

ARTICLE

## Representation of Women's Struggle against Violence and Gender Discrimination in the Film “Women from Rote Island”

Wulandari, Anastasya Christine, Ghina Reftantia, Diana Dewi Sartika, Erlisa Saraswati

Universitas Sriwijaya, Indonesia

### ABSTRACT ENGLISH:

Film is a mass communication media that combines audio and visual elements to convey messages to a wide audience. As a cultural product, film uniquely represents social realities, shapes public opinion, and serves as a platform for reflecting on various human issues. In the modern era, film has evolved into an effective tool for voicing social criticism and highlighting marginalized issues in public discourse, including violence and gender discrimination. One such film is *Women from Rote Island*, which focuses on the experiences of women in Eastern Indonesia who face domestic violence and structural discrimination. The film portrays how women fight to uphold their rights and dignity amid strong patriarchal cultural pressures. Through emotional storytelling and symbolic visuals, the film delivers messages of resistance against the injustices experienced by women. This article aims to analyse the representation of women's struggles in *Women from Rote Island* using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. This theory is applied to explore the denotative (literal) and connotative (symbolic or cultural) meanings of the signs presented in the film—ranging from imagery, character expressions, and dialogue to setting. The research employs a qualitative method with a descriptive approach, allowing the researcher to interpret the hidden messages and meaning structures constructed by the film. The analysis reveals that this film not only represents the social realities faced by women but also serves as a symbolic resistance to an unjust social system. It succeeds in building audience empathy and encouraging critical awareness of issues related to gender-based violence and discrimination. Thus, film can be seen as an effective alternative medium in voicing women's struggles and advocating for gender equality.

**Keywords:** Film, Representation, Discrimination, Women from Rote Island

### ABSTRACT INDONESIAN:

Film merupakan salah satu bentuk media komunikasi massa yang menggabungkan elemen audio dan visual untuk menyampaikan pesan. Sebagai produk budaya, film memiliki kemampuan unik dalam merepresentasikan realitas sosial, membentuk opini publik, serta menjadi wadah refleksi terhadap berbagai isu kemanusiaan. Di era modern, film berkembang menjadi alat yang efektif dalam menyuarakan kritik sosial dan mengangkat persoalan-persoalan yang sering kali terpinggirkan dalam wacana publik, termasuk isu kekerasan dan diskriminasi gender. Salah satu film yang mengangkat isu tersebut adalah *Women from Rote Island*, sebuah film yang berfokus pada pengalaman perempuan di wilayah Timur Indonesia yang menghadapi kekerasan dalam rumah tangga dan diskriminasi struktural. Film ini menggambarkan bagaimana perempuan berjuang mempertahankan hak dan martabatnya di tengah tekanan budaya patriarkis yang kuat. Melalui narasi yang emosional dan visual yang simbolis, film ini menyampaikan pesan-pesan perlawanan terhadap ketidakadilan yang dialami perempuan. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis representasi perjuangan perempuan dalam film *Women from Rote Island* dengan menggunakan teori semiotik Barthes. Teori ini digunakan untuk menggali makna denotatif (makna literal) dan konotatif (makna simbolik atau kultural) dari tanda-tanda yang muncul dalam film, baik berupa gambar, ekspresi tokoh, dialog, maupun latar tempat. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan deskriptif, yang memungkinkan peneliti untuk menginterpretasikan pesan-pesan tersembunyi dan struktur makna yang dibangun oleh film. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa film ini tidak hanya merepresentasikan kenyataan sosial yang dihadapi perempuan, tetapi juga menjadi sarana perlawanan simbolik terhadap sistem sosial yang tidak adil. Film ini berhasil membangun empati penonton dan mendorong kesadaran kritis terhadap isu kekerasan dan diskriminasi gender. Dengan demikian, film dapat dilihat sebagai media alternatif yang efektif dalam menyuarakan perjuangan perempuan serta memperjuangkan kesetaraan gender.

**Kata Kunci:** Film, Representasi, Diskriminasi, Perempuan dari Pulau Rote

## Introduction

Film is a narrative medium with immense power in representing social realities, shaping public opinion, and creating cultural discourses on important societal issues. As a cultural product, film not only visualizes stories but also reflects and reproduces underlying social values (Hakim et al., 2024; Mudjiono, 2011; Muthmainnah, 2023; Saskhia et al., 2022). In this context, film often serves as a space for articulating the various issues faced by marginalized groups, one of which is women (Alam & Lakshmi, 2023; Dwiyani et al., 2024; Ghofur et al., 2023; Yasa, 2021). Women in film appear not only as fictional characters but also as symbolic representations of collective experiences facing oppression, violence, and structural discrimination.

