

Body Size on Cinema: A Critical Discourse Analysis on Contemporary Indonesian Cinema

M. Afifulloh¹, Nurvita Wijayanti¹

¹English Literature Department, Universitas Bangka Belitung, Bangka Belitung, Indonesia

Correspondence: M. Afifulloh, English Literature Department, Universitas Bangka Belitung, Bangka Belitung, Indonesia.

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Abstract

This article discusses how a fat body in a film is used as a metaphor for a deviant, dangerous, and irresponsible personality through the various narratives occupied by the characters in the film. This research is qualitative research with the main data source is *Imperfect* film released in 2020. The approach used is a combination of film studies and Sara Mills' critical discourse analysis. The results of the study show that although *Imperfect* promotes gender equality in society, the narrative that is built still position fat bodies and black skin as non-ideal, especially for woman. Furthermore, *Imperfect* film positions fat women as a subculture group that struggles as well as agents of change. In conclusion, this study provides an understanding of how the cinematic discourse on size and weight in the context of the structure of the wider community is related to gender issues and films as popular media still have not placed a positive side on weight and skin color, especially in Indonesian society.

Keywords: discrimination, visual image, body size, stereotype, *imperfect*

1. Introduction

Cinema, or film, as a popular culture product, deserves a lot of attention since the film is a reflection of society's views and ideals, (Adi 2011:32). Every film is situated in a specific culture and develops in that culture. They reflect our values and how we live together as a society. A film can show us more clearly what we are thinking and feeling than we do when we are interacting with people in real life. As a result, a film can be utilized as a window into how cultural and social landscape is constructed particularly in Indonesian society. Examining and comprehending popular media such as film will reveal how power relations are expressed, as the film is the construction of society. According to Arneil (1999:4), reviewing and understanding film will expose how much they neglect or distort social norms.

Beauty standards discourse has become big issue in various countries. The stereotype of flawless is beautiful, white is beautiful, and slim body is beautiful significantly affect women behavior. This issue triggers many apps or digital platform to create editing applications such photo editing applications providing people edit their skin, body size and face in the photo (Yamout et al., 2019). The technology of editing applications makes people especially women can be whomever they want and boost their self-esteem (Henriques & Patnaik, 2020). Based on Aparicio-Martinez research, (Amanda, 2021), these unrealistic ideal beauties also caused women to dare to do an unhealthy diet. They were obsessed with the slim body because, in their perception, the slim body was the ideal beauty they must have so that society could accept them.

When talking about ideal beauty standards, it means fat or obese women become the exception. Fatness not only size matter but also intersect with race and gender. Fatness always is related to wider and long-standing stereotypes of black woman, 'mammy' or 'hillbilly', (Plotz, 2020). As women are stereotyped as vulnerable, unstable emotion, and dependent person, then it internalizes Indonesian community including the construction of woman body. On the hair that must be straight and long, on the eyes that must be round, on the lips that must be red and on the body that must be tall and slim, (Luviana, 2015). This universal subordination of women because of their distinctive and function in the traditions and culture inherent in society. Gender construction in the context of patriarchy makes it difficult for women to change their 'destiny'. Gender is engineering in social life that forms a specific identity between men and women to be differently influenced by socio-cultural factors, religion, customs, economic level, scientific progress, and technological progress. These gender differences result in different roles and tasks between men and women in various areas of life in society, (Wardaniningsih & Kasih, 2022).

In fact, Indonesian women's roles are culturally defined by traditional assumptions, which dictate that women belong in the kitchen and on the bed. Another stereotype is that women are companions and the family's second person and that women do not have the same opportunities as men. Therefore, Haryantia and Suwana (2014:236) see that due to traditional customs, social values, religions, and patriarchal ideology in Indonesia, gender equality is still a long way off. The social construction has also been perpetuated by media such as infotainment, news or even film. Roles for women, in particular, are delineated underdeveloped and far below proportionality in film media, (Kunsey, 2018). The media often advertises fatphobia, and it relates to the concept of normalcy. Fear of the fat body as a reaction to the increasing pressure to normalize within a society that more and more relied on mass production techniques, thereby creating a physical environment based on the assumption of an average 'normal' body, (Huff, 2001). In Indonesian context, Women must have the ability to attract men so that appearance is considered an important capital. This assumption underlies the importance of women's outward appearance in everyday life, (Muashomah, 2010). Therefore, fatness becomes the complex problem for women. Fatness also means *other* and potentially experience bullying. The existence of such an attractive, beautiful and handsome concept will certainly bring influence for women who feel they are not included in the criteria. A different treatment for women who do not fit with the criteria will trigger discrimination. Women with fat body have various problems in social life such as being the subject of ridicule, bullying, feelings of lack of confidence and fatness also impacts to the woman carrier as professional or in public space. In cinema, for decades, women are kept out of the world of work. They are always domesticated. But lately, the film media has voiced women's rights in the world of work. women have played many roles in the public space, earning a living for the family. Woman profession is portrayed more positively but as a less powerful profession and is simply a charming woman, (Johston, 2010).

