato: "I'm sorry."

Saori: "Does your ear hurt?"

Minato: "I... can't be like Dad."

Saori: "Your father is even worse. But I promised your father that I would hold on until you got married and had a family of your own. Just a normal family like you see everywhere. Until you have a family of your own, that's the greatest treasure."

Minato's mother's statement linking her son's future to the concept of heterosexual marriage reflects the internalization of traditional gender norms that limit the space for individual identity expression. Minato's statement, "I... can't be like my father," shows an identity dissonance rooted in social pressure to conform to hegemonic masculinity models and heteronormative family structures. Minato's act of jumping out of the car is not merely an emotional impulse, but a symbolic representation of inner tension and rejection of restrictive social constructs. This scene confirms that rigid ideals of masculinity can lead to psychological crises, in line with Kimmel's analysis (1997) which highlights that toxic masculinity plays a significant role in shaping the emotional suffering of modern men.

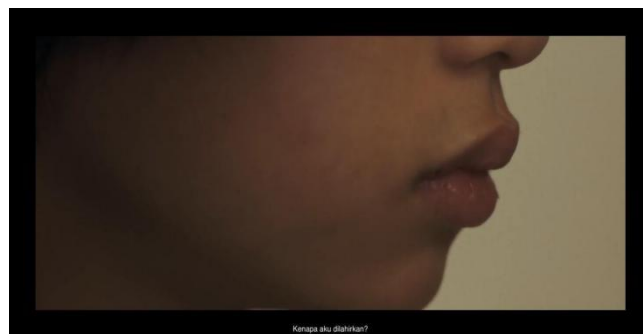


Figure 9 Minato questions his life [01:47:28 - 01:47:39]

Minato: "Why was I born?"

In this monologue, Minato shows symptoms of intense emotional distress and an existential crisis caused by trauma and social alienation. His statement, "Why was I born?" represents a form of despair and a profound loss of meaning in life. His inability to express his emotions openly stems from an environment that demands steadfastness and rejects weakness. His school, teachers, and even his mother were unable to recognize his emotional needs, thereby reinforcing his psychological isolation.

The social construction of masculinity that rejects vulnerability causes chronic emotional repression, causing Minato to experience a decline in self-esteem and a loss of self-worth. This condition shows that the concept of hegemonic masculinity can be a determining factor in the formation of psychological disorders in boys.

From an Islamic perspective, expressing emotions is not a sign of weakness, but rather part of human nature. The Prophet Muhammad himself exemplified a balance between strength and gentleness of

heart. Thus, the emotional restraint depicted in Minato's character contradicts the Islamic principle of *rahmah*, which emphasizes a balance between reason and emotion in building mental health.



Figure 10 Boy puts trash on Yori's desk [01.19.19 - 01.19.24]

Daito: "It stinks, it stinks. Is he here yet?"

Kuroda: "Stop it, Daito."

The boy pours trash from the trash can onto Yori's desk, making it dirty and full of trash. These actions constitute bullying directed at Yori by the boys in his class. The bullying experienced by Yori reflects how toxic masculinity can encourage bullying behavior in male social environments. In this context, the boy's behavior shows an attempt to maintain masculinity and suppress individuals who are considered different or do not conform to dominant masculinity norms. Yori, who appears gentler and does not exhibit masculine characteristics, becomes the target of bullying.



According to Michael Kimmel, one effect of toxic masculinity is violence, which stems from cultural norms that value male dominance, aggression, and emotional control. This can be seen in a scene involving Minato, who is laughed at by his male friends after he gives Yori a rag to clean his desk. What was intended as a kind gesture is taken as a sign that Minato "likes" Yori, and their ridicule suggests that showing concern among boys is strange or embarrassing. Feeling ashamed and worried that his masculinity is being questioned, Minato suddenly attacks Yori and pushes him to the ground. His reaction was not driven by hatred toward Yori, but by a strong need to avoid being seen as different, something his friends associated with weakness or a lack of masculinity. This moment shows how toxic masculinity can push boys toward violence. The pressure to act "like a real man" can create feelings of anger and confusion. Minato's actions were not only about being teased, but also his way of trying to prove that he fit the idea of what society expected of a boy.