In this regard, film acts as a cultural reconstruction, codifying societal values and views into a visual form easily accessible to audiences. Film also possesses high symbolic power in conveying implicit messages (Wahyuningsih, 2019). Through the use of visual signs and cinematic language, film can communicate social criticism or raise sensitive issues, such as gender-based violence and discrimination against women, without having to address them directly (Wahyuningsih, 2019; Yasa, 2021). A semiotic approach, as developed by Barthes (1977), allows for the analysis of denotative and connotative meanings in film.

One film that represents this reality is *Women from Rote Island*, an Indonesian film directed by (Nyangoen, 2023). This film is set on Rote Island, East Nusa Tenggara, and tells the story of local women who live in the shackles of patriarchal culture, face domestic violence, and experience social marginalization due to masculine customary structures. The main character in this film is depicted as a strong woman who not only survives the violence, she experiences but also fights against the system that silences her basic human rights. This film gives voice to pain and resistance that is often overlooked, especially in Indonesia's marginalized regions that are rarely brought to the stage of national discourse.

In the context of gender studies, the representation of women in this film is highly relevant for analysis. Gender, as understood in contemporary social theory, is not merely related to biological differences between men and women, but is a social construct fraught with power relations (Dwifatma, 2018; Gashu & Muchie, 2018; Hatton, 2023; Muqoyyidin, 2013). As emphasized by Judith (1990), gender is performative, meaning it is continuously shaped and defined through social, cultural, and discursive actions. In many contexts, women are often constructed as subordinate, weak, and dependent, ultimately opening up space for practices of gender-based discrimination and violence.

Violence against women is a structural phenomenon that cannot be separated from cultural, economic, and political contexts. Connell & Pearse (2015) explain that gender inequality is part of a systematic social structure, in which hegemonic masculinity plays a role in maintaining male dominance and the subjugation of women. The film "Women from Rote Island" depicts these forms of violence not only explicitly through scenes of physical violence, but also through cultural symbols such as customs, clothing, gestures, and social interactions that restrict women's freedom of movement.

In "Women from Rote Island," Barthes's semiotic approach allows for a more critical reading of visual symbols such as the traditional cloth worn by the female characters, the traditional house as a restrictive domestic space, and traditional rituals that represent patriarchal power (Barthes, 1977). For example, the use of traditional cloth in the film not only signifies cultural identity but also represents the traditional burden women must bear as guardians of family and community honor, which in turn limits their freedom. These connotations demonstrate that culture is not merely a backdrop but also an active participant in perpetuating symbolic violence against women.

This semiotic approach also reveals how the camera and cinematic techniques are used to shape the audience's perception of female characters. Close-ups of wounded faces, somber gazes, and gloomy lighting serve as visual cues representing suffering and helplessness, but as the narrative progresses, these representations shift to become symbols of strength, determination, and struggle. Within Barthes's framework, this shift in meaning reflects the transformation of the "myth of women as victims" into the "myth of women as warriors," which ideologically challenges patriarchal dominance (Asrini & Dhamayanti, 2018; Garcia & Winduwati, 2023; Cristina & Wijiharto Tunggal, 2023).

Furthermore, *Women from Rote Island* also offer an in-depth perspective on how women in marginalized areas establish their agency amidst social and cultural constraints. In line with the thinking of Mohanty (2003), women in the global South should not be positioned solely as victims, but rather as active actors with the ability to interpret, respond to, and negotiate their realities. This film serves as a concrete example of how local women construct alternative narratives about their identities and roles in society.

Several studies have been conducted by Indonesian researchers on the representation of women's struggles, such as those by Huda et al., (2021), which examines the representation of women's struggles in the film "Hidden Figures," which tells the story of African-American women who frequently experience discrimination. Furthermore, studies on women's struggles within cultural and religious contexts have also been explored in several different films (Febryanti et al., 2024; Mumtazah, 2024). Similar analyses of films within a religious context have also been conducted by (Rini et al., 2025). These studies only analyze how women are represented in films, analyzing them through the concepts of race and religion. However, the representation of gender-based struggles in this film, which examines it from the perspective of gender itself, has never been done before. Studies on gender representation will continue to emerge annually because film production continues (Rahman et al., 2025).

