Critical discourse analysis on the representation of the female detective character in the *Borderless Fog* film

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Article History

Abstract

This study examines manifestations of gender inequality and power relations in the film *Borderless Fog* (2024), nominated for Best Picture at the Indonesian Film Festival. Employing Mills' Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the research analyzes dialogues involving the female protagonist, Sanja Arunika, to reveal how linguistic choices reflect gender-based power relations. Using a qualitative, interpretive approach, it analyzes the film's English-subtitled script to investigate how the female detective protagonist, Sanja, is constructed in relation to dominant patriarchal discourses and gendered power relations. Selected script segments are contextualized and interpreted to uncover the implications of the stance on gender representation in societal norms. The findings demonstrate that male characters consistently position Sanja as an object through utterances emphasizing her physical appearance, fragility, or external affiliations, thereby diminishing her role and undermining her professional authority. While the film challenges stereotypes by portraying Sanja as competent and resilient, it simultaneously critiques the systemic patriarchal structures embedded in male-dominated professions. The discussion connects these findings to broader feminist discourse, highlighting how media representations can either perpetuate or contest gender inequality. This study contributes to the understanding of gender dynamics in Indonesian cinema, which simultaneously reproduces and subverts gender norms within institutional and cultural contexts.

Abstrak

Analisis wacana kritis pada representasi karakter detektif perempuan dalam film *Kabut Berduri*

Studi ini menelaah manifestasi ketimpangan gender dan relasi kuasa dalam film *Borderless Fog* (2024), yang dinominasikan sebagai Film Terbaik pada Festival Film Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan CDA dari Mills, penelitian ini menganalisis dialog-dialog yang melibatkan tokoh utama perempuan, Sanja Arunika, untuk mengungkap bagaimana pilihan bahasa mencerminkan relasi kuasa berbasis gender. Melalui pendekatan kualitatif interpretatif, penelitian ini menganalisis naskah film berbahasa Inggris guna menginvestigasi bagaimana konstruksi karakter detektif perempuan, Sanja, dikaitkan dengan wacana patriarkal dominan dan relasi kuasa yang berorientasi gender. Segmen-segmen naskah yang terpilih dikontekstualisasi dan diinterpretasi untuk mengungkap sikap implisit terhadap representasi gender dalam norma-norma sosial. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa karakter laki-laki secara konsisten memosisikan Sanja sebagai objek melalui ujaran-ujaran yang menekankan penampilan fisik, kerapuhan, atau afiliasi eksternal dirinya, sehingga mereduksi perannya dan melemahkan otoritas profesionalnya. Meskipun film ini menantang stereotip dengan menggambarkan Sanja sebagai sosok yang kompeten dan tangguh, secara bersamaan juga mengkritik struktur patriarkal sistemik yang tertanam dalam profesi-profesi yang didominasi laki-laki. Bagian pembahasan mengaitkan temuan ini dengan wacana feminis yang lebih luas, serta menyoroti bagaimana representasi media dapat berperan dalam melanggengkan maupun menggugat ketimpangan gender. Studi ini memberikan kontribusi terhadap pemahaman dinamika gender dalam sinema Indonesia, yang secara bersamaan mereproduksi sekaligus menantang norma-norma gender dalam konteks institusional dan kultural.

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1   Introduction

Borderless Fog (*Kabut Berduri*), an Indonesian crime investigation-thriller film directed by Edwin, garnered multiple nominations at the 2024 Indonesian Film Festival, including categories such as Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, Best Leading Actor, Best Supporting Actor, Best Cinematography, Best Visual Effects, Best Original Score, Best Sound Editing, Best Makeup, and Best Costume Design. The film centers on Sanja Arunika, a female detective from Jakarta tasked with solving a murder case on the border of Kalimantan and Malaysia. Through her interactions with figures such as the local police chief and an army officer who undermines her, Sanja emerges as a resilient and self-reliant individual. While the film primarily revolves around a serial murder case, it also addresses broader social issues, including Dayak local wisdom, faith, language, and culture, as well as themes such as human trafficking, bureaucratic corruption, and ethnic conflicts. The narrative is further enriched by anthropological research contributed by Lumenta (2011).

