



Women's Resistance to Patriarchy in the *Little Women* Movie by Greta Gerwig

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Received: 2026-04-09 Revised: 2026-05-08 Accepted: 2026-05-12</p> <p>Keywords: existential feminism; feminist film; <i>Little Women</i> (2019); patriarchy; women's resistance.</p> <p>DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.10098</p> <p>Corresponding Author: Ayu Sulistiawati sulistiawatiyu233@gmail.com Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung</p>	<p><i>This study examines the representation of patriarchy and women's resistance in the film <i>Little Women</i> (2019) directed by Greta Gerwig. The research aims to analyze how patriarchal norms are portrayed in the film and how the female characters respond to these constraints. The study is grounded in feminist theory, particularly Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism, which emphasizes women's agency in defining their own identities and freedom. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method, using the film as the primary data source. Data were collected through purposive sampling of selected scenes that depict gender relations, dialogue, narrative actions, and visual elements associated with patriarchal structures and acts of resistance. The analysis focuses on cinematic aspects such as dialogue, characterization, spatial arrangement, costume, and symbolic imagery. The findings show that patriarchy in the film is represented through social expectations that prioritize marriage as women's ultimate goal, limit women's professional independence, and reinforce traditional domestic roles. Nevertheless, the March sisters challenge these restrictions through different forms of resistance. Verbal resistance appears through dialogue that rejects patriarchal norms, symbolic resistance emerges through creative and intellectual pursuits, and relational resistance is reflected in the solidarity and mutual support among the sisters. The study concludes that the film portrays women as active agents who negotiate autonomy and redefine their identities within patriarchal constraints.</i></p>

1. Introduction

Film and literature have long been closely interconnected as narrative forms that convey meaning, ideology, and social values. According to Bazin (2005), cinema developed “in symbiosis with literature,” meaning that film evolved alongside literary traditions rather than independently. Both film and the novel function as narrative arts that construct meaning through time and storytelling (Bazin, 2011). Consequently, film should not be understood merely as visual entertainment but also as a form of visual writing that communicates ideas through cinematic language such as framing, editing, and mise-en-scene.

As a cultural medium, film reflects and shapes social ideologies related to identity, power, and gender relations (Wilk, 2024). One of the dominant ideological systems frequently represented in cinema is patriarchy, which privileges men while marginalizing women's roles and autonomy in social life. Feminist film scholars argue that patriarchal ideology historically shaped women's representation in cinema, often positioning women as passive objects rather than active subjects within the narrative (Mulvey, 1975).

Recent studies have increasingly examined how contemporary cinema challenges these patriarchal representations through feminist perspectives. Salsabila, Awaludin, and Assiddiqi (2022), for example, analyzed Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* (2019) using Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory and found that the film subverts traditional cinematic conventions by presenting women as active narrative subjects rather than objects of visual pleasure. Similarly, Sutrisno, Nurhasanah, and Rachmawati (2023) applied Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism to analyze Jo March's struggle for autonomy, interpreting her rejection of conventional marriage as an act of self-definition and resistance against patriarchal expectations. Rorintulus et al. (2024) also explored feminist themes in the film through liberal feminist theory, highlighting Jo March as a symbol of intellectual independence and gender equality.

Other scholars have further explored female empowerment and autonomy within the film's narrative. Samad and Paris (2024) argued that the female characters in *Little Women* represent different stages of existential freedom, demonstrating how women negotiate identity and independence within patriarchal structures. Likewise, Sofia, Chitra, and Geubrina (2024) used liberal feminist theory to examine how the film portrays women's empowerment through education, creativity, and sisterhood. These studies collectively show that *Little Women* (2019) has become a significant cultural text for feminist film analysis. However, most of these studies focus primarily on individual characters especially Jo March as the central representation of feminist resistance.

Despite these valuable contributions, a significant gap remains in examining the collective dimension of female resistance within the film. Previous studies tend to emphasize individual empowerment rather than exploring how the March sisters collectively challenge patriarchal norms through solidarity, dialogue, and symbolic actions. Moreover, limited attention has been given to how cinematic elements such as visual symbolism, mise-en-scène, and narrative structure construct the representation of resistance. This gap indicates the need for a more comprehensive analysis that integrates feminist theory with cinematic interpretation to understand how women's resistance is visually and narratively constructed in the film.

