

## The Depiction of Tolerance in American Superhero Films

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### ABSTRACT

It is true that film as medium can represent a lot significant values in society, one of them is tolerance. It is crucial to discuss tolerance because societies have become more diverse. Therefore, exploring tolerance on films can be fascinating and useful. By using American superhero films (*Fantastic 4* (2005), *Fantastic 4: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2007), and *Black Panther* (2018)) to depict how tolerance is represented, this study offers to enhance the understanding of tolerance which has always been one of important values to have. By applying Hall's theory of representation, this study exposes two essential points: tolerance must be conceptualized by incorporating mutualism, understanding, and peace; and tolerance shown on American superhero movies should incorporate the portrayal of race and gender.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction Indonesia is a country with its multicultural society. *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* or "berbeda-beda tetapi tetap satu jua" becomes the motto and watchword which binds all Indonesian citizens into a whole. Despite having different local languages, ethnics, religion and various elements, it is not the root of disunity. The watchword is supported by the the presence of practices / the act of tolerance towards Indonesian citizens. However, none is perfect. There are certainly some hindrances in practicing tolerance.

Several practices of intolerances remain to occur frequently around the world. The topic on tolerance seems to be interesting as well as important if it can be identified and observed through entertainment media – movies. This makes movies play a significant role for some people. For that reason, people need to explore and observe what a film conveys to them (Buckland, 1998, p. 1).

Recently, American films have been dominating the filming world. The popularity of the great artworks have made adolescents these days preceive movie watching as a need or a hobby. As the time goes by and technology advances alongside with the freedom to communicate, a lot of movies with innapropriate content appear, which cover criminal, violence and sex. Ironically, those films are watched by children and teenagers which will in fact give out negative impacts to young generations and the moral of the nation's children. In spite of that, not every film gives out negative impacts, there are also films which bring about positive influences and tend to lead towards moral repairs, such as the movie *Fantastic 4* and *Black Panther*. Tolerance, for instance can be found out in those films.

Tolerance, generally, means to appreciate, to permit or to allow a certain way of life, which includes opinions, views, beliefs, habits, behaviours, that is condtradictory or different compared to one's way of life. Tolerance is crucial if linked together with a multiethnic, multicultural and multireligious social life. A film is surely produced through many extensive considerations and researches in order to achieve maximum results; moreover, the message in a movie is as well influenced by the society so that the purpose of the making of the film is obtained. It is true that besides entertaining, films can also enrich one's knowledge (Adi, 2011, p. 71). Movies with superheroes as the main characters may often depict the sense of tolerance which many people are not conscious.

The tolerance of a great leader in many of the arising issues is seen, reflecting that neither skin nor gender poses as a hindrance to become a hero. This study focuses on tolerance because it is clear that tolerance in the society is dropping especially amongst adolescents; as a result of the lack of tolerant attitude, a lot of issues often happen in the community. Among the moral values portrayed in the films, tolerance is considered more significant than others because it can be used to enhance people's awareness of being tolerant.

Therefore, this research provides understandings and benefits of tolerance for teenagers through American Superhero films. Superheroes are always depicted as powerful and kind figures. They fight for peace and protect the world. Their extraordinary power has inspired a lot of people. Therefore, superhero movies may have an impact toward someone's life. There may be essential values of life which can be explored through superhero movies. One of the values is tolerance. It is indeed interesting to explore how superhero films can represent tolerance which is seen as a very fundamental issue particularly in a multicultural society.

The conduct of education in Indonesia has to fulfil the expected goal. Education goals are not always based on the numerical scores obtained by students in learning activities. Good student's attitudes, such as a sense of having tolerance are likewise an education goal success. In a teaching and learning process, two essential elements are teaching method and learning media (Arsyad, 2013, p. 19). Both aspects are related to each other. For this reason, choosing the right media to learn something can be a good way.

However, it is possible to state that one of the main functions of a learning media is as a helping tool which at the same time affects the learning atmosphere, condition and environment arranged and created by teachers. In studying a language, for instance, the success in a learning process is influenced by several factors, such as teachers, students, method, motivations, and surroundings (Harmer, 1991, p. 9). The study source in a history learning activity has various types. The more varied the learning source used by students or subjects in studying history, the more historical information or knowledge studied and developed by the students. So, one can study from any kinds of sources.

