

THE REPRESENTATION OF MOTHERHOOD IN THE FILM “IF I HAD LEGS I’D KICK YOU”

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ABSTRACT

Mainstream media have long portrayed mothers as patient, selfless, and able to balance caregiving with other responsibilities, while contemporary cinema increasingly shows the exhaustion and vulnerability behind this ideal. This study examines how motherhood is represented in If I Had Legs I'd Kick You (2025), directed by Mary Bronstein, and whether the film challenges, negotiates, or reproduces the ideology of idealized motherhood. Using a critical paradigm and a qualitative approach, the study analyzes eight selected scenes through John Fiske's levels of reality, representation, and ideology, supported by Sharon Hays' concept of intensive mothering and the concepts of maternal vulnerability and double burden. The findings reveal four connected themes: the pressure of intensive motherhood, maternal vulnerability and the emotional burden of motherhood, double burden and the unequal distribution of care, and maternal identity, agency, and the struggle for control. The film challenges the image of the calm and endlessly capable mother by making maternal exhaustion, guilt, and the need for personal space visible. However, it does not fully reject the ideology behind Linda's suffering, since the expectation of constant maternal responsibility remains internalized by the protagonist. The film is therefore best understood as negotiating idealized motherhood, exposing its personal costs without offering a complete alternative to it.

Keywords: *motherhood; intensive mothering; maternal vulnerability; double burden; John Fiske's semiotics*

ABSTRAK

Media arus utama telah lama menggambarkan ibu sebagai sosok yang sabar, rela berkorban, dan mampu menyeimbangkan pengasuhan dengan tanggung jawab lain, sementara sinema kontemporer semakin memperlihatkan kelelahan dan kerentanan di balik gambaran ideal tersebut. Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana keibuan direpresentasikan dalam film *If I Had Legs I'd Kick You* (2025) karya Mary Bronstein, serta apakah film tersebut menantang, menegosiasikan, atau mereproduksi ideologi keibuan ideal. Dengan paradigma kritis dan pendekatan kualitatif, penelitian ini menganalisis delapan adegan terpilih melalui level realitas, representasi, dan ideologi John Fiske, didukung konsep *intensive mothering* Sharon Hays serta konsep kerentanan maternal dan beban ganda. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan empat tema yang saling berkaitan, yaitu tekanan *intensive motherhood*, kerentanan maternal dan beban emosional keibuan, beban ganda dan pembagian pengasuhan yang timpang, serta identitas maternal, agensi, dan perjuangan untuk memegang kendali. Film ini menantang citra ibu yang tenang dan selalu mampu dengan memperlihatkan kelelahan, rasa bersalah, dan kebutuhan akan ruang pribadi. Namun, film ini tidak sepenuhnya menolak ideologi yang menjadi sumber penderitaan Linda karena ekspektasi tanggung jawab maternal yang terus-menerus tetap terinternalisasi dalam diri tokoh utama. Dengan demikian, film ini paling tepat dipahami sebagai negosiasi terhadap keibuan ideal.

Kata Kunci: keibuan; intensive mothering; kerentanan maternal; beban ganda; semi-otika John Fiske

INTRODUCTION

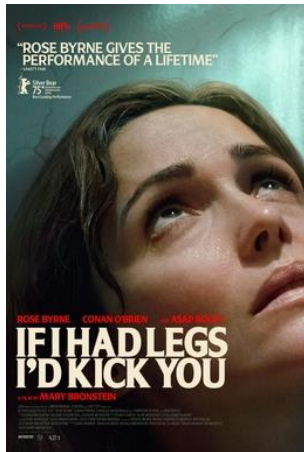
The idea of the “ideal mother” has long been understood by feminist scholars as a cultural invention rather than a natural fact. Adrienne Rich (1976) distinguished motherhood as a personal experience from motherhood as an institution imposed on women, while Sharon Hays (1996) described the dominant model of “intensive mothering” as child-centred, emotionally absorbing, expert-guided, and demanding enormous time and energy. Hays argued that this model creates a contradiction: women are asked to be selfless at home while being competitive in the workplace. This contradiction has intensified as mothers are now watched through parenting books, online forums, and the image of the “supermom” who appears to do everything effortlessly (Henderson et al., 2010).