Based on this gap, this study investigates the representation of patriarchy and women's resistance in Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* (2019). The research questions are: (1) How is the patriarchal system represented in the film *Little Women* (2019)? and (2) How is women's resistance against patriarchy represented through the characters and narrative of the film? The objectives of this study are to describe the representation of patriarchal structures and to analyze the forms of women's resistance portrayed in the film.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the collective representation of female resistance through verbal, symbolic, and relational forms of resistance expressed by the March sisters. By integrating existential feminist theory with film analysis, this study contributes to feminist film studies by demonstrating how cinematic storytelling reconstructs female subjectivity and solidarity within a patriarchal context.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative research approach to examine the representation of patriarchal systems and women's resistance in Greta Gerwig's film *Little Women*. Qualitative research is appropriate because the purpose of the study is to interpret meanings, representations, and social phenomena as expressed through narrative, dialogue, and visual symbolism rather than to measure variables numerically. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative research aims to explore and understand the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem, emphasizing interpretation and contextual understanding of textual or visual data.

Research Design

This research uses a descriptive qualitative design. This design is chosen because it allows the researcher to describe and interpret social phenomena in depth through textual and visual analysis. Descriptive qualitative research focuses on providing a comprehensive and straightforward explanation of events or representations observed within a particular context (Lambert & Lambert, 2012).

In this study, the descriptive qualitative approach is suitable because the research analyzes cinematic elements such as dialogue, visual composition, setting, and characterization to understand how patriarchy and women's resistance are represented within the narrative of the film.

Subject and Unit of Analysis

The subject of this research is the film *Little Women*. The unit of analysis consists of selected scenes, dialogues, narrative structures, and visual elements that depict patriarchal ideology or acts of resistance performed by the female characters, particularly Jo, Meg, Amy, and Beth March. This study uses purposive sampling to select approximately 8–12 key scenes that clearly portray gender dynamics and moments of resistance. These scenes include interactions between characters, moments of conflict related to gender expectations, and symbolic visual compositions that illustrate women's struggle for autonomy and self-definition. The selected scenes are categorized into four analytical themes:

1. Representation of patriarchy
2. Verbal resistance
3. Symbolic resistance
4. Relational resistance (solidarity among women)

Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

The data collection technique used in this study is document and media analysis. The researcher collects data by repeatedly watching the film and carefully examining scenes that reflect patriarchal norms and women's resistance. Dialogue transcripts, scene descriptions, and visual elements such as setting, costume, lighting, and character positioning are documented and organized as research data.

The data sources consist of:

1) Primary data:

The primary data come from the film *Little Women*, including its dialogues, narrative structure, visual imagery, and symbolic cinematic elements.

2) Secondary data:

Secondary data include academic books, scholarly journal articles, and previous research related to feminism, patriarchy, existential feminism, and gender representation in film.

The researcher serves as the main research instrument, which is typical in qualitative research. In this role, the researcher identifies relevant scenes, records important dialogues, and interprets visual and narrative elements based on the theoretical framework used in the study. Qualitative research commonly relies on the researcher as the primary instrument for collecting and interpreting textual or visual data.

The data collection process follows several steps:

1. Watching the film multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the narrative.
2. Identifying scenes that represent patriarchal structures or female resistance.
3. Recording relevant dialogue and visual descriptions.
4. Classifying the data according to the research categories.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data analysis in this research follows a qualitative interpretive process. This study adopts the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of four steps:

The analysis process involves several steps:

1. Data collection – gathering relevant scenes, dialogues, and visual elements.
2. Data reduction – selecting and focusing on important data related to patriarchy and resistance.
3. Data display – organizing data into categories such as patriarchy, verbal resistance, symbolic resistance, and relational resistance.

4. Conclusion drawing and verification – interpreting meanings and ensuring validity of findings.

Through these analytical stages, the research reveals how cinematic language including narrative structure, dialogue, and visual symbolism constructs meanings related to women's autonomy and resistance.

3. Result

This section presents the findings of the research regarding the representation of patriarchal systems and women's resistance in *Little Women* (2019) directed by Greta Gerwig. The analysis focuses on selected scenes that illustrate gender power relations and the various forms of resistance performed by the female characters. Based on qualitative descriptive analysis, the findings are categorized into four main themes: (1) representation of patriarchy, (2) verbal resistance, (3) symbolic resistance, and (4) relational resistance.

The analysis reveals that the film constructs patriarchy through social expectations, economic dependency, and traditional gender roles, while the March sisters challenge these norms through dialogue, visual symbolism, and interpersonal solidarity.