One learning source facilitates learning media in the form of cassettes, videos, computers, CDs, films, and many others. Film is chosen because it is easy to understand, interesting, popular, and it can also be the source of entertainment (Adi, 2011:29). Therefore, film is used to fulfill a general need that is to pass on an idea, message or reality. In other words, it has been studied by many people from different kinds of perceptions (Turner, 1999, p. 1). The use of film media in learning provides a whole new atmosphere and excitement for students. Films are able to present materials regarding a process or a past event with particular venue, subject as well as atmosphere of any kinds of places. Therefore, this study emphasizes the significance of identifying meaning represented through films.

Based on the explanations above, the objective of the research is to understand the concept of tolerance and to identify the idea of tolerance represented in American Superhero films. The results of the research are expected to contribute to society. Therefore, the purpose of study is theoretically expected to be able to contribute to the development of humanities theories, especially cultural and literary theories. The result of the study can be utilized to enrich certain studies related to movies, such as media studies, film studies, etc. It is practically expected to be helpful in giving better understanding about tolerance to students, teachers, parents, etc. Additionally, this study can also be a useful reference to other researchers who are interested in analyzing movies.

## 2. METHOD

The data obtained for this study were qualitative data. This means, the data were not in numerical forms. The data were statements, such as dialogues, scene descriptions, ideas or perspectives. The main (primary) data of the study were acquired from the American superhero movies - *Fantastic 4* (2005), *Fantastic 4: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2007), and *Black Panther* (2018). These films have been chosen for some reasons. First, many people, especially teenagers enjoy watching superhero movies and these three superheroes films gained a lot popularity when they were released. They were so popular that even two of these superhero movies were shown on Indonesian TV channels. In other words, a lot of Indonesia people watched these movies. Second, the three films above contain many scenes and dialogues which can represent tolerance.

This study is a qualitative research. This means it actually intends to find out as many data as possible relevant to the topic through observing, interviewing, etc. in order to explain certain phenomena or issues (Hariwijaya & Djaelani, 2004, p. 39; Creswell, 2010, p. 16). Further, this kind of research is frequently used in social and cultural studies. The collected data were mostly in the form of dialogues from the films and scenes related to the dialogues from film observation. There were several significant scenes and dialogues obtained from the films which could be interpreted by using semiotic approach to identify the meaning behind them. The secondary data used to discuss the acquired primary data were gathered from any relevant references such as books, journals, magazines, etc.

Language, sign/symbol or image can be interpreted to figure out the meaning (Hall, 1997, p. 15; Chandler, 2007, p. 13). Representation can be understood as the act of presenting or presenting something other than itself,

through the symbols/signs provided through photography, dialogue, writing, films, videos, etc. (Piliang, 2003, p. 21). Further, Fiske & Hartley (2003, p. 98) also explained that people can construct the meaning of the film they have watched. Therefore, in this study, all the dialogues, plots, scenes, and acts can be interpreted to figure out the meaning.

As a part of semiotics, theory of representation focuses on what and how something can represent a meaning to something. So, it is not only image and words but the object is also can be purpose as signifiers in the production of meaning in the semiotic approach (Hall, 1997). In order to show what the films represent, it is important to collect all essential dialogues and scenes.

There are key or essential terms used in this study which need to be further clarified in order to help readers understand the concept of the term in order to avoid misperception toward the terms used in this study. The first term to define is superhero. This term is frequently used in this study. Superhero movie is a phenomenal and popular genre which may contain of science fiction, action, and fantasy in it. This kind of film usually portrays the fight between the good and the bad. The good one is known as a hero who own extraordinary power to defeat the bad characters.

A lot of people, especially teenagers enjoy watching superhero movies because they are usually full of incredibly creative visual and sound effects, so film producers will have to spend a lot of money for superheroes movies. This uniqueness can attract people to watch superheroes films (Pratista, 2008, p. 26). In other words, a lot of people will enjoy watching superheroes movies because this kind of film may present certain satisfaction because most superheroes films are highly supported by great technology in terms of visual and sound effects. Additionally, good-looking actors appears as hero characters will certainly attract more audiences.