Historically, Indonesian crime films have predominantly featured male protagonists, with female investigators rarely occupying central roles. The inclusion of a female detective in *Borderless Fog* marks a notable shift in the representation of women within Indonesian cinema. This development challenges entrenched gender stereotypes and highlights the limited portrayal of women in positions of authority in media. By placing a woman at the forefront of a crime thriller, the film disrupts traditional gender norms that often confine women to passive or secondary roles (Putri & Noviana, 2022). Examining the status of women within a society serves as a fundamental indicator for assessing the level of civilizational advancement (Rahim, 2024). This narrative progression provides a compelling basis for critical discourse analysis (CDA), particularly through Sara Mills' framework, which examines how media constructs and positions female identities within societal and cultural contexts.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) investigates the relationship between linguistic choices in spoken and written texts and the socio-cultural contexts in which these texts are situated. Dijk (1999) underscores that CDA aims to reveal how domination, inequality, discrimination, and the misuse of social power are reproduced, sustained, or contested through textual practices across various social and political domains. A specialized branch of CDA, feminist discourse analysis, adopts a feminist interpretive framework to assess the extent to which a given discourse aligns with feminist principles. It is acknowledged that the functioning of gender ideologies and institutionalized power imbalances between—and within—groups of women and men is intricately interconnected with other social identities and varies across cultural contexts (Lazar, 2007). This study employs Mills' model of feminist discourse analysis, which specifically examines the representation of women in media texts.

Mills (2005) proposes a tripartite framework for feminist textual analysis, encompassing the roles of actors, the subject-object dynamic, and reader positioning. First, she emphasizes examining how actors—individuals or entities mentioned in the text—are positioned within discourse, as this influences their perceived roles and reflects broader media portrayals. Second, Mills investigates the distinction between subjects (active agents) and objects (passive entities), highlighting how such positioning often marginalizes women by limiting their agency, as seen in the portrayal of Sanja Arunika, the female detective in *Borderless Fog*. Here, narrative constructions shape both the representation and the audience's perception of gendered identities. Third, Mills underscores the interactive relationship between media producers and readers, wherein texts are crafted to guide audience interpretation through embedded cultural codes, reinforcing or challenging prevailing gender ideologies. This analytical approach thus recognizes the co-construction of meaning by the text and its readers, revealing the ideological functions of media discourse in shaping gender roles.

The study is situated within a growing body of research that uses Mills' CDA to examine gender representation in media, especially in films and news texts. The previous studies cited in this article provide a variety of contexts. Nurhasanah ((2022), Dewi and Hamdani (2023) and Hartutik and Sayuti (2023) unveil news or media that represent gender-biased violence or objectification. In addition, Adriani et al. (2020), Fitriawan et al. (2025), and Azhari (2025) uses feminist discourse analysis in films, especially those exploring female identity, beauty standards, or sexual objectification. Supriyono and Mathew (2024) and Suryaningsih and Sayuti (2022) analyse the representations of women in literature or online platforms which explore either institutional misogyny or patriarchal cultural narratives. Murtiningsih et al., (2017) and Dewi & Hamdani (2023) highlight systemic biases in media portrayals of women. Their study, however, primarily focus on genres like drama, horror, or romance. Meanwhile, Wibawani & Anwar (2023) and Nurussa'adah and Yudhawirawan (2023) focused on the genre of thriller film.

Related to the social context of women position in male-dominated professions or institutional power, Asheva and Tasyarasita (2022) and Baghbaderani (2024) critique gendered power dynamics but often examine Western contexts or non-professional roles. Indonesian films featuring female leads (e.g., *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*) have been analyzed, yet in the context of law enforcement or institutional corruption Adriani et al., (2020). Lazar, (2007) and Rahim (2024) emphasize institutionalized sexism but lack a specific analysis of how dialogue reinforces these structures in Southeast Asian, or specifically, in Indonesian cinema. However, most of these studies focused on female victimization, sexual objectification, and passive or reactive female characters. Other researchers, such as Rachma & Ulya (2021) and Tuhepaly and Mazaid (2022) applied semiotic analysis rather than discourse-based approaches.