Representation of Patriarchy

The analysis indicates that patriarchal ideology in the film is primarily represented through dialogue and social expectations directed toward the female characters. Female success is frequently associated with marriage, domesticity, and dependency on men. Characters such as Aunt March and societal figures embody these expectations by suggesting that women should prioritize marriage over personal ambition or intellectual pursuits. For example, Aunt March tells Jo that she should "marry well and settle down," implying that writing cannot sustain a woman economically.

This dialogue reflects the social structure in which women's economic survival is linked to marriage rather than professional achievement. The film also visually portrays patriarchy through domestic spaces, where women are frequently positioned in settings such as kitchens, drawing rooms, and family parlors. These spaces symbolize the traditional gender division of labor that confines women to domestic roles.

Verbal Resistance

Verbal resistance is one of the most explicit forms of opposition portrayed in the film. Through dialogue, characters openly reject patriarchal expectations and assert their autonomy. Jo March is the primary figure of verbal resistance, frequently expressing dissatisfaction with societal limitations imposed on women. For instance, Jo states that she would rather be "a free spinster and paddle her own canoe," which clearly reflects her refusal to conform to traditional expectations of marriage as the ultimate goal for women.

This statement illustrates her commitment to independence and personal freedom. Another example occurs when Jo rejects Laurie's proposal, explaining that she cannot love him in the way society expects and that she prefers independence over belonging to someone else. These dialogues illustrate existential resistance, where

women actively define their own identities rather than accepting roles assigned by patriarchal norms.

Symbolic Resistance

Symbolic resistance is conveyed through visual elements of the film, particularly through mise-en-scène. Scenes depicting Jo writing alone in her attic workspace represent intellectual freedom and creative autonomy. The attic functions symbolically as a private space where Jo can express herself without societal constraints. Costume design also plays an important role in representing symbolic resistance. Jo often wears simpler and more practical clothing compared to the conventional feminine attire of the period. This costume choice visually reinforces her rejection of traditional gender expectations. Lighting and framing further emphasize Jo's independence. When she is shown writing or working alone, the camera centers her within the frame, highlighting her subjectivity and intellectual agency. These visual elements support the interpretation that the film uses cinematic language to portray women's resistance beyond dialogue.

Relational Resistance

Relational resistance refers to solidarity and mutual support among female characters. The March sisters frequently encourage each other to pursue their aspirations, even when their choices differ. For example, Meg explains to Jo that choosing marriage does not mean abandoning personal dreams. This moment illustrates a form of feminist solidarity in which women respect each other's life choices rather than judging them according to patriarchal standards. The film also portrays sisterhood as a source of emotional strength. Through shared conversations, collaborative activities, and mutual support, the March sisters collectively challenge societal expectations. Their solidarity demonstrates that resistance to patriarchy can occur not only through individual rebellion but also through collective empowerment.

Summary of Findings

The results indicate that *Little Women* (2019) presents a multidimensional portrayal of women's resistance to patriarchy. The film represents patriarchal structures through social norms that restrict women's economic independence and professional aspirations. However, these restrictions are challenged through verbal defiance, symbolic visual elements, and relational solidarity among the female characters.

These findings demonstrate that the film constructs resistance not merely as an individual struggle but also as a collective process in which women support and empower one another to redefine their roles in society.

Table 1. Classification of Patriarchy Representation and Women’s Resistance in Little Women (2019)

Scene Time	Dialogue / Visual Scene	Category
35:34	Aunt March tells Jo that women must marry well	Representation of Patriarchy
1:32:07	Meg explains her dreams are different	Relational Resistance
1:32:50	Jo states she prefers to be a “free spinster”	Verbal Resistance
1:37:57	Jo rejects Laurie’s proposal	Verbal Resistance
1:52:28	Jo writing alone in the attic	Symbolic Resistance
2:03:26	Jo negotiating her book publication	Symbolic Resistance
2:09:02	Final scene of Jo owning her literary work	Symbolic Resistance
TOTAL	Patriarchy Representation	1
	Verbal Resistance	2
	Symbolic Resistance	3
	Relational Resistance	1