This article studies how fatness is represented by film *Imperfect* and how the representation intersects with gender and race in Indonesia. Some studies on fatness and media were conducted such as Amanda (2021) with exploring how fatness is stereotyped in news online media. From Amanda's study, fatness is still a negative stereotype and obese women are placed as subculture group. Wahyuni and Kuncoro (2019) also studied about discrimination on obese people. This study focused on how obese people experience bad treatment in public space such job opportunity. although there were already some critical works about fatness around, academic engagement with issues of representation of fatness and specifically cinematic representations seemed to be few and far between. While Ross (2010), studied about women and men identity in media and concluded that the fixation with body shape, especially for women, is nothing new, but what history and culture shows us is that ideal forms of the female figure come and go, with fat bellies and hips being prized in some places in some periods, and eighteen-inch waists being the benchmark of ultimate femininity in other places at other times. In the 2000s girls and women are bombarded with images of ultra-skinny women who are held up as exquisite and desirable icons of female bodily perfection. Ross's study ensure that the discourse of the woman body is unstable. It changes along with the prevailing norms in society. Body image always intersects with gender issues in general. Saphiro (2015) studied about how technology intersects with the body and identity in American society. Saphiro stated that the body construct people experience about social norms and belief. The body is assumed to reveal to the world the individual's identities, values, and moral character, making a statement about an individual before they ever utter a word, (Saphiro, 2015, 12). This article is dedicated exclusively to the cinematic representation of fatness and providing a mapping of the most common tropes of fatness in contemporary Indonesian cinema. This article also aims for a critical analysis of cinematic representations in the context of larger societal structures and discourses regarding body size and weight. Furthermore, this study introduces Fat Studies approach to the discipline of Film Studies, especially in Indonesian cinema which has so far remained largely ignorant of critical or any other kind of analysis of fat representation, (Plotz, 2020). The meaning of our body is shaped by social context, expectations, and our definition of the situation. That is, the process of analyzing and assigning meaning to our body and its sensory experiences is a learned one that is shaped by cultural beliefs, expectations, norms, and interpersonal dynamics. Therefore, critic for body image in cinema significantly in media studies, mainly to reveal how social norm belief that fat body is 'other', slim-body is ideal. As we find the assumption that fat body is lazy, blonde is stupid, and feminine men is gay. This research is also to show that embodied identities (such as race, class, and gender) are not just physical realities but also social institutions that shape individual lives. In Indonesian context, women's beauty standards tend not to change from the past. Beauty in Indonesia goes through a transition from "beautiful and white belonging to Dutch and to Japan". The colonizers carried out various ways to influence the population regarding the perception of beauty. One of the methods used is to make the natives feel insecure with the color of their skin, (Warsista, 2019). Therefore, in society (including Indonesia), the assumption has developed that being overweight is closely related to unhealthy conditions and poverty (Tlili et al., 2008), while a slim body is a sign of high economic status, (Bush, et al, 2001). Film as the mainstream media has an important role in perpetuating this beauty construction, (Buckingham et al., 2019). The concept of beauty is constantly changing, from classic to postmodern beauty, from natural standard to subjective standard. Fat bodies are regularly seen as a flaw and it becomes complex when it is universally considered to be a body that is not ideal, under the standard of beauty. Indonesia is no exception, which is

experiencing a shift in beauty standards. Nonetheless, Windasari et al (2017), stated that beauty standards are often constructed by the media (Indonesian cinema) through the use of female models of a certain type. To reveal how film perpetuates woman body's standard, critical discourse analysis is the appropriate approach.