The burden behind this ideal is real and often invisible. A 2024 social experiment by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Indonesian publication Magdalene tracked the domestic and caregiving hours of five Indonesian women for one week. Four of them logged more than 40 hours of unpaid care work, exceeding Indonesia’s legal standard for full-time paid work, and two recorded more than 100 total hours when paid and unpaid work were combined. Most participants still regarded

caregiving as a natural female duty rather than an unequal social expectation (ILO & Magdalene, 2024), illustrating how the ideology of idealized motherhood persuades women that a heavy burden is simply part of who they are.

Media play an important role in circulating this ideal, because repeated images can make certain forms of mothering appear normal or desirable. Recent scholarship, however, identifies a shift in contemporary screen culture toward more critical portrayals of maternal ambivalence, exhaustion, and conflict (Liddy & Flynn, 2025), as seen in films such as *Tully*, *Pieces of a Woman*, and *Nightbitch. If I Had Legs I'd Kick You* (2025), written and directed by Mary Bronstein and distributed by A24, follows Linda (Rose Byrne), a therapist caring for her chronically ill daughter while her husband is largely absent (Figure 1). The film premiered at the 2025 Sundance Film Festival, won 39 awards from 77 nominations, received a 92% positive rating from 225 critics on Rotten Tomatoes, and was screened in Indonesia through Jakarta World Cinema 2025. Byrne’s performance earned the Silver Bear for Best Leading Performance and the Independent Spirit Award, among other honours.

Figure 1. The Film Poster



Source: A24 (2025)

Bronstein has stated that the film was inspired by caring for her own sick daughter but is “emotionally true” rather than autobiographical; for example, a hospital screen that originally showed glowing numbers becomes a room flooded with red light. This deliberate reshaping of experience into cinematic signs makes the film suitable for semiotic analysis. Previous Indonesian studies using Fiske’s semiotics have examined motherhood in *Mrs Chatterjee vs Norway* (Radila & Shasrini, 2024), *Turning Red* (Syaifullah, 2023), *Room* (Maulati & Prasetyo, 2017), and *Sabtu Bersama Bapak* (Andhani & Putri, 2017), but they mainly frame motherhood as struggle, sacrifice, or emotional bonding and have not connected it with intensive mothering. This study therefore asks: (1) how is motherhood represented in *If I Had Legs I'd Kick You* (2025)? and (2) does the film negotiate, challenge, or reproduce the ideology of idealized motherhood?

RESEARCH PURPOSE

This study aims to describe how motherhood is represented in *If I Had Legs I'd Kick You* (2025) and to analyze whether the film challenges, negotiates, or reproduces the ideology of idealized motherhood.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical Paradigm

This study uses a critical paradigm, which views media representation as connected to social, cultural, and ideological structures. Motherhood is understood as a socially constructed role shaped by expectations of caregiving, self-sacrifice, and responsibility toward children, and the study questions the ideology underlying its representation rather than only describing it.

Intensive Mothering

Hays (1996) explains that intensive mothering requires parenting to be child-centred, guided by expert advice, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive, and financially expensive, making the mother primarily responsible for how the child turns out. In this study, the concept is not used to assume that the film supports or rejects idealized motherhood, but as a framework for identifying expectations such as constant availability, emotional responsibility, and the prioritization of the child’s needs.

Maternal Vulnerability and Double Burden

Maternal vulnerability refers to the emotional, psychological, and physical struggles of a mother within the responsibilities and expectations of motherhood, such as exhaustion, anxiety, guilt, isolation, and emotional instability. It is not automatically read as resistance, but as part of the film's broader construction of motherhood. Double burden refers to the overlap of paid work with unpaid care and household responsibilities, involving physical, emotional, and cognitive demands. Research shows that mothers often adjust their employment to accommodate family needs, which can reinforce the gendered division of labour at home (Webber & Williams, 2008).