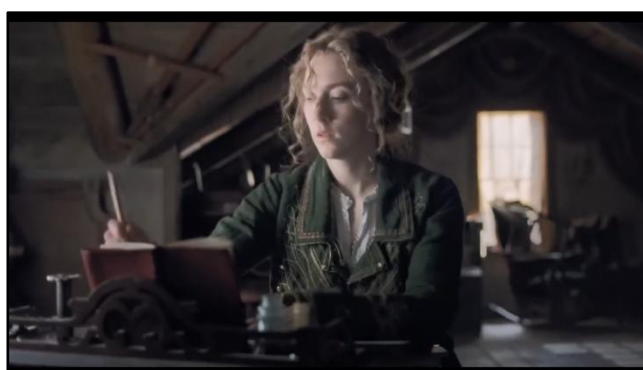


Figure 1. Symbolic Resistance through Jo March Writing in the Attic

The image illustrates Jo March working independently in her attic workspace, surrounded by manuscripts and a candle. This scene visually symbolizes intellectual autonomy and creative freedom, representing resistance to patriarchal expectations that confine women to domestic roles.

Source: Gerwig, G. (Director). (2019). *Little Women* [Film]. Columbia Pictures.

4. Discussion

Representation of Patriarchy in Little Women (2019)

The findings of this study reveal that the patriarchal system in *Little Women* (2019) is represented through social expectations, institutional limitations, and cultural norms that regulate women's roles in the nineteenth-century society depicted in the film. Patriarchy appears primarily through the belief that women's success is measured by marriage rather than intellectual or professional achievement. One example occurs when Aunt March advises Jo that writing will not provide her with financial stability and that she should instead marry well. This statement reflects the dominant patriarchal ideology that positions women's social mobility and economic security within the institution of marriage.

Such representations align with feminist scholarship that explains patriarchy as a social system that privileges male authority and restricts women's opportunities in public and professional spheres. Research on the film also highlights how Jo March experiences gender stereotypes that pressure women to prioritize marriage and domestic life rather than career ambitions.

In the context of cinematic representation, patriarchy is also encoded visually through mise-en-scene elements such as domestic spaces, costume design, and framing. Scenes set within the March household emphasize the domestic environment traditionally associated with women, reflecting how patriarchal culture confines female activity within private spaces. However, Greta Gerwig simultaneously uses these spaces to question patriarchal assumptions by portraying them as places of intellectual exchange, creativity, and sisterhood rather than passive domesticity.

Furthermore, patriarchal ideology is also reinforced through economic structures. Women in the film face limited opportunities for financial independence, forcing them to rely on marriage as a form of social security. Amy March's reflections on marriage as an economic contract illustrate this structural constraint. This representation supports feminist analyses that emphasize how patriarchal societies maintain gender inequality through institutionalized economic dependence. This finding is consistent with recent studies which show that *Little Women* portrays patriarchy through marriage expectations, economic dependency, and domestic roles imposed on women (Puspitasari, 2024; Angelia & Widyaningrum, 2024).

Forms of Women's Resistance in the Narrative

The analysis identifies several forms of female resistance expressed by the March sisters. These forms include verbal resistance, symbolic resistance, and relational resistance, which together construct a multidimensional portrayal of women challenging patriarchal expectations.

Verbal Resistance

Verbal resistance appears when female characters directly challenge patriarchal discourse. Jo March's dialogue rejecting marriage as a compulsory life goal exemplifies this form of resistance. Her statement that she would rather remain independent than conform to societal expectations reflects a conscious rejection of patriarchal norms. From an existential feminist perspective, such resistance represents the process of self-definition emphasized by Simone de Beauvoir. Beauvoir argues that women must transcend socially imposed identities in order to achieve authentic

existence. Jo's determination to pursue a writing career instead of marriage illustrates this philosophical principle.

Feminist studies of the film similarly note that Jo's ambition and independence demonstrate her refusal to conform to traditional gender stereotypes imposed on women. Therefore, verbal resistance functions not only as personal defiance but also as a broader ideological critique of gender norms that restrict women's autonomy. This form of resistance aligns with findings by Putri and Al Hakim (2024), who argue that Jo March's dialogue reflects independence and rejection of traditional gender roles.

Symbolic Resistance through Visual Representation

Symbolic resistance in the film is conveyed through visual imagery and mise-en-scène rather than explicit dialogue. One example is the recurring scene of Jo writing in the attic surrounded by manuscripts and books. The attic symbolizes intellectual freedom and creative autonomy, contrasting with the domestic expectations imposed upon women. From a film studies perspective, mise-en-scène elements such as spatial arrangement, lighting, and costume can communicate ideological meanings embedded within cinematic narratives. In *Little Women*, these visual components construct a symbolic language that represents women's aspiration for independence.

