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THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE MOVIE *THE BREADWINNER*

Deta Maria Sri Darta and Diah Kristina

Kristen Satya Wacana University and Sebelas Maret University
deta.darta@staff.uksw.edu and kristina_diah@yahoo.com

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Abstract

This article would like to present how women were defined in the movie, both by male and female characters. Mills (1998) provides a tool to help the readers understanding the style of a writer through her choices of words, sentences, and even in the discourse level. A novel based movie which won and was nominated in several awards, *The Breadwinner*, was full of portrayal of women in the setting of Afghanistan under the Taliban rule. The tragic story was beautifully wrapped under the animated movie produced to show the real picture towards the world. The data are in the form of words, sentences and discourse spoken by male and female characters that represent the depiction of women. The data obtained are examined with the view of Sara Mills theory. It is found that in the movie, the women are represented as two opposing aspects: women representation as an object of man domination, and women as the subject who is able to speak out her mind and to decide independently.

Keywords: depiction, feminist stylistics, *The Breadwinner*, women

Introduction

As one artifact of how language is used by human to utter her idea, a text might carry more than the idea itself; it also represents the ideology that the writer believes. Van Dijk (2015, p. 466) says that “critical discourse analysis is discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context”. It means that critical discourse analysis studies the production and maintenance of social-power misuse and inequality. Moreover, Ilinuha et al. (2013) in their article on critical discourse analysis argue that

the issue of identity questions the interrelationship between particular entities such as society, religion and culture. Understanding the changing issue of how people express themselves related to both social and cultural discourse seems necessary in order to achieve a constructive communication. (p. 262)

It means that the text, its producer, and readers are interrelated one another. By understanding the text produced, readers will be able to see what sort of identity that the producer would like to be related to. Through text, the producer can also

communicate to the readers and introduce a certain ideology without having a direct contact.

Texts are not immune to forces outside the texts, as Mills stated that “texts are invaded by the social cultural norms, by ideologies, by history, by economic forces, by fashions, by gender and racial stereotyping, and so on” (1998, p. 157). However, this does not mean that the author does not have any power or control over her work, rather that she is also subject to the interaction with those forces. Through analyzing the language that is used in the text, the readers will understand the meaning beyond the lines. To do so, the readers need tools, one of it is critical discourse analysis or CDA. According to Fairclough and Wodak (1997), CDA sees discourse as a social practice. It means that there is a kind of dialogue between a discursive event and situation, institution, social structure that set the event.

Power is an important concept CDA. Using language as the vehicle, power has the capacity to implement and maintain a certain structure in society. Thus, studying the language used by a text critically, readers are able to locate power and how the power addresses them as readers. It shows the close relation between text and power, while CDA helps readers to scrutinize the text and withdraw themselves from being taken into the text as the power wants. CDA aims to reveal the hidden agenda of a text and suggests the readers not to accept anything as it is.

The Breadwinner (2017) was chosen as the text to analyze because of it was based on a true story. This movie is an animated drama movie directed by Nora Twomey and produced by Angelina Jolie. The movie was nominated as Best Animated Feature at the 90th Academy Awards. It is based on a bestselling novel written by Deborah Ellis, who had witnessed similar pictures in real life in Afghanistan under the control of Taliban. Though the story as well as the movie aim to show how women survive without the existence of men in Afghanistan contexts, still in some parts of the movie, the male domination lingers.

The purpose of this article is to find the representation of women by female and male characters in the movie. This article, thus explores how women are defined by men, how they are treated, and how they perceive themselves in the movie *The Breadwinner*. This article also investigates the subject-object position as well as reader position that are the main points of Feminist Stylistics, a CDA proposed by Sara Mills.

Feminist Stylistic by Sara Mills

Feminist Stylistic Approach deals with the representation of women in a text. This theory was proposed by Sara Mills (1998) to prove how women are often marginalized in social life even in a text. By looking at the words and sentences produced in a text to represent women, we can tell the ideology of the text writer.

This approach aims to explore the text writer’s assumption or ideology through her/his writing style. Not only that, this approach also recognizes the actor position in a text, which one is the subject and which is the object. The third aim is to criticize how a writer and a reader are positioned in a text. The readers’ expectation, their values, political affiliation, belief, and norms play an important role in presenting a text to the readers. And the fourth to see a person position through the narrative style and structure (1998, p.13).

Mills proposes three level of analysis (62 - 156) as follows:

- a. Word level analysis, focusing on sexism language and its meaning in the text.
- b. Sentence level analysis, looking at naming, ready made phrase, metaphor, transitivity choice, jokes/humor which carry ideology that look down on female.
- c. Discourse level analysis, scrutinizing the character/role, fragmentation, focalization and schemata.