John Fiske's Semiotics

Fiske (1987) explains that television and film can be read through three levels of codes. The level of reality covers what is directly seen and heard, such as appearance, behaviour, gesture, expression, setting, and speech. The level of representation covers technical codes such as camera work, lighting, editing, sound, and narrative. The level of ideology connects these codes to broader social values, which in this study concern the ideal of motherhood.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study is a qualitative study using John Fiske's semiotic approach. The research subject is *If I Had Legs I'd Kick You* (2025). Primary data consist of scenes, screenshots, dialogue, props, and other visual and verbal elements from the film and its script, while secondary data are drawn from books, journal articles, and previous studies. Data were collected through documentation and literature review. Eight scenes were selected based on their relevance to Linda's experience as a mother, her emotional condition, caregiving responsibilities, and relationships (Table 1), and were then analyzed at the levels of reality, representation, and ideology.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the eight scenes produced four connected themes, discussed below at the levels of reality, representation, and ideology.

Table 1. Selected Scenes

Selected Scene	Relevant Concept	Script
Linda is overwhelmed by the sound of the medical machine in the hotel room	Hays: continuous surveillance	Scene 7
Linda attempts to cope at night while carrying the baby monitor	Hays: limited personal space	Scenes 9–10, 41, 46
Linda argues with her husband on the phone	Double burden: gendered communication	Scene 14
A patient leaves her baby with Linda	Double burden: gendered division of labour	Scenes 47–52
Linda breaks down during the parents' group	Hays: maternal vulnerability	Scenes 67–69
Linda reveals her past abortion to her therapist	Maternal identity: agency	Scene 70
Linda removes her child's feeding tube	Hays: maternal agency	Scene 85
Linda is unable to escape through the sea	Maternal vulnerability	Scenes 96–97

Source: Researcher's analysis

1. The Pressure of Intensive Motherhood

In Scene 7, Linda is asleep in a dark hotel room when the beeping of her daughter's medical machine grows louder and faster until it wakes her. At the level of reality, she gets up unsteadily and immediately attends to the machine, while the medical pole, tubing, and feeding bag turn the room into a caregiving space. At the level of representation, the darkness makes the red light of the machine one of the few visible elements, and the rising mechanical sound makes the audience experience the interruption with her. Because the beeping recurs “as usual” in later scenes, the pressure feels continuous rather than exceptional.

In Scenes 9–10, 41, and 46, Linda tries to create moments for herself by smoking, listening to music, drinking wine, and talking to James, yet the baby monitor is always beside her (Figure 2). The music from her phone mixes with the sounds from the monitor, and the hotel remains visible in the distance from the dark baseball field. The monitor thus becomes a symbol of a responsibility that follows her wherever she goes.

Figure 2. Linda Carrying the Baby Monitor

Source: If I Had Legs I'd Kick You (2025)

The pressure reaches its deepest level in Scenes 67–69. When Dr. Spring tells the parents' group that self-blame does not help their children, Linda insists that it is her fault, stands up, and declares that she and her child have failed, before struggling to breathe inside her car. The irony is that a space designed to reduce guilt becomes the place where her guilt is exposed most strongly. At the level of ideology, the three scenes show intensive mothering operating on three levels: the machine represents constant physical availability, the monitor represents the loss of personal space, and Linda's guilt represents the internalization of maternal responsibility (Hays, 1996).

2. Maternal Vulnerability and the Emotional Burden of Motherhood

In Scene 85, disturbed by the constant noise of the machine, Linda pulls the feeding tube from her daughter's abdomen and unplugs the machine, leaving the room silent for the first time. When the child says her stomach is wet, Linda replies, "I made everything better," and in the film's surreal logic the opening appears to close. Close-ups and a slow zoom focus on the child's abdomen and Linda's mixed expression of fear, fascination, and relief, while the opening visually echoes the hole in the hotel ceiling. This moment can be read as maternal agency, since Linda refuses to follow the medical process passively. Yet it also reveals vulnerability, because her agency comes from believing that she alone must "fix" her child.

In Scenes 96–97, Linda repeatedly runs into the sea at night, but the waves push her back onto the shore until the final wave becomes supernatural. She then enters a "void" where her child's voice gradually comes closer, calling "Mommy." The repeated failed attempts visualize her inability to escape, while the child's voice shows that motherhood remains present even when the child is not visible. The maternal bond works in two directions: it gives Linda a reason to return, but it also leaves her no space outside her maternal role.

Agency and vulnerability therefore exist together, and her determination to control her child's condition is part of what makes her vulnerable.