The use of writing spaces, artistic activities, and creative expression visually communicates Jo's resistance to patriarchal restrictions. Moreover, the film's cinematography frequently centers female characters within the frame, shifting the visual perspective from the traditional male gaze to a more empathetic representation of women's experiences. This visual strategy emphasizes the subjectivity of the female characters rather than portraying them as objects of observation. Symbolic resistance is also supported by recent research showing that visual elements in the film represent feminist ideas through creative expression and autonomy (Putri & Nugroho, 2024).

Relational Resistance and Female Solidarity

Another significant finding of this research is the presence of relational resistance, which refers to acts of solidarity among women. Unlike previous analyses that focus primarily on Jo as an individual feminist figure, this study highlights how the collective relationship among the March sisters' functions as a form of resistance against patriarchal norms. The film portrays each sister as representing different responses to patriarchal society. Meg values family life, Amy pursues artistic recognition and financial stability, Beth embodies moral compassion, and Jo seeks intellectual independence. Despite their differing aspirations, the sisters support one another's choices, illustrating that feminism can take diverse forms.

Scholars have also observed that *Little Women* emphasizes the importance of sisterhood and mutual support among women in negotiating societal expectations. The narrative demonstrates how collective bonds among women strengthen their ability to challenge patriarchal constraints. This finding supports feminist theory that views solidarity as a crucial element in resisting systemic oppression. Rather than presenting resistance solely as individual rebellion, the film portrays it as a collaborative process in which women encourage and empower one another. The importance of sisterhood and solidarity is also emphasized in recent studies, which highlight that the March sisters represent collective resistance against patriarchal norms (Riani, 2025).

Existential Freedom and the Redefinition of Womanhood

The final stage of analysis interprets how the acts of resistance performed by the characters lead to the reconstruction of female identity. Through existential feminist theory, the characters' actions represent the process of achieving freedom and self-definition beyond patriarchal expectations. Jo's authorship symbolizes intellectual autonomy and the power of storytelling as a tool of resistance. Her success as a writer challenges the patriarchal belief that women cannot achieve professional recognition.

Meanwhile, Amy's decision to negotiate marriage on her own terms demonstrates strategic agency within structural limitations. Together, these narratives illustrate that female empowerment in the film does not follow a single path but emerges through diverse choices and experiences. By presenting multiple forms of resistance verbal, symbolic, and relational *Little Women* redefines womanhood as a dynamic process shaped by freedom, creativity, and solidarity. Ultimately, the findings confirm that Greta Gerwig's adaptation transforms the original literary narrative into a contemporary feminist discourse. Through narrative structure, dialogue, and visual symbolism, the film reconstructs women's subjectivity and highlights their capacity to resist patriarchal structures.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the representation of patriarchy and women's resistance in the film *Little Women* directed by Greta Gerwig. Using a qualitative descriptive approach and grounded in the existential feminist theory of Simone de Beauvoir, the research analyzed selected scenes, dialogues, and visual elements to understand how patriarchal ideology and women's resistance are constructed within the film's narrative and cinematic language.

The findings reveal that patriarchy in the film is primarily represented through social norms that associate women's success with marriage, restrict women's economic independence, and reinforce traditional domestic roles. These patriarchal expectations are conveyed not only through dialogue such as the advice given by Aunt March but also through visual elements including domestic settings, costume design, and character positioning within the frame. Such representations illustrate how nineteenth-century social structures confined women's opportunities for self-determination and professional autonomy.

Despite these restrictions, the film portrays women as active agents who challenge patriarchal norms through multiple forms of resistance. First, verbal resistance appears through dialogues in which female characters openly question societal expectations, particularly through Jo March's rejection of marriage as the ultimate goal for women. Second, symbolic resistance is expressed through cinematic elements such as *mise-en-scène*, spatial composition, and scenes depicting creative activities like writing and artistic production. These visual representations symbolize women's intellectual freedom and independence. Third, relational resistance emerges through the solidarity among the March sisters, demonstrating that resistance to patriarchy can also occur collectively through emotional support, mutual respect, and shared aspirations.

Through these forms of resistance, the film reconstructs female subjectivity by presenting women as individuals capable of negotiating identity and autonomy within patriarchal structures. The narrative emphasizes that women's empowerment is not limited to a single path but can manifest through diverse life choices, including

intellectual independence, artistic ambition, or family life. In this sense, the film contributes to contemporary feminist discourse by portraying women as active subjects rather than passive recipients of patriarchal norms.