1.1 Discourse Analysis

According to Leech and Short (Afifulloh, 2018), discourse is a linguistic communication seen as a transaction between speaker and hearer, as an interpersonal activity whose form is determined by its social purpose. Text is linguistic communication (either spoken or written) seen simply as a message coded in its auditory and visual medium. Discourse is language communication seen as a transaction between speaker and listener, as an interpersonal activity in which form is determined by social goals of the discourse. Text is language communication (both spoken and written) seen as a message encoded through the medium of sound or visual. Film is a visual object in which it symbols, images, movement and dialogue work together to produce a meaning. The meaning that is composed from those various aspects is then referred to as language. Monaco (2000, 152), stated that film is very much like language. Human do indeed read an image physically as well as mentally and psychologically, just as we read a page. Pope (2014, 4), emphasized that there a move perspective about what is text specifically in media studies. According to Pope, textual study meant writing and reading verbal texts in the medium of print. However, the final decades of the twentieth century witnessed an explosion of new media forms, expanding the concept of "texts" far beyond the printed word. "Texts" now include web publications, advertising, film, television, video and digitalized sound, graphic media, mixed media texts, and even installations. Monaco and Pope's opinion is in line with Wodak and Mayer (2015, 2), that discourse analysis explicitly signposts 'non-verbal (semiotic, multimodal, visual) aspects of interaction and communication: gesture, images, film, the internet and multimedia' as appropriate targets.

1.2 Mills' Critical Discourse Analysis

Mills (2008), stated that sexism is a discourse in society, that why discourse analysis is vital for sexism analysis. Mills emphasizes subject and object in discursive text. The position of subject and object in the text determines the subcultures are represented, how women are dominated and marginalized by two positions, as subject or object. The negotiation between subject and object in the text decides on how various cultural backgrounds, ideologies, politics, identities, and knowledge are produced, (Eriyanto, 2002).

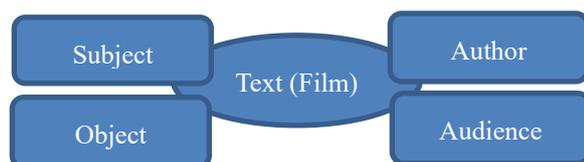


Figure 1. Sara Mills Discourse Analysis Model

Sara Mills emphasizes subject and object in the text to reveal the meaning. Subject and object depend on how film director places the character. Active character means subject and vice versa. Film director and the character are the author. The contestation of meaning occurs when the representation of meaning is constructed by audience. The author and the audience decide the purpose of the story, (Eriyanto, 2002). The audience perspective and the position of the author determine what is acceptable or not. For Sara Mills, the representation in the media is the most important aspect to define how a group, person, or idea are depicted and it affects how audiences interpret the construction of the media representation. The position of social actors in cinema creates certain ideology among the audience. The higher the position the more access in determining reality.

2. Method

This study is a qualitative. When watching and analyzing reality to construct a theory to explain what is happening, qualitative research is used (Creswell, 2012). To interpret the data, Sara Mills' discourse analysis is used. The primary data were taken from the Netflix Original film *Imperfect* (2019). It is the adaptation from the book entitled *Imperfect: A Journey to Self-Acceptance*. This film is considered as the data since this film promotes gender equality in Indonesia. This film is a winner in Asian Academy Creative Awards year 2019 for Best Comedy Program Award (Oktavianus, 2020). As Turner (1999) stated that film is a 'reflection' of the dominant beliefs and values of its culture, then it makes sense that *Imperfect* is not only product of imagination but a system of value with certain ideology. The ideology of a film does not take the form of direct statements or reflections on the culture. It lies in the narrative structure and in the discourses employed; the images, myths, conventions, and visual styles. Carleton (2022) added that as a multi-sensory technology, films contain countless, carefully selected visual and auditory details to be "read" by viewers, making these powerful texts worthy of serious examination.

Van Leeuwen and Jewitt (Afifulloh, 2022,) stated that in the study of visual communication the stages that must be passed in data analysis include the presentation of semiotic "codes", namely: what can be said and done with pictures, and how things that are said and done by audiences regarding pictures, can be interpreted in relation to with social relations and interactions. Furthermore, there are steps in film studies as follow:

- a. Build the sign (in the movie) to be encoded.
- b. Analyze social significance, forget opinion in analyzing.
- c. Determine the meaning of existing signs (setting, plot, characters, symbols, and others).
- d. Decide how the film represents the topic you want to convey.
- e. Make a chart or sketch of the context of the whole story (historical, cultural, political and others related to the symbols in the film).
- f. Make some questions or statements that will guide you in developing your research analysis.
- g. Develop a research statement.

All those steps conducted to reveal the representation of body size in *Imperfect* film and how this representation intersects with the gender norm in Indonesian society.

3. Result

After studying all the collected data from film *Imperfect* based on Sara Mills discourse analysis, the findings of the research can be seen as provided as in the table below.