There are two important words which describe superhero – “super” and “hero”. From the teenager’s perspective, *Oxford Essential Dictionary*: for elementary and pre-intermediate learners of English (Waters (ed) 2006, p. 405) defines ‘super’ as “very good” and ‘hero’ as (1) “as person, especially a man, who has done something brave and good” (2) “the most important man or boy in a book, play or film” (2006: 194). From the definitions above, superhero means a person, usually man who is strong and has good personalities or characteristics and needed by people.

Superheroes have extraordinary skills or super abilities which come from the advancement of science and technology (Winterbach, 2006). As the point mentioned previously, the use of modern technology in creating the effects makes it worthwhile. Further, it could be understood that the distinctiveness of superheroes with the popular names or letter on their costumes and all the missions they must carry out to save human beings and fight for kindness.

Many popular superhero characters have been produced by Marvel Comics as a part of Entertainment. The superheroes characters created by Marvel have becomes popularly significant characters in the world of entertainment. The official website of Marvel states that thousands of superhero characters have been included in many kinds of media for more that seventy years. Therefore, these Marvel’s superhero characters have been found in TV series, video games, films, etc. Therefore, superheroes film discussed in this study is a kind of genre which portrays heroes with super power carrying out tasks to save people and fight against the bad.

### **2.1. The concept of tolerance**

People are familiar with the term tolerance. It seems a common word, however, not everyone can understand what tolerance is and how it works. Tolerance is a fundamental issue especially in a multicultural society. The word “tolerance” can be defined differently. To simplify it, tolerance can mean to let go. In reality, the practice of tolerance may not be as simple as the definition. The New International Webster’s Student Dictionary of the English Language (Bogus, 1996, p. 774) defines tolerance as:

1. The character, state, or equality of being tolerant. 2. Freedom from prejudice; open-mindedness.
3. The act of enduring, or the capacity for endurance. 4. An allowance for variations from specified measure as of machine parts. 5. Med. Ability to withstand large or increasing amounts of a specified substance or stimulus.

From the definitions above, the first three definitions are suitable to refer to the meaning of tolerance in general, especially in daily social life. The important keywords to understand tolerance is “character”, “unbiased (free from prejudice)” “open-minded”, “endure”. So, it is a character which is unbiased and open-minded to put up with differences. In addition, Indonesia Dictionary known as Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (1989, p. 955) tolerance means attitude that shows someone to leave someone alone or to stop bothering. In other words, it may mean respecting, allowing: allowing the opinion, views, beliefs, habits, behavior and so on or which are contrary

to its own founders. From the explanation above, the concept of tolerance is strongly connected to the essence of respecting differences.

People may also define tolerance as showing mutual respect and understanding for the sake of peace; a method to peace and it can be the essential factor for peace. It is basically a way of creating harmony. In order to avoid conflicts, one must be able to show the attitude of respecting others who are different from self. The implementing of tolerance always depends on the willingness to give and share with others by respecting others' principles. Additionally, tolerance can be perceived as an attitude allowing other people or groups and avoiding hurting them and another point of view is that tolerance is not merely respecting but also helping and supporting for the existence of other people or groups.

Nowadays, more and more societies have become multicultural, as a result, the essence of tolerance has always been challenged by any kinds of situations such as finance, social attitudes, trust, and so (Persell et al., 2001). Therefore, it is significant to explore more about tolerance. By this way, people can have better understanding about tolerance towards differences regarding races, ethnic groups, genders, religion, etc.

From the different perspectives above, there are several significant key ideas which reflect the meaning of tolerance as shown below:

mutual respect	Tolerance
differences	
understanding	
a way	
avoiding conflict	
peace	

Tolerance can be defined as an attitude of showing mutual respect differences based on understanding and care which may also function as a way to avoid conflicts and to create peace. It is true that many conflicts appear in society because many people are intolerant toward differences. Consequently, discrimination and prejudice take place. This may get worse if the society is multicultural. Therefore, people must realize the importance of understanding tolerance. Indonesia, for instance, is a country with multi-ethnic groups, diverse cultures and religions which may easily lead to conflicts if all Indonesia people do not show tolerance. If all Indonesian citizens are aware of the need for being tolerant, everyone will live in harmony (Samad, 2020, pp. 72–73). As a result, diversity of Indonesia will always be the most essential asset.