Thus, this study aims to examine how the film *Women from Rote Island* represents women's struggle against violence and gender discrimination through Roland Barthes's semiotic approach. This article not only attempts to unravel the visual and narrative meanings in the film but also places them within a broader context, namely, social structures, patriarchal culture, and discourses of women's empowerment (Zulia & Rahman, 2024). This study is expected to contribute to gender and film studies in Indonesia, as well as broaden our understanding of how the film medium can be a tool of resistance and social transformation for marginalized groups.

## Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach. This approach aims to provide an overview of various social conditions or phenomena occurring in society (Afrizal, 2014; Bungin, 2020; Creswell, 2016; Tracy, 2024; Sugiyono, 2017). The data used consisted of descriptions and observations from literature studies, as well as observations of the objects and issues being studied. Data were obtained through articles, journals, documents, and the internet, which supported information and data collection during the analysis process. Data collection techniques included capturing scenes or screenshots as part of an observation of the film "Women from Rote Island," which can be viewed through online streaming platforms.

The analysis process began with observations by watching the film "Women from Rote Island" through online streaming platforms to ensure its suitability for analysis. The analysis employed Roland Barthes's semiotic theory, which focuses on the concept of two-order signification (Barthes, 1977). The first stage of significance is the relationship between the signifier and the signified in a sign, which refers to its connection to external reality, a concept Barthes calls denotation. This is the most concrete meaning of a sign. To demonstrate the second stage of significance, Barthes uses the term connotation. The second stage of significance relates to content, where signs work through myth. The analysis process in this study is carried out through three main stages. First, the author will identify scenes that depict women's struggles against violence and gender discrimination that appear in the film. This is done by recording events and taking screenshots or captures of several scenes relevant to the research. Second, the author will attach findings in the form of screenshots or captures of scenes and interpret relevant texts or dialogues. These findings will then be analyzed using Roland Barthes's semiotic approach, which focuses on three things: denotation, connotation, and myth. Third, the author will provide answers to the research problem formulation, and the conclusions are attempted to be objective, supported by data and evidence that have been analyzed theoretically.

## Result and Discussion

The film *Women from Rote Island* depicts women's struggle to seek justice for the sexual violence and gender discrimination that occur in their environment. The female characters in this film are portrayed as strong, independent, and central to the story. This contrasts with most films, which often depict women as mere victims and objects of romanticisation or sexualization. To analyse the signs or symbols that represent women's struggles, the author has selected six scenes, along with their time and duration, which have been analysed using Roland Barthes's Semiotic theory as follows.

### Data 1: Scene 1. 00:58:30

#### Denotative Meaning

This scene shows Martha carrying a piece of wood while chasing a man who has sexually harassed and attempted to rape her.

### Connotative Meaning

This scene depicts Martha's feelings of disapproval and anger towards the man, leading her to resist by stabbing and chasing him as he tries to escape her threats. Martha's stabbing is not only a form of personal revenge but also represents a form of resistance against the patriarchal culture that silences the voices of victims of sexual violence.



*Figure 1. Martha was chasing a man*

### Myth

In a patriarchal society, women are considered weak. In fact, when victims of violence, women are expected to remain silent and not fight back against men. However, the scene of Martha stabbing the perpetrator shatters the myth of the culture of silence that has long been imposed on women who experience sexual violence.

### Data 2: Scene 2. 01:24:02



*Figure 2. Orpa (Martha's mother) reports to the police*

### Denotative Meaning

This scene shows Orpa reporting Martha's rape to the police.

### Connotative Meaning

Orpa feels that by reporting to the police, she will receive justice for what happened to her daughter (Martha). However, the police response in this scene is skeptical of Orpa's report. This conveys a message about the imbalance of power and institutional insensitivity towards victims. It also implies that women who speak up are often not immediately believed.

### Myth

According to myths circulating in traditional societies, sexual violence is a shame that must be hidden. Orpha's actions in this scene represent a rejection of a culture that silences victims' voices. In patriarchal cultures, women are often denied the space to speak out or demand justice. This scene represents a form of resistance against this social construct.