Besides analysing the actor position in the text, Mills also sees how writers and readers are addressed by the text. The unfair representations of female are seen from two main points subject-object position and reader position. Considering the subject-object position, Mills believes that media is not neutral. It is affected by the position of power around it, that is, the text might represents female as object due to male domination over the text creation. Meanwhile, reader position point sees how the readers of the text are addressed by the text, whether they are considered as female or male. This is important to see what ideology the writer plays throughout the text.

Method

The data was taken from the movie entitled *The Breadwinner*. The words and sentences taken were those related to represent women in Afghanistan. The English subtitle of the movie was used to help locating and understanding the words and sentences well. The novel *Parvana* was used as a supplement to the data taken from the movie, since the movie is made based on the novel written by Deborah Ellis.

This study employs some procedures. First English subtitle was scrutinized to decide which words and sentences belong to the data. Then the data were categorized according to the speaker: male and female. The data were also classified into words, sentences, and discourse to match the theory proposed by Sara Mills. Next step was interpreting the words, sentences, and discourse found to see the pattern that can be used to conclude the style of the writer. The data taken from the movie was accompanied by the frames captured from the movie to give a clear understanding and authentic data. To enrich the discussion, the data obtained was compared to the data taken from the novel.

Findings and Discussion

The finding and discussion will be presented under several sub-categories. The first is the representation of woman seen from several points of view and the second is discussion of the position of subject – object as well as the position of reader, and the third is the text interpretation in general.

Representation of women

The discussion of women representation in the movie *The Breadwinner* begins with the representation done by male character. The setting of the movie was Afghanistan in the era of Taliban. Being conquered by Taliban, the people of Afghanistan had to follow the rule, the order that was set by the conqueror. The rules were mostly captivated women and children living in Afghanistan. Some rules for women can be concluded from several frames in the movie through the dialogues spoken by male characters that obey Taliban. The main rule was that women must not go out of the house without men. This rule resulted to several

conditions, one of which was that no women were seen in the market. The economics activities were done by men, while women would stay and wait at home. The sellers must not sell things to women. It was proven by the frames taken from the movie.



6

00:01:55,920 --> 00:01:57,832

I saw you serve a woman!

It was stated in the movie, Taliban, represented by male character, had already made a rule for women. It was said that they had determined a specific dignity for women. The complete rule can be seen as follow:

70

00:04:50,480 --> 00:04:53,757

We have determined
specific dignity for women!

71

00:04:53,760 --> 00:04:55,592

Women should not go outside

72

00:04:55,600 --> 00:04:58,069

and attract
unnecessary attention!

73

00:04:58,120 --> 00:04:59,998

If a woman shows herself,

74

00:05:00,000 --> 00:05:02,605

she will be cursed
by Islamic Sharia

75

00:05:02,640 --> 00:05:04,757

and should never
expect to go to heaven.

Disobeying this rules, women were not going to heaven after they past away.

The sympathizer of Taliban checked the market and watched if anyone disobey the rule. If women have to go out of their house, they should be accompanied by their husband or brother. Even when the women have no choice, whenever they disobeyed this rule, they would be punished by being beaten in the street and being told to go home, “the place where they belong” according to Taliban rule.



230
00:13:28,240 --> 00:13:31,074
Why are you out here by
yourself? Where is your husband?



231
00:13:31,160 --> 00:13:32,913
- I... I have no choice!
- It's not permitted to be



232
00:13:32,920 --> 00:13:35,037
out here without your
husband or your brother.

From the frames above, it can be seen that whenever going out, women have to wear Burkha (a cloth to cover their head). This Burkha does not allow the women to see the road clearly, since it only consists a small net in the eyes part that gives a limited view.

One of male character, Idrees, considered women as a kind of thing that should be kept away from the crowd. It is seen from the expression he said when he saw Parvana in the market. Idress said that a girl should not draw attention to herself:



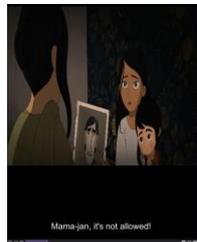
97
00:05:55,440 --> 00:05:57,238
She's drawing attention
to herself!



98
00:05:57,240 --> 00:05:59,277
She should be at home,
not displaying herself

The word display shows that women was represented as a thing.

The next discussion on representation of women is taken from utterances spoken by female characters. Female characters in the movie were depicted to be submissive to Taliban rule. One example was when Parvana disagreed to go with her mother to find her father:



217

00:12:05,680 --> 00:12:07,717

Mama-jan, it's not allowed!

Women were also portrayed as stereotype of having long hair (which she has to take care of), doing the cleaning and taking care of food and clothes. They also had to be ready to become a 'gift' from a family presented to another family who had male that was looking for a wife. Parvana's sister had to be ready and willing when her mother told her to marry their cousin from other city in order to survive.

