
GENDER SEMIOTICS IN THE FILM "THE BREADWINNER"

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ABSTRACT

The Breadwinner film is one of the films that have elements related to gender in it. The approach of this research is a qualitative descriptive research type, with data analysis using the method of Miles and Huberman. The semiotic analysis used the Roland Barthes analysis model which divides the stages into three, namely denotation, connotation, and myth. The results of this study are that gender in this film has a denotative meaning where women have demands to behave and act according to their environment, a connotative meaning where people put a lot of emphasis on how women should behave through verbal utterances, and myths about culture taken from one interpretation of the verses of the Al-Quran regarding women.

KEYWORDS

Film, Connotation, Denotation, Myth, Discrimination, Gender



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INTRODUCTION

"The Breadwinner" is a family drama animated film released in 2017 and directed by Irish actress Nora Twomey. "The Breadwinner" is an animated film written, produced, and directed by women, based on the best-selling novel by author Deborah Ellis. The film features the voice of Canadian teen actress Saara Chaudry as the main character Parvana. The film aims to build a story as real as possible, convincing the audience and making the film easily understood. In line with the mission of national cinema, since 1979, national cinema can be used together with entertainment media as an educational tool to educate the younger generation about nationalism and character formation (Ardianto, 2012). "The Breadwinner" is about an 11-year-old Afghan girl who has to dress like a boy to support her family financially. Other voice actors in the film include Saara Chaudry, Soma Chhaya, Noorin Gulamgaus, Laara Sadiq, and Ali Badshah. Aircraft Pictures, Cartoon Saloon, and Mélusine Productions are the production houses behind "The Breadwinner."

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The 94-minute film grossed over \$2,790,214. The English-dubbed film tells the story of Parvana, an 11-year-old girl raised in Afghanistan in 2001 under the Taliban regime. At one point, her father is imprisoned, although he is actually innocent. This prompts Parvana to support her family by selling goods at the market. Parvana is forced to cut her hair and dress like a boy.

The protagonist Parvana in "The Breadwinner" is a Middle Eastern girl imprisoned in Afghanistan due to cultural restrictions under Islam. Her rebellious nature often worries her family members about her behavior, but sometimes Parvana becomes the hope for the continuation of her family's current life. The film is suitable for various ages, from children to adults, to provide post-film stimulation for socio-cultural and psychological identification among viewers.

The gender theme in "The Breadwinner" is a denotative meaning where Parvana is a female character and also a child who always has to follow social rules, which strongly shows the patriarchal pattern in her environment. There are rules in Parvana's environment that force her to engage in activities related to Afghan social norms, such as dependence on men for everything. On the other hand, Parvana feels uncomfortable in such an environment because she can already witness the oppression of women and the poor in the name of her own family. Parvana also does not receive proper education, so in her spare time, she only listens to her father's history stories. The film takes place in a Taliban-controlled village in Afghanistan with a non-modern social culture, and also the similarity of belief in gender roles and perspectives, which only places women inside the house, while those who can work or have rights to ordinary people are men. This leads to the practice of the cultural tradition of Bacha Posh, which has been practiced by Afghan society for generations.

Literature Review

Gender Injustice

Gender and sex have fundamental differences that need to be understood when analyzing issues related to social injustice that often target women. This phenomenon occurs due to the close connection with gender differences and gender injustice, along with the broader structure of social injustice in society. Gender is the result of social or cultural formation that is continuously and continuously carried out, which is not a permanent form, because contradictory social realities are clearly found in the feminine and masculine (Fakih, 2013). Both types can be found in both genders and not just in one. Differences in gender would not be a problem as long as they do not result in gender injustice, which, in fact, becomes a problem, namely the emergence of many injustices against both men and women. Gender injustice is then divided into five forms: gender and marginalization of women, gender and subordination or attitudes that place women in unimportant positions, gender and stereotypes, gender and violence, and gender along with workload. These five aspects cannot be separated, as one leads to another in this injustice.

In society, the prevailing gender is determined by the perspective of society on the relationship between men and their masculinity, and the relationship between women and their femininity or masculinity with feminism. However, these

relationships are not included in absolute correlations (Rogers, 1980). Gender is not universal but rather a variant from one society to another over time. Thus, it can be understood that gender is a form of social construction or structure that is not inherently born but can be formed or changed to suit the place, time or era, race, social status, ethnicity, culture, and other aspects. Gender is also not part of God's nature, which can be changed and made by humans because of the relative nature of gender, unlike sex, which is natural and unchangeable.