The gap addressed by this paper directly responds to limitations in prior research by focusing on underrepresented genres (crime-thrillers) in Indonesian gender studies. This diverges from most previous research, which typically focuses on female characters in romantic dramas, horror, or advertising. In addition, this study fills the gap by providing an empirical discourse analysis of film scripts. Unlike earlier studies that focus on women as sexual objects or victims, this study focuses on how a woman in a position of authority is linguistically undermined and marginalized. The conflict here revolves around professional legitimacy. It expands Mills' CDA to identify subject-object positioning and show how media constructs reader interpretation and reinforces or subverts gender ideologies through narrative framing. To unveil the social implication, this study links individual agency to systemic critique (corrupted police), a nuance absent in studies like Perangin-angin et al. (2023). The research integrates a critique ((institutional corruption and complicity with gender bias, examining how systemic pressures (e.g., internal police dynamics, threats, suppression) silence the protagonist even when she acts righteously.

Feminist CDA has been widely applied to analyze media and film representations of women, typically highlighting objectification or stereotyping in victim or passive roles. This paper fills a gap by analyzing a female detective in a thriller-crime genre, showing how professionalism is undermined through language in a male-dominated institution, while simultaneously critiquing systemic corruption. The novelty of this study lies in several key aspects. First, it analyzes a crime thriller film—*Borderless Fog*—a genre traditionally dominated by male characters, but which in this case features a female detective as the central figure. This marks a significant deviation from conventional representational patterns. Second, the study does not focus solely on the sexual objectification or victimization of women but rather explores how women's professional authority is systematically undermined through the discourse of surrounding male characters. Third, it presents a critique of the interrelated institutional forces of the police and patriarchal systems, particularly in mechanisms of pressure, neglect, and the delegitimization of women with integrity. Fourth, by employing Mills'

framework, this research expands its analytical scope beyond subject-object positioning to include how media shapes reader positioning, thereby offering a broader interpretive dimension on gender ideology within film narratives.

Given these considerations, it is imperative to scrutinize how *Borderless Fog* presents a female character who demonstrates that professional competence is not contingent on gender but on resilience, integrity, and skill. Additionally, the film's portrayal of patriarchal perspectives embedded in the script warrants examination, particularly in light of its groundbreaking depiction of a female detective within the underrepresentation of this genre in Indonesian cinema. To provide a detailed analysis of the female detective's position in *Borderless Fog*, the following research questions are proposed: (1) How is the leading female character linguistically represented and objectified in *Borderless Fog*?; (2) What linguistic utterances are used to construct the female detective's identity?; and (3) What social implications arise from these representations?

By applying Mills' CDA framework, this research holds significance for the following reasons. Firstly, it endorses the understanding of gender representation in Indonesian cinema. This study contributes to the growing body of research on gender representation in Indonesian film by analyzing how *Borderless Fog* portrays its female detective. It examines her character traits, actions, and positioning within the narrative. Secondly, it explores challenges to traditional gender roles. The film's focus on a female detective provides an opportunity to assess how it challenges or reinforces traditional gender roles. Does the film offer a nuanced and complex portrayal of a female protagonist, or does it ultimately conform to stereotypical expectations? Thirdly, this study contributes to feminist discourse. It aligns with feminist scholarship that seeks to understand and challenge how media and popular culture perpetuate gender inequality, as exemplified by the studies mentioned previously. This research advances feminist CDA by offering a textually grounded, genre-specific analysis of gender dynamics in Indonesian cinema, while contextualizing its findings within global feminist media theory. Its novelty lies in its methodological precision (Mills' CDA applied to dialogue) and thematic focus (women in authority vs. institutional patriarchy). Thus, this study makes a novel contribution to the discourse on gender in Indonesian media by presenting an interdisciplinary perspective that bridges feminist critique, critical discourse analysis, and contemporary cinematic genre studies.