Female characters are also looked down for their existence as human being equals to men. A simple scene when Parvana took raisins, Sorraya, her sister, forbade her to eat them. Soraya said that the raisins were for Zaki, their younger brother. The family ate together, but the father (man) should take their portion first. Although the family did not agree to the Taliban rule, they still maintain the patriarchy within their family. The conservation to the patriarchy was done by female characters.

However, the female character of Parvana was also portrayed differently. Losing her father and seeing her mother was beaten by male in the street, Parvana gained her courage to go to the market to buy food for their family. Instead of getting some food, she lost all the money she had. After a night of deep consideration, she cut her hair and wore her late brother clothes, pretended to be a boy. She went to the market and succeeded to buy some food for her family. She gained confident and went to the market everyday to find a job and becoming the breadwinner for her family.

As a girl Parvana had an important role within her family. Although she had older sister, Sorraya, Parvana owned a position to replace her father's position. She even acknowledged that she had provided her family with enough food. She assured her mother that she could take care of the family matters, until she found a way to save her father from prison. It is seen from the frame below:



992

01:05:19,200 --> 01:05:21,635

Why? I provide
for you just fine!

Although education for children and women were banned at that time, Parvana's father, who was a teacher before Taliban came, told his children stories. He also taught them to read and write. Parvana was good at making up a story, she used to soothe her brother with her story. Unfortunately, in her story she created a male hero who saved his city. She named him Sulayman, who happened to be the name of her late brother whose clothes she wore. Parvana even owed the courage from the shadow of her brother Sulayman, who lives in her made up story.

Subject-object and reader position

This movie addressed women as both subject and object. Some parts of the movie portrayed women as the object since the movie depicted the real women condition in Afghanistan under Taliban. As objects, women were not counted, their voice was not heard. However, through the female main character, Parvana, this movie also addressed women as the subject. As subjects, women, through the character of Parvana, had the control over the actions they did. Parvana did not ask anybody to consider her decision of cutting her hair and pretended to be a boy. Nobody told her to save her family and her father, she decided herself.

It was also her own choice to go to prison to find her father and did several things to save him:



1004

01:05:48,160 --> 01:05:50,277

Let me go see him before
we leave.

Parvana had already planned to gain some money to bribe the prison guard to let her father go. She did not want to ruin her plan, although her mother asked her to obey her and stayed at home until their relative from other city came to pick them.

Meanwhile, this movie positioned its viewers (readers) as women who need to know the difficult conditions of women in Afghanistan under Taliban. This movie assumes that the readers will agree to the statement concerning gender that women equal to men. The movie also focalized the voice of muted women and children in Afghanistan in the time of the story. Readers are asked to join the feeling and experience the hardships that were experienced by the female characters.

Interpretation

Although this movie aims to portray women in Afghanistan under the control of Taliban, it also emphasizes on the struggle of the women to survive. It shows that this movie takes side to support the women actions to liberate themselves. Unfortunately, the imaginary story told by Parvana spoils the picture of strong women. The movie appreciates women to have courage to liberate, but at the same time it reminds women that they cannot survive without men. This kind of duality shows how deep patriarchy is rooted within human's life, even when a son has passed away, he still lives as a hope.

As a strong girl, Parvana did not realize of the thing she was able of doing. While her mother, Fattima, finally found her strength after she was about to lose her life and she had to save her first daughter, Sorraya, and her baby boy, Zaki.

This shows that the institutionalized culture by Taliban was deeply rooted, making each individual loses her strength and confident to decide and act upon her life.

Compared to the novel version, the movie was considered inconsistency in the portraying the struggle of women in Afghanistan. The movie version imprisoned Parvana through the story she created, in which a boy became the story hero. While in the novel version, the made up story about Sulayman was not found. The movie sadly used male character as the hero, as the subject, above Parvana, making the depiction of Parvana as strong girl soften and still marginalized by the shadow of her late brother.

Conclusion

Using CDA, especially feminist stylistics approach, this article has shown that *The Breadwinner* represents women as two opposing dimensions. The first, women representation is as an object of man domination, represented by Taliban, in Afghanistan context. The second representation is that women becomes the subject, being able to speak on behalf of her own way of thinking, being able to take decision on what to do next.

The discussion has also shown that although this movie tried to take readers to see what happened to women in Taliban in the hope that women all over the world support one another, still the phantom of patriarchy lingers. The use of story made up by Parvana to calm the situation spoils the strong representation of women, due to the creation of male hero in the story. It seems that it wants to perpetuate the statement that women can not survive without men. However, the story that Parvana made up was only found in the movie, while in the original novel version this story was not found.

Feminist stylistics has suggested ways to approach texts and reveal the *latent* condition carried by the text, especially related to gender issues. A text carries its writer ideology and the elements around the text making. As readers, reading the text critically will help to understand the hidden agenda that the text would like to convey. A text, like *The Breadwinner*, tries to communicate with the readers in two ways directions. First, the text conveys the message from the author, and second the readers perceive the text as a tool to focalize their marginalized conditions.

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