Roland Barthes's Semiotics

Semiotics originates from the English word semiotic, which comes from Greek, giving the understanding that semiotics is a semeion that means a sign and has the meaning of a theory of signs. Semiotics Berger has two characters, Ferdinand De Saussure and Charles Sander Peirce. Both figures developed semiotics separately and did not know each other. Saussure's academic background is linguistics, while Peirce's is philosophy. Saussure refers to the science he developed as semiotics, based on the assumption that all human actions and behaviors carry meaning or, as long as they function as signs, must be supported by systems of differentiation and conventions to create that meaning. Meanwhile, Peirce refers to the science he built as semiotics. With Peirce's background in philosophy and logic, human reasoning is always done through signs. This means that humans can only reason through signs. In his thinking, logic is like semiotics, and semiotics can be applied to all types of signs. In further development, the term semiotics is more commonly used than semiotics (Tinarbuko, 2008).

Roland Barthes is a structural thinker who often practices linguistic and semiotic methods used by Saussure. Barthes's semiotics is divided into several levels within the language system, namely denotation and connotation. Denotation is a form of significance at the first level, and connotation is at the second level. The denotation system as a first-level signifier has a chain of signifiers and signifieds, namely materialistic forms or abstract concepts behind them. Then, the connotation system is a signifier system that is in the second position or level, where this connotation is after the signifier or sign from the denotation system that has a relationship and connection with others in a higher-level sign chain. According to Roland Barthes, connotation has identical aspects with operations related to ideology, which are often considered and referred to as myths, and its function or purpose is to provide expression and truth to the values present in society, especially dominant values within a certain period.

Ideology is considered to exist as long as there is culture, which leads Roland Barthes to state that connotation is a form of cultural expression. Culture will be manifested in the text, and ideology will manifest itself by passing through various types of codes that pass through the text and become things that mark important things related to characters, backgrounds, perspectives, and so on (Sobur, 2009). In his concept, connotation does not have additional meanings and also contains two types of additional meanings or interpretations, which also contain two parts of denotation signs indicating their existence. Denotation and connotation have different meanings, where according to Roland Barthes, denotation is the actual meaning or understanding, but also a first-level significance associated with hidden meanings

and sensors or forms of political repression. Connotation also has an identity that is similar to ideological operations, commonly known as myths, and its function is to provide expression and justification for dominant values that apply to a certain period.

Regarding myths, basically, second-level significance has a relationship with content, sign work that goes through content, and emotions that have connotations to certain ideologies. Basically, everything in the world can be turned into myths, and one myth will arise temporarily and will be replaced at another time because it will be replaced by another myth. It can also be said that myths have the function of providing information from symbols or symbols that will bring about certain meanings or understandings based on the historical and cultural values of society (Pawito, 2007). This myth serves the purpose of expressing and justifying dominant or most prominent values within a specific period or time and period.

Object-Mediated Communication

According to Charles Sanders Peirce, a sign is something that appears present, is also capable of representing the relationship between the sign and the sign receiver that is representative and leads to interpretation. Signs must involve modifications of knowledge about objects, meaning that someone's concept of an object is a version of what was already known before (Champagne, 2018). Information from this object can be in the form of status, brand, background, production process, history, or employees working for the object. In other words, all this information becomes very important when the object appears in the midst of society in its entirety, so that all this information will eventually turn into a sign.

The Semiotics of Outspoken Objects theory consists of 2 interconnected theories that support each other, namely: Symbolic Interaction Theory, which emphasizes humans in relation to meaningful objects and depends on how people act on them. Then there is the influence of Actor Network Theory, which focuses exclusively on humans, where they replace human actions and act as humans do in a given situation. Both are collaborations in applying theories that make the relationship between humans and objects a communication within it, thus creating interpersonal interactions among humans afterward.

Meanwhile, according to Stephanie Pena-Alves, the theory of Semiotics of Outspoken Objects focuses on humans using selected objects as mediators to help perform work to advance communication when interacting with others. Objects can help humans not only in conveying short-term meanings but also in utilizing long-standing basic assumptions about social life. Thus, it can be said that the theory of Semiotics of Outspoken Objects is a communication theory used by humans through an intermediary object chosen to convey meaning without accompanying oral statements when interacting with others (Littlejohn et al., 2017).