Table 1. The Position of the subject and object

No	Title	Position		Sum
		Occurrences of Subject	Occurrences of Object	
1	White is beautiful	8 times	12 times	20 times
2	Black is ugly	5 times	-	5 times
3	Slim is beautiful	10 times	9 times	19 times
4	Fatness is ugly	15 times	26 times	41 times
5	Black is beautiful	4 times	3 times	7 times
6	Fat is Beautiful	4 times	4 times	8 times
	Sum	46 times	54 times	100 times

The data above confirmed that film *Imperfect* placed fatness as a negative side. It can be seen from the occurrences both as subject and object in the film. The concept of white is beautiful is portrayed 20 times while black is beautiful is only 7 times. In addition, the most dominantly appeared in the film is the concept of fatness is ugly. It occurred 41 times. Film *Imperfect* dominantly showed more discrimination on identity then equality. Even though, this film was produced to promote gender equality. This can be seen from the sum of the equality representation in the film. There is lack of the representation of fatness is beautiful and black is beautiful.

Data I/*Imperfect*_0:21_white is beautiful

Nora: "So cute, so adorable. She's so white, like cotton ball. Luckily, this one is like her mom, huh?"

The transcript above appears in the first scene. The scene shows how people amazed by white skin. The character Lulu (the baby), was being placed as a standard of the beauty only because she has white skin as white as her mother. While Rara (Lulu's sister) is ignored because she has black skin as black as her father. From the first time, the film depicted how skin is construed as the symbol of beauty. Data 1 also showed how the subject works in cinema. The director placed Nora as the subject of the norm.

Data II/*Imperfect*_11:39_white is beautiful

Rara: "They are so beautiful, are not they? Slim, fair-skinned, how come you are not embarrassed taking me with you?"

Data II showed how Rara is the subject in constructing the norm. Rara confirmed that beauty is white and slim. While her position is not that of a woman with white skin and slim, so, she is not qualified for a beautiful woman.



Picture 1. Imperfect

Picture 1 above showed how the construction of beauty is juxtaposed clearly in the film. The expression between two women in the picture construe how white skin look so confident while black is so uncomfortable. The picture symbolized how the director places his position as a subject and the audience as an object. What in the mind of the director is expressed by the picture above.

Data III/Imperfect_3:50_Fat is Ugly

Debby: "I don't know what else to you seeing you like a stranded whale".

The script above placed fatness is an object position. Debby (Rara's mother) clearly stated that fatness is a monster. She used a whale as metaphor that obese woman is scary and unacceptable. Rara is the object in this case. In another scene, the representation of the discrimination can be seen from the dialogue below.

Data IV/Imperfect_14:16_Fat is Ugly

Rara: "How do you know it's me?"

Debby: "The stair trembles differently."

Data V/Imperfect_1:00:45_Fat is Ugly

Mr. Kevin: "We both know that you're the most capable, but the problem in our industry, what's in your head is not enough. Appearance is also important. Because we have to represent Malathi Brand when we meet the media, investor and all sort people.

In another case, besides body size, women are pressured by another normalcy construction in society. For examples are the shape of the face, curly hair, uneven teeth, and many more.

Data VI/Imperfect_1:26:45_Face too round

Lulu: "but my face is too round."

Data VII/Imperfect_1:01:02_Curly hair

Maria:"I am embarrassed with my broccoli hair."

The data above depicted that social construction about woman body or identity sometime are confirmed by herself. Insecure feeling is the way how a person or woman accept another justification and it is perpetuated by the object action such as change the appearance to reach social right as 'normal woman'. Society generally assumes that a beautiful woman is a woman who has a slim body, white skin and long hair, a modern woman is an ideal woman who are white, tall, long hair and sharp nose. Representational discourse about women has developed in this arena and has previously been justified as a trigger for symbolic violence because women who do not match the representation of women who are developing according to the first category discussed will receive comparisons and marginalization as a form of symbolic violence.

3. Discussion

In contemporary society, certain women's body images become attractive and become normative symbols of femininity. Women always have hopes and aspirations to achieve the normative symbol in various ways. These hopes and ideals then develop into a construction of femininity. In the film *Imperfect*, Rara, who is the main actor, represents how women must struggle hard to achieve a normative symbol of beauty in modern society in Indonesia. Appearance is foremost has been a jargon for decades. Physical appearance has been the hope of every woman since the struggle of the second wave of the

feminist movement and it has greatly contributed to the social, political and cultural rights of women in a patriarchal system, (Chernin, 1981; Wolf, 1991; Faludi, 1992). Rara represents how woman is under pressure to change in order to gain their social and cultural rights. Change is always related to physical form. When Rara is under pressure, it means that she completely positions as object, a victim of the system (men and the environment). However, not all women are mistreated by the system because many women justify physical beauty as the main asset that why they do make-up, strict diets, or plastic surgery. Normative femininity is coming increasingly to be centered on woman's body, not its duties and obligations or indeed its capacity to bear children, but its sexuality, more accurately, its assumed heterosexuality and its appearance. These typical ideals of femininity are being forced upon, but also internalized and perpetuated by women. Foucault stated that this concept is how disciplinary power works on society, (Barky, 1998).