Figure 12 Minato hears Yori's father hitting him [01:44:16 - 01:44:26]

Kiyotaka: "Tell him."
Yori: "I'm cured of my illness now. I worried you, but I'm fine now."
Minato: "Recovered from what?"
Yori: "I'm normal now."
Minato: "You've always been normal."
Kiyotaka: "There's a girl you like near your grandmother's house, right?"
Yori: "She's Shindo Ayaka."
Kiyotaka: "Thanks for playing with her."
Yori: "Sorry. I lied."
Minato: "Hoshikawa!"
Yori: "It hurts!"
Kiyotaka: "Why can't you do what I tell you! I'll punish you again."
Yori: "Stop! It hurts."
Kiyotaka: "Shut up!"

Yori's father orders him to tell Minato that he is "normal" now and that he likes girls, implying that his previous identity or behavior was considered abnormal or unacceptable. Later, Yori privately admits to Minato that this statement is not true. When his father learns the truth, he responds angrily, physically dragging Yori back home and beating him. This violent act clearly illustrates the dangerous consequences of toxic masculinity, particularly when individuals are forced to conform to rigid and limiting ideas about what it means to be a man. Yori's father equates being "normal" with being masculine and heterosexual, rejecting any form of emotional openness or sexual difference as a sign of weakness or deviance. His violent response is an attempt to enforce gender norms through domination and control. This moment strongly reinforces the film's portrayal of toxic masculinity, showing how societal expectations around masculinity can escalate into abuse and violence.

Many consider Minato and Yori's relationship not to be romantic, but rather a phase of "brotherhood," that what they feel is a childish friendship. It seems to validate the adult perspective in the film itself, that two boys should not feel romantic and sexual tension between themselves. This makes the audience seem like "monsters" to Minato and Yori. One of the universal experiences for the queer community in the film *Monster* is when Yori's father, who does not accept his son's sexual orientation, commits violence under the pretext of "curing" Yori of his "illness." Homosexuality is often considered a disease and a disorder. And that stigma happens to Yori at school. At such a young age, Minato and Yori begin to understand gender and sexuality and are rejected by the world because they are not "heterosexual," meaning they are not "normal." Heteronormativity makes those who are not "heterosexual" seem strange and wrong.

In the context of the film *Monster* (2023), this scene emphasizes how children's gender identities are shaped through social and cultural representations in their environment. Boys like Yori learn that to be socially accepted, they must conform to constructions of masculinity that reject values of gentleness, empathy, and gender equality. These constructions show how social systems subtly shape children's gender orientation and expression from an early age through daily interactions.

This finding is in line with the Islamic view that rejects all forms of gender-based insults or abuse. The Qur'an emphasizes the importance of mutual respect and upholding justice, as Allah says in Surah Al-Hujurat [49]: 11:

“O you who believe, let not a group of people look down on another group, for it may be that the latter are better than the former.”

This verse emphasizes that insulting others, including based on gender expression or gentleness, is contrary to Islamic moral principles. From an Islamic perspective, every human being is created with a natural disposition, or *fitrah*, which is the basic potential to love goodness, justice, and compassion. Therefore, Yori's empathy and gentleness are not weaknesses, but part of human nature that should be preserved and appreciated. Thus, the film *Monster* (2023) not only reveals the clash of social constructs about gender, but also invites viewers to reflect on the importance of returning to human nature, which places empathy, compassion, and equality as universal values that are in harmony with Islamic teachings.

CONCLUSION

Hirokazu Koreeda's *Monster* (2023) presents a profound reflection on the social construction of masculinity and its impact on the emotional development of boys. Through the character of Minato, the film reveals how social pressure to conform to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity—demanding toughness, emotional suppression, and adherence to heteronormativity—can lead to psychological alienation and identity crisis. This representation illustrates that toxic masculinity not only limits self-expression but also becomes a source of inner suffering and mental vulnerability. In a broader context, Koreeda's narrative invites society to reconstruct its understanding of masculinity in a more inclusive, empathetic, and humane way.

From an Islamic perspective, the balance between strength and gentleness is an essential part of human nature that must be preserved. Therefore, liberating men from the rigid ideals of masculinity does not mean negating their roles and responsibilities, but rather restoring their full humanity. Such efforts constitute an important step toward achieving psychological well-being and a more civilized social harmony.

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