Bacha Posh Culture (Disguising as a Boy)

The tradition in Afghan society, inspired by Islamic culture, glorifies men over women in daily life (patriarchy). This applies not only to all adult activities but has been practiced since childhood. This phenomenon has inspired the term

Bacha Posh, which is a cultural practice where girls dress and behave like boys (Bleiker, 2018). This tradition allows the girl to behave freely like a boy, such as protecting her siblings, going to school, walking alone in public spaces, and even shopping for basic necessities in the market. Usually, this happens in families without sons other than the parents (head of the household), and also in families with a weak economic background, making it difficult to have sons.

This phenomenon originated from the differences in rights and gender role obligations that occurred in the Middle East and then developed in Afghanistan. This could influence girls who are interested in the cultural behavior of being free like boys, such as playing in public spaces and helping their parents in the family economy. Not only behavior, but they also change their clothes, change their names, even cut their hair, and behave like boys in general. However, this tradition usually ends when the girl reaches puberty or menstruates, and they will return to their full female nature.

The term Bacha Posh, which literally means a woman dressed like a man, is believed to have existed in the cultural tradition of society since ancient times, even before the full entry of Islamic civilization into Afghanistan (Chambers, 2022). This phenomenon sometimes comes from parents who want to "dress up" their daughters for a better future such as economics, strong human mentality, and high intelligence for their children. This makes this culture very common among Afghan communities, especially in this era, even though this practice is suspected of going against the cultural norms of society, especially the majority of the population who are religious and adhere to Islamic culture.

Film as Mass Communication

In the history of its development, film has two major themes: First, the use of film as a propaganda tool, which is important in society, especially in achieving the main goals of society itself. Second, the emergence of several artistic movements in filmmaking, resulting in some social documentaries. Both are considered deviations that only reach a minority of the population and are oriented towards realism.

Film as one of the media in mass communication makes sense, besides film communication applications are in the form of audio-visuals aimed at conveying messages to groups of people gathered in one place (Effendy, 2011). The message from a film as mass communication is very diverse, depending on the purpose of the film itself. Delivery can also be in the form of dialogue, set backgrounds, or even the portrayal of a character representing someone within it. Not only that, but films can also be a medium of information, especially for cultural societies that have been considered taboo or unusual to be known by people worldwide.

A film certainly has a moral in delivering the dramatic essence of the film, especially those found in the script's storyline. As written in the book "Ethics Goes to the Movies: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy," the morals of a film can determine how we live in society and what kind of people we should be in everyday life (Falzon, 2018). Not to mention, morals can also have implications for the psychological effects of humans, where there are feelings of joy or sadness after watching a film. This reinforces the author's argument, especially in the film *The Breadwinner*, that covert cultures can serve as moral lessons for people in their daily lives.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research utilizes a qualitative approach, which is a comprehensive analysis of the content presented in the film "The Breadwinner" produced by the Netflix platform based in California, United States. This approach is chosen because the method and type of data used in this research are suitable for qualitative research, where the data analysis employs the Miles and Huberman method, and the research is conducted continuously until completion interactively. The research approach involves observing, collecting, and analyzing data to understand the existing issues and then describe them according to the phenomena occurring in society (Silalahi, 2006).

In terms of research type, this study is descriptive and only provides an exposition of the situation or condition and provides explanations along with descriptions related to the issues to be discussed. This type of research does not establish relationships, hypotheses, or predictions. The data analysis method used is semiotic analysis, where the analysis involves two levels of meaning provided by Roland Barthes, namely denotation and connotation interpretations. The data obtained will then be analyzed by conducting data reduction, presenting the existing data, and subsequently drawing conclusions or verification.