However, this research has several limitations. First, the analysis focuses on a limited number of selected scenes from a single film, which restricts the scope of interpretation and may not capture all dimensions of gender representation within the narrative. Second, the study relies primarily on textual and visual analysis of cinematic elements without incorporating audience reception or production perspectives. Third, the theoretical framework mainly uses existential feminism, which may limit the exploration of other relevant perspectives such as intersectional feminism or postmodern feminist theory. Therefore, the findings should be understood within the specific analytical context of this research and should not be generalized beyond the film analyzed.

Based on the limitations and implications of this study, several recommendations can be proposed for future research.

First, future studies may expand the scope of analysis by comparing different film adaptations of *Little Women* or examining other feminist films to explore how representations of patriarchy and women's resistance evolve across different historical and cultural contexts. Comparative studies may provide deeper insight into how cinematic narratives reconstruct gender relations over time.

Second, further research could incorporate additional theoretical perspectives such as intersectional feminism, which examines how gender oppression interacts with other social identities such as class, race, and culture. Integrating intersectional analysis may provide a more comprehensive understanding of how women's experiences are shaped by multiple social structures (Crenshaw, 2021).

Third, future researchers may employ alternative methodologies, such as audience reception studies, discourse analysis, or digital ethnography, to explore how viewers interpret feminist messages in films. Understanding audience responses can reveal how feminist narratives influence public perceptions of gender equality and women's empowerment in contemporary society (Gill, 2022).

Finally, further research could examine the role of contemporary female filmmakers in reshaping gender representation in cinema. Recent studies suggest that women directors often challenge traditional cinematic perspectives by emphasizing female subjectivity and lived experiences, thereby transforming film into a medium for feminist discourse and social critique (Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenberg, 2020). Investigating these trends may contribute to a broader understanding of how feminist filmmaking continues to evolve in the modern media landscape.

6. Acknowledgement

First and foremost, the author would like to express the deepest gratitude to Almighty God for His blessings, grace, and guidance, which have made it possible to complete this journal article as part of the academic process toward obtaining a bachelor's degree. With great respect and sincerity, the author would like to convey profound appreciation to Mr. Dr. Ujang Suyatman, M.Ag and Mrs. Agry Pramita, M.A as academic supervisors, who have generously devoted their time, energy, and thoughts in providing guidance, direction, and invaluable feedback throughout the process of writing this journal. Their dedication and patience have been among the most

important factors in the successful completion of this work. The author would also like to express heartfelt gratitude to beloved parents for their endless prayers, love, sacrifices, and unwavering support. Their tireless efforts have been the greatest source of strength for the author in completing this academic journey and achieving a bachelor's degree.

The author also considers it important to appreciate herself for all the effort, prayers, perseverance, and determination maintained throughout this long process. This journey has not been easy; however, with strong determination and hard work, every challenge has been overcome to reach this final stage. Furthermore, the author would like to thank all extended family members for their continuous moral support and prayers despite their busy lives. Their presence has been a meaningful source of encouragement. Sincere appreciation is also extended to beloved friends, especially Devi Julianti and Sela Khusnurrohmah, who have always been a source of motivation and strength in facing various challenges. Special thanks are also given to Akhdanil Ghifari for being a loyal companion throughout this academic journey.

The author would also like to thank Anisa Nurhidayanti (Ica), who became the author's first close friend and remained by her side throughout the four-year journey, as well as Arila Nur Rochman, Miftahul Khasanah (Ana), and Retno Nindya Khoirunnisa (Mbak Nin) for being part of meaningful experiences and cherished memories during college life. Gratitude is also extended to Azzahra Fadiliawati Agustin (Ara) as a fellow friend from the Jabodetabek area, as well as boarding house friends Gea Amalia, Saskia Asila Zahwa, Rifa Musyarrofah, and Lia Handayani who have always been present in both joyful and difficult times, offering support and companionship. Special appreciation is also extended to all friends who cannot be mentioned individually for their togetherness, support, and presence that have greatly helped and accompanied the author throughout these four years.

The author also expresses sincere thanks to Nala, a beloved orange cat, who provided emotional support during difficult times. Finally, the author hopes that this journal will be beneficial, broaden knowledge, and serve as a source of inspiration for its readers. May all the kindness and support given to the author be abundantly rewarded. Thank you very much. Wishing everyone continued health and happiness.

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