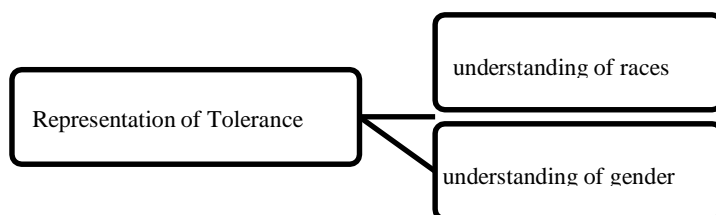
By understanding, respecting, and showing empathy to differences, one is considered to be tolerant and this may be beneficial for someone because by showing tolerance, one may help create a harmony, peace and security in society (Muawanah, 2018: 62). However, the concept of tolerance is not easy to understand and difficult to be applied. Many people fail to tolerate because they simply neglect the idea of being tolerant. If this happens, more and more people will never understand what tolerance is. Someone is considered tolerant if he can show generosity, patience, and respect towards different viewpoints even though he disagrees (Suharyanto, 2013, p. 198).

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. The Representation of Tolerance

Since the dialogues (utterances) and scenes from film can represent people's emotions. The study conducted toward the films reveals there are some essential values conveyed in modern American superhero films. One of them is tolerance. As a matter of fact, American superhero movies may represent tolerance. This value can be perceived as a symbol which can represent something happens in society

Thus, this part of discussion contains several kinds of representations of tolerance acquired from American superheroes films *Fantastic 4* (2005), *Fantastic 4: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2007), and *Black Panther* (2018). It is obvious that tolerance is a significant issue in The United States, a multicultural country. Through the superhero movies discussed in this study, there are several kinds of tolerance need to be emphasize.



The representation of tolerance is frequently depicted in the films in some kinds of form as followings.

### 3.1.1. Through Understanding of Races

Themes on races have often been used as a topic of discussion in forums, seminars, discussions, or in the form of written works such as books, journals, etc. Regarding racial issues, it is generally known that teenagers especially school students hear words which may provoke hatred toward certain races, ethnic groups, genders, disability, and sexual orientations. As a result, bullying tends to happen at schools (Navarro et al., 2016, p. 1). In the United States, for instance, the discrimination toward skin color has been an important issue. It is even written in the history of America that the practice of slavery happened. Racism causes slavery to occur and it would also create a gap between the superior race and inferior race when more people from different cultural backgrounds, for example Hispanics, Asians, Jews, etc (Ikuenobe, 2014, pp. 108–127).

Race is visible. In other words, it easy to notice someone’s ethnic background. In general, it is clear that race is biological classification which makes people different from other people based on the skin color. This condition can easily be misunderstood and misused which can finally create racial discrimination. The basic point to understand is actually why people are angry only because others do not have the same skin colors as theirs. Racist and prejudiced behaviors may happen because people are influenced by the way other people – those who need to be more superior that the other; those who think that they are better than the others (Robinson, 1999, p. 105). The worst is that these people simply let those misguiding thoughts lead them to hatred.

As a result, a lot of people believe that this condition makes people different as well as their characteristics, therefore, there is a perception that society needs to be organized differently and thus, it leads to different treatment for different people. This condition may generate the the so-called minority groups and majority groups. It is true to say that intolerance still happens in this era, especially in multicultural societies. In the US, for instance, intolerant habits are still seen in many American societies. As a matter of fact, there are still people who consider themselves majority and more superior that the other races in the country believe that they are better and need to guide other races. For this reason, intolerance happens in a multicultural society due to the lack of knowledge about the importance of being tolerant.

It is true that people can easily discriminate other people based on the skin colors and this is seen through the derogatory terms used in societies for instance, “nigger” (African-Americans), “red skin” (Native Americans), “Yellow” (Asians), etc. (Rudy, 2017, p. 291). This condition will be worse if more and more people ignore the importance of tolerance.