#### Data 3: Scene 3. 01:52:30



*Figure 3. A woman pours sauce on the genitals of the man who raped Martha.*

### Denotative Meaning

A group of women (Martha's mother, grandmother, and close friends) catches Martha's rapist by secretly hiding when he is about to rape her again. After catching him, they beat him and pour sauce on his genitals.

### Connotative Meaning

The women's cooperation in catching the perpetrator demonstrates solidarity among women fighting against sexual violence. The beating and pouring of sauce on the perpetrator's genitals are not only a form of revenge but also a symbol of humiliation for men. Furthermore, the use of genitals as the target of violence indicates that these women are attempting to reverse the power position. If previously the man's genitals were used for rape, now they are used as objects of punishment.

## Myth

The myth that justice can only be achieved through the formal system is debunked by this scene. This scene depicts an alternative form of justice: when the law fails to defend the victim, society (in this case, the women) creates its own laws.

### Data 4: Scene 4. 02:07:09



*Figure 4. A group of women demonstrating in front of the police station*

## Denotative Meaning

This scene shows a group of women from Rote Island standing in front of a police station. They are carrying kitchen utensils and shouting demands for a thorough investigation into the sexual violence case. The police present appear to be monitoring the situation, while others simply observe.

## Connotative Meaning

This scene signifies that the women of Rote Island refuse to be silenced. In a culture that often relegates women to the domestic sphere, this scene is a statement that women also have the right to speak up. The demonstration in front of the police station also reflects their distrust of the law, which they perceive as often ignoring cases of sexual violence.

## Myth

The myth in this scene is that sexual violence is an individual problem, not a structural one. The women's collective action emphasizes that sexual violence is not just a matter of one perpetrator and one victim, but rather part of a systemic social problem that requires structural responses and cultural change. Furthermore, this scene also refutes the notion that women have no place in the public sphere. By demonstrating, they demonstrate that women can speak out and demand justice.

**Data 5: Scene 5. 02:07:46****Denotative Meaning**

During the demonstration, several women were seen attempting to remove their clothing. This action surprised the police officers guarding the scene, who attempted to stop them.

**Connotative Meaning**

The actions of the women in this scene seem to reflect how women are reclaiming control over their bodies, which have long been objects of male power, a culture of shame, and restrictive social norms. Furthermore, the act of removing their clothing in this scene seems to imply that they are declaring, "This body belongs to us. We are free to choose for ourselves."



*Figure 5. Some women try to take off their clothes*

**Myth**

This scene shatters the myth that women's bodies are a source of shame and must be covered, thus making them objects of social control. The women's act of removing their clothing demonstrates their courage in challenging social standards. Furthermore, this scene critiques statements that blame the victim, as if clothing is the cause of women's harassment. Undressing in open space illustrates that the real problem is the system and the perpetrator, not the victim.

**Data 6: Scene 5. 02:18:08****Denotative Meaning**

This scene depicts Orpa smoking a cigarette after successfully confronting Kobis, who confessed to the murder of her daughter, Bertha. Kobis had previously demanded that Orpa have sex with him as a condition for Orpa to reveal who killed Bertha.

### Connotative Meaning

The act of smoking in this scene is interpreted as an affirmation of self-control. It appears as if Orpa smokes as a way to regulate her breathing, manage her anger, and celebrate her victory over male dominance. In this context, the cigarette signifies resistance, determination, and pain that is being experienced in silence.



*Figure 6. A woman smokes*

### Myth

Kobis represents a symbol of manipulative power, using threats and sexual demands to maintain his dominance. However, when Opra resists, this scene shatters the myth that men are always in an unassailable position.

### Conclusion

Based on the authors' analysis of the film "Women from Rote Island" using Roland Barthes' semiotic model, it can be concluded that the film contains scenes representing women's struggles. The author found six scenes containing signs of women's resistance, both directly (explicit) and indirectly (implicit). The film depicts women not only as victims of male domination, but also as figures who bravely fight injustice, advocate for themselves, and challenge the myths of patriarchal culture. Furthermore, the film debunks the myth that victims of sexual violence should be submissive and silent. Through a series of scenes, the film transforms women's positions from objects of suffering to subjects of resistance, from silenced to vocal. Thus, "Women from Rote Island" not only presents a story of violence and injustice but also serves as a symbolic space where new meanings of women's power, courage, and solidarity are reconstructed and championed.

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