The object of research in this study is the film "The Breadwinner," released in 2017 and directed by Nora Twomey. In this film, many scenes contain gender issues in their depictions, and these gender issue scenes are the focus and subject of analysis using the theory of Roland Barthes employed in this research. Another reason is that the film is rich with the cultural phenomenon of Bacha Posh, which involves specific communication processes within the storyline depicting interactions among individuals. Additionally, there are several moral messages that the film director wishes to convey, especially regarding social issues affecting Afghan society, which persist through generations but remain relevant to this day.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In the film "The Breadwinner," which is the subject of this research, several meanings depicted in Barthes' theory continuously emerge throughout, related to both denotative and connotative meanings, as well as myths. The meanings in this film are found in both implicit and explicit messages within "The Breadwinner," focusing on gender issues. For instance, it's prominently displayed in the film that women must be accompanied by men when leaving their homes. Men are always depicted as dominant figures, responsible for work and daily activities, while women are portrayed oppositely. This is consistent with cultural theory, where the lack of equal rights for women in Afghan culture is highlighted. Women are not allowed to engage in activities outside the home without being accompanied by their father or male siblings. Another denotative meaning is shown in how Parvana's father and the surrounding environment dictate Parvana's life path and decision-making.



Figure 1. The scene of her father always protecting Pavarna (daughter) when leaving the house

In this film, the division of labor often deemed appropriate for men and women is depicted, showing that gender is a concept often used as a parameter for identifying roles based on societal or cultural influences. Since the beginning of the film, it is shown how Parvana follows her father's orders to help with trading, only to be captured by Taliban criminals for teaching Parvana how to read stories. This reflects gender injustice as Parvana is not allowed to receive education, not even basic historical knowledge. Parvana and her mother Fattema then protest the arrest of Parvana's father, which ends with threats of imprisonment for both of them, with Fattema being beaten for protesting by showing a photo. Parvana eventually ventures out to find food for her family but is not served simply because she is a woman. Thus, Parvana begins to resist and disguises herself as a boy for her family, setting the stage for the conflicts in the film.



Figure 2. Pavarna after disguising herself as a boy then shopping for daily necessities at the market.

Connotative meanings emerge in scenes that explicitly mention specific rules for women, where they are forbidden to leave the house and deemed "unimportant," facing condemnation by Islamic Sharia law if violated. Connotative meanings are also evident when Parvana meets her friend who also disguises herself as a boy for survival, reflecting the Semiotics of Outspoken Objects theory by using male

attributes such as clothing, haircut, and name to gain social acceptance and avoid previous gender discrimination.



Figure 3. The scene of Pavarna and her friend using all male attributes to gain *social gender* recognition

Gender aspects in "The Breadwinner" are depicted with complexity, showcasing both societal gender roles and gender biases. Gender roles emerge as distinctions between men and women based on existing traditions depicted in the film. Gender biases are evident in conversations and scenes where Parvana feels the injustice in her highly patriarchal environment. Parvana, as the main character, disagrees with and dislikes her mother and sister's submissive attitudes, expressing her desires and ideas directly and even having the determination to change the culture to achieve gender equality, marking a turning point in the film.



Figure 4. The scene of Pavarna and her brother arguing about Pavarna's desire to leave the house.

Myths in the film arise from societal beliefs or the formation of beliefs that women leaving their homes will bring disaster as it goes against their sacred text, the Quran. In "The Breadwinner," this discrimination is solely attributed to the misinterpretation of Islamic Sharia law by the Taliban who enforce such rules. Clear differences in roles for women and men are depicted in several scenes in the film, where Parvana, as the main character, faces reprimands for actions deemed culturally inappropriate or against gender perspectives, such as when she seeks her father or tries to buy food, facing admonition for leaving and being refused service because she is a woman. Her mother also warns her, stating that Parvana will never

be served if she reveals herself as a woman, as the merchants do not want to take the risk.



Figure 5. The scene of Pavarna and her mother releasing Pavarna to leave the house and accept the risk if her disguise is known by the public.

CONCLUSION

Based on this research, various elements and aspects of gender emerge in every form of meaning, such as connotation, denotation, and myths. Gender, as a concept, is born within society to serve as a differentiating factor between men and women, which humans have utilized over time, enforcing gender norms for every individual born into prevailing traditions. This is because gender is inherent and exists within individuals, whether desired or not by their own selves. Moreover, Pavarna's gender disguise demonstrates the theory of Semiotics of Outspoken Objects, suggesting that by easily using gender attributes, society can be deceived about one's true gender.

This film serves as a portrayal of the reality in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, highlighting messages about gender discrimination and voicing the cultural practice of Bacha Posh, which has been entrenched in Afghan society for generations. The film also serves as a mass communication medium for conveying cultural messages to all audiences. Additionally, because the film can influence individuals' psychological states to focus more and engage deeply with its narrative, the psychological effects vary depending on the age and social strata of the viewers..

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