Women can now work which is in the public domain, but women still receive certain patterns or rules to get a job or position. Requirements after requirements will arise when entering the world of work or promotion, especially related to body shape. It assumes that all sectors, especially the body and arenas of social life, have been mechanized. Subjective requirements in the world of work, according to a woman, are like being given a standard pattern by what the body should be formed, especially in the public area, namely the work environment. This can be seen in social life, where women's bodies are treated as an important phenomenon. An attractive body contained in the requirements to get a job or position is interpreted as a need to be visually consumed in the world of work.

Rara as the main character in the film should stand in the liminal space; between independence and insecure feeling. She is smart, creative, and a role model for other employees. But these assets are unable to cover her shortcomings as a fat and unattractive woman. Her appearance hindered her career in the company. Subjective requirements in the world of work are like being given a standard pattern by what the body should be formed, especially in the public area, namely the work environment. In the economic aspect, if there is someone who is not in accordance with the body according to the normative work environment, then they will not be accepted, as well as qualifications in a position at work. Morgenroth and Ryan (2018), stated that it is normal in society to those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished. Body standards in the work environment also have an influence on the political aspect, because the choice of whether someone is attractive or not attractive will be in accordance with the leader's ideology. This can be seen in social life, which treats women's bodies as an important phenomenon. It proves that fat woman is just like an old woman. In cinema, they often portrayed as more unattractive, unfriendly, and unintelligent, (Simonton, 2004).

Film *Imperfect* puts fat and unruly women to confirm hegemonic gender and body politics in opposition. What has so far been left unmentioned is the issue of race and how it relates to the constructs of normative femininity. Whiteness is an essential part of normative femininity in general and also of feminine ideals of physical attractiveness in particular, (Plotz, 2020). This film also highlights that context of white skin and silky hair have traditionally been considered to be the epitome of female beauty, thereby immediately excluding black women from these ideals and situating them as less attractive by default.



Picture 2. *Imperfect*

The two of pictures above show the transformation of Rara's character as both object and subject position. As object, she is placed as a fat and black woman who socially has limited access even though she has good abilities. On the other hand, after transforming, Rara is placed as a subject who actually confirms that being smart is not enough, appearance is the most important thing. She got her position as a manager after turning pretty and white. The fact shows that societal ideals of beauty always made women feel less than adequate because of her dark skin, (Plotz, 2020). In general, fat women have not just been constructed as being outside of normative gender roles in terms of physical appearance but have been considered as 'less than feminine'. Fatness is an essential aspect of one of those stereotypes. Rara might be strongly associated with maternal qualities, but she is asexuality and complete opposition to normative ideals of female beauty nevertheless mark her as not fully feminine. This film shows scenes of symbolic violence embodied in 'othering' towards fat women. In the family, Rara was depressed by the physical appearance of her sister who was considered the ideal

woman and this was perpetuated by the treatment of Rara's mother who always regretted Rara's appearance. Rara also experiences 'othering' at work just because she is fat and unattractive. This 'othering' works systematically, subtly, like a euphemism, works unconsciously and is difficult to recognize. On the one hand, this 'othering' works in the social system as a natural thing and is part of the preservation of correct norms in a society. Hegemony and domination are often tightly bound either through social forces or with daily habits so that they do not require justification, and this experience, by Bourdieu (2020) is referred to as symbolic violence.

4. Conclusion

Film *Imperfect* represent how discrimination on body size works in society and it should be resisted. In the end of the story, film confirmed that appearance is not more important than inner beauty. Humans are created by God with the same degree. Therefore, all forms of discrimination must be eliminated as a form of gratitude and tolerance for all groups or Community. However, the film still provides a dominant view that stereotype the de-feminizing capacities of fatness are used very commonly in the depiction of images of dark women as less than feminine, as indicated by number of characters in the film. Rara as the main character is placed as subject and object position specifically as the representation of the subject of discrimination and the object of the discrimination. The film stands along with the discrimination on one side, on the other side the film is the opposition.

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