Through one of American superhero films, for example, there is a scene showing how an African-American character is respected. The film *Fantastic 4 : Rise of The Silver Suffer* (2007) shows an African-American general holding an important position and giving orders. Even the white characters says that he feels honored to meet the general, as shown in the following dialogue:

Reed: It was an honor to see you sir. (00:14:10- 00:14:13)

The depiction above signifies that African-Americans who have been degraded in American society are now portrayed as respected characters in those American movies. It may indicate that a general is not always white as many Hollywood films have showed in the past. African-American people have always been a part of American culture and history since the country was established, but they were discriminated and treated unfairly in the United States (Faan, 2006, p. 29). Apart from the sad truth, those movies present African-Americans who have been highly respected. It shows that black people also have the same rights as other people or races. They are entitled to uphold high positions in their careers if they have qualifications.

Another example of African-American character having an essential role in American superhero movies is the characters named T’ Challa from the film *Black Panthers* (2018). This Black character is the superhero in the movie. This can tell that a Black man can also become a superhero and save the world. The depiction above shows:

- very important person (VIP):                      1. speaking in public (in an important forum)

2. being listened by a lot of important people
3. being accompanied by ladies

This condition reminds people of the courage Martin Luther King has had when he delivered a speech to emphasize the importance to fight for equal rights. This gave strength and motivation to a lot of African-Americans to take part in the movement, to protest unfair treatment they experienced (Putri, 2015, p. 40). In other words, the portrait of a Black superhero guiding people in public shown in the film can represent the essence tolerance of different kinds of races.

In the past, African-Americans were rejected by White Americans who dominated American society and culture (Miharso, 2008, p. 81). Therefore, the presence of African-American superhero characters will definitely lead the way to show the essence of being tolerant in multicultural societies. This may change people's perspectives on races, especially if it is represented on movies. The following is the dialogue taken from the film *Black Panthers* (2018):

T'Challa: My name is King T'Challa, son of King T'Chaka. I am the sovereign ruler of The Nation of Wakanda. And for the first of time in our history. We will be sharing our knowledge and resources with the outside world Wakanda will no longer watch from the shadows. We cannot. We must not. We will work to be an example of how we, as brother and sisters on this earth should treat each other. Now, more than ever. The illusions of division threaten our very existence. We all know the truth. More connects us than separate us. But in times of crisis the wise build bridge while the foolish build barriers. We must find away to look after one another as if we were one, singel tribe. (02:05:25 - 02:06:29)

The dialogue above reflects that there is a pride and honor of being a king. This may signify the identity that African-American people have been fighting for. In other words, the history of slavery and racial discrimination motivated them to reach for their true identity to be legally respected and recognized (Febriyanti, 2015, p. 59). For this reason, the watching a Black superhero character may reflect that racial issues are not supposed to be present in any societies.

Thus, it is expected that those who are engaged in social interactions formally or informally may show tolerance (Persell et al., 2001). People need to be informed that attractiveness and strength is not related to particular races or ethnic groups only. A man can be considered more attractive if he can take care of himself; be masculine and have some kinds of pleasant personalities (Mehrabian & Blum, 1997, p. 35). Understanding that all kinds of skin colors are unique and beautiful can help people to show respect and appreciation toward others who have different skin colors from theirs.

By portraying a black superhero in *Black Panthers*, its producer may gain a lot of profits as well as popularity for guiding people to understand that superhero is not always white. Black superhero can also save the world. Thus, it is important to note that the presence of African-Americans superheroes in American films can represent a shift in people's perception. People no longer associate superiority to the White citizens. It is true, a multicultural society will always have a racial issue such as prejudice, stereotype, discrimination, and so. However, by watching Black superheroes with extraordinary power to save people, it will generate an idea that living in a society with people from different races is normal and therefore, everyone must be able to show tolerance to one another.

### 3.1.2. Through Understanding of Gender

Representation of tolerance from American superhero films can also be seen through how the film depicts gender. Gender discussed in this study is the presence of female superheroes in American superhero movies. The depiction of female superheroes can reflect gender issues in society. Gender is also an important issue in the world. It is a topic fequently discussed in national or international forums in the form of debates, public speaking or written works such as articles, research reports, journals, books, etc. Mainstream conventionally divide gender into masculine and feminine, even though current gender issues involves other categories of gender. Gender differences have always been issues in almost all countries. It may cause unfair treatment for both men and particularly women (Fakih, 2001, p. 12).