3. Double Burden and the Unequal Distribution of Care

In Scene 14, Linda argues on the phone with her husband Charles while continuing to feed their daughter according to the medical program. Charles repeatedly uses "we," "us," and "our," while Linda answers, "There is no WE here there is ME" and "I am NOT a housewife. I work too." Charles reminds her of their agreement that she would take care of the apartment and child, and even suggests that she enjoy the hotel, beach, pool, and maid service. He is present only as a voice, while Linda physically performs the care. The contrast between his language of shared responsibility and her actual labour shows how double burden becomes invisible when care is described as "ours" but performed by one person.

In Scenes 47–52, Linda's patient Caroline leaves her baby, Riley, at Linda's office and does not return. Linda, described in the script as "terrified," holds the crying baby, searches the bathroom and hallway, asks colleagues for help, and calls Riley's father, Nick, who refuses to come before five o'clock because "I'm at work," while Linda still has another patient waiting. She

finally hands Riley to the police. Across both scenes, men use work as a reason for limited involvement, while Linda's work is expected to bend around care, and care also passes from one woman to another when support is absent. This supports the view that the double burden stems from a gendered organization of care rather than a personal failure (Webber & Williams, 2008).

4. Maternal Identity, Agency, and the Struggle for Control

In Scene 70, Linda lies in a fetal position on her therapist's sofa and, after a long silence, reveals that she had been pregnant twice and had a surgical abortion almost twenty years earlier. Crying and struggling to breathe, she says, "I am one of those people who wasn't supposed to be a mom" and later, "I am not a mom." The therapist remains silent for a long time and then ends their therapeutic relationship. The long opening silence, the gradual change from a closed posture to sitting up, and the escalating emotion construct a movement from silence to disclosure. The scene does not suggest that the abortion caused her crisis or that she regrets it; rather, her past becomes part of how she questions her legitimacy as a mother when she cannot meet the ideal. Her decision to tell her story shows agency, but the lack of support leaves her vulnerability largely unanswered.

5. Negotiating Idealized Motherhood

Taken together, the four themes show that Linda's motherhood is shaped by tensions between responsibility and personal needs, care and exhaustion, and agency and vulnerability. The film challenges the conventional image of the calm, selfless, and endlessly capable mother by making exhaustion, frustration, unhealthy coping, and the desire to escape visible, in line with the shift in contemporary screen culture toward more complex maternal narratives (Liddy & Flynn, 2025). At the same time, it does not fully reject the ideology behind Linda's suffering. The expectation of constant maternal responsibility remains internalized: Linda monitors her child, measures her worth by her child's progress, and is drawn back to her maternal role even when she tries to escape. Unlike earlier studies that present motherhood mainly as sacrifice or unconditional love, this film exposes the personal cost of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) without offering a complete alternative to it.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that:

1. *If I Had Legs I'd Kick You* (2025) represents motherhood through four connected themes: the pressure of intensive motherhood, maternal vulnerability and emotional burden, double burden and the unequal distribution of care, and

maternal identity, agency, and the struggle for control. Motherhood is presented as a complex experience rather than a simple image of love and self-sacrifice.

2. The film negotiates the ideology of idealized motherhood. It challenges the ideal by making maternal exhaustion, guilt, and the need for personal space visible, yet shows that the expectation of constant responsibility remains powerful and internalized by the protagonist.
3. Contemporary representations of motherhood can appear to challenge traditional ideals while still carrying the expectations that make those ideals powerful.

RECOMMENDATION

1. **Academic Recommendation.** This study is limited to one American film and to textual analysis shaped by the researcher's perspective. Future studies may compare this film with other portrayals of "imperfect" motherhood such as *Tully* or *Pieces of a Woman*, use audience reception approaches to examine how mothers interpret such films, or examine Indonesian and other non-Western films to see how intensive mothering operates in different cultural settings.

2. Practical Recommendation.

Filmmakers and media creators are encouraged to continue telling honest stories about motherhood, including exhaustion, guilt, and self-doubt, showing that a mother can care deeply while also being overwhelmed.

3. **Social Recommendation.** Audiences are encouraged to watch films about mothers more critically, noticing when a struggling mother is still measured against the standard of the perfect mother, and to question why caregiving continues to be treated primarily as a mother's responsibility.

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