The common perception of male authority has given more opportunities for men to dominate in every aspect of life (Connell & Messerschmidt., 2005, p. 832). People often assume that the skill level of women is considered to be lower on average than men. In other words, society has formed a stereotype that men are more powerful than women. Therefore, the issue of gender inequality is still widely spoken all around the world. However, the development of science and knowledge has paved a way to let people see that differences in roles between men are actually constructed by norms, traditions, and culture in a society.

However, the depictions presented in American superhero films seem to be different from the stigma constructed in society. For instance, there is a significant dialogue in *Fantastic Four* (2005):

Victor : I think both of you know Susan Storm, My Director of Genetic Research. (00:03:06 - 00:03:10)

The dialogue above showing that Susan Storm (a female character) in the film holds a position of director. She has a very important position in the institution. This may reflect that the gender issue depicted in the film is related to ability.

Regarding ability, Robbins & Judge (2007, pp. 39–44) have explained that abilities can be categorized into two, namely intellectual ability which is required to perform different kinds of activities related to mind, logic, and problem solving and physical ability is needed when doing tasks which require strength, stamina, and so on. The stereotype that women are weaker, less powerful or less intelligent than men may still be found in many societies. This stereotype has a huge impact to women in social life and may create a perception that women remain in the second class because gender issue moving around the society is often related to the ability of men and women. In *Black Panther* (2018), there is a scene as well as dialogue as following:

Okoye: Take her to the River Province to prepare her for the ceremony.  
Wakanda Female Warrior : Yes, general. (00:14:08-00:14:11)

What makes this more interesting to discuss is that, Okoye is portrayed as an African- American female warrior who holds a position as a general in the film. This is to show that a warrior is not always identical with male or white. An African-American woman can also be depicted as a warrior who can fight for her country and her people. African-American people had experience of being discriminated and stereotype in the United States.

The depiction of a Black female warrior may represent equality in gender and races. People can see that the presence African-American women as female warriors may show that it fairness. This may be related to the idea that women and men are equal. Further, the dialogue above may represent that women's physical ability is similar to men's. Looking back to world history, people know that there have been many important female figures who changed the world. In Native American culture, for example, Perdue (1999, p. 11) has stated that women from Native American play an essential role in American history. This representation may also show that people have begun to see that some conventional ideas on gender are not suitable for this modern life. As a matter of fact, women play significant roles in daily lives.

Many people start understanding that practice of patriarchy in many cultures has created more chances for men to dominate in almost all aspects in society, and this has gradually influenced people's thought to assume that men are more powerful than women. According to Connell (1987, p. 110) the idea of patriarchy can cause bias in gender because it may generate the idea of women being inferior. Therefore, the presence of female superheroes in American culture may reflect that people gradually eliminate the perspective that hero is identical with men. This shows that the depiction of female warrior can reframe the idea of women's inferiority. By showing equal power that men and women, people, especially children and teenagers may understand that it is important to respect to each other and to tolerate people whose genders are different from theirs.

Since intolerance has still become an issue that many multicultural countries are still facing, American superhero films exist to help people see the importance of being different by presenting significant symbols which can represent tolerance. This is important because it can give better understanding about tolerance and respect to young generations. Thus, from the analysis above, American superhero movies such as *Fantastic 4* (2005), *Fantastic 4: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2007), and *Black Panther* (2018) represent tolerance through the depiction of different races and genders.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

American superheroes films can be useful to depict essential life values which everyone can learn and one of them is tolerance. From the analysis above, there are some essential points to highlight. Firstly, tolerance is still a value that many people, particularly from multicultural societies need to preserve. Multicultural countries such as United States of America and Indonesia, for example, still have a lot of homework in order to end discrimination, prejudice, racial conflicts, and so on. Therefore, through American superhero movies, people can see the beauty as well as the meaning of diversity.

Secondly, even though tolerance can be defined in many ways, there are a lot of people who need to have better understanding on the meaning of tolerance. Through this study, the concept of tolerance is encouraged by embracing mutual respect and understanding as essential values to accept differences in race, gender, religion, etc. in to create harmony and peace in society. Finally, through American Superhero films, the representation of

tolerance can be symbolized through gender and race. The presence of African-American men and women as the main characters and the role of female characters as superhero can give people a picture of equality in gender and race. Further, this perspective is also essential for Indonesia, as one of multicultural countries.

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