2   Methods

This study employs Mills' Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework to analyze the discourse within the film *Borderless Fog*. Mills' approach, which integrates feminist perspectives and emphasizes the dynamics of subject-object positioning and power relations, is particularly effective for deconstructing the complex power dynamics and representational practices depicted in the film. Adopting a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in Mills' CDA, this research examines the verbal utterances in *Borderless Fog* to explore how the film both constructs and challenges dominant narratives, power relations, and patriarchal perspectives surrounding its female detective protagonist. The primary data source for this study is the script of *Borderless Fog*, which contains dialogues among the characters. The script, derived from the English subtitles available on Netflix, serves as the foundational text for analysis. Secondary data includes scholarly articles that situate the film within its broader cultural and societal context. The researcher identifies and selects specific segments of the script that illustrate the positioning of the female lead character, Sanja, as well as utterances that reflect her role within subject-object power relations and expressions of gender bias or patriarchal viewpoints. These data are then interpreted within their contextual framework to uncover the social and ideological implications of the film's representation of women. Through this analytical process, the study aims to reveal how the film navigates and negotiates gendered power structures and societal norms.

3   Findings

Using Mills' CDA approach to identify utterances in the script of *Borderless Fog* that indicate the position of women as objects of power relations, these are the data emerging when the woman, Sanja, is treated in ways that reveal gendered power relations. Below are the details:

Figure 1. Data from script line number 58 (00: 03:37)
[Source: Researcher's documentation]

The utterance "a hotshot detective from Jakarta" is stated by Panca, the police officer who is in charge in the station. This utterance is in context of introductory statement from a police chief to announce Sanja assignment to investigate a murder case in Kalimantan. Although the place origin, Jakarta, seems superior as the capital city of Indonesia with roles as the center of governance and economy, the attribute of "hotshot", that casually means "displaying skills flamboyantly" reduces the image of superiority. The utterance suggests a potential subversion of traditional gender norms that often marginalize women in positions of authority. The description with the qualifier "hotshot," may also reduce the subject's complexity, framing her as a visual object or as an ornament in a male-dominated space.

Figure 2. Data from script line number 65 (00:04:21)
[Source: Researcher's Documentation]
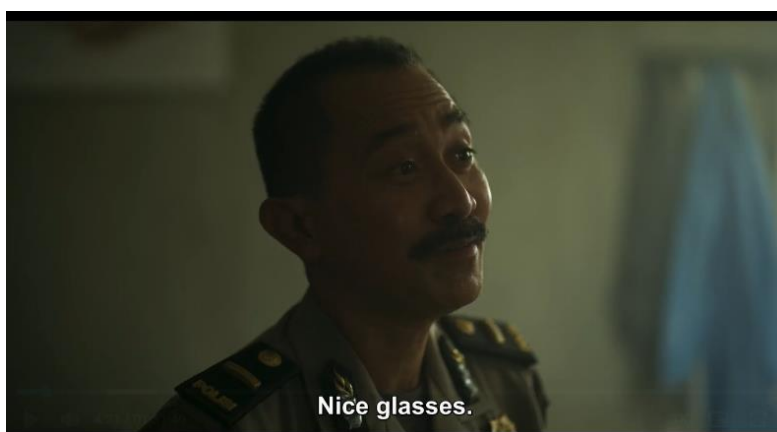
This complimentary comment, "Nice glasses. Very fashionable**.**" comes from Panca, the police chief who tries to be friendly and get familiar at the first meeting with Sanja. However, the line subtly expresses that the chief observes and evaluates Sanja from her fashion style. The utterance represents the female's worthiness of notice around an accessory rather than her inherent qualities, actions, or

professional expectations at first meeting. By focusing on the glasses and describing them as "fashionable," the line risks objectifying the subject by reducing them to a single characteristic—style. This echoes media tendencies to present women in a way that prioritizes their physical attributes or accessories over their intellectual, emotional, or professional contributions. By commenting on her glasses and calling them "fashionable," the chief shifts the conversation from her professional identity to her appearance. This creates a gendered positioning: the woman is evaluated for her looks, not her skills, rank, or institutional function. This is a form of discursive othering, where women are framed within feminine domains (fashion, aesthetics), even when they occupy roles that are institutionally masculinized (police, authority).

The statement is **polite** and **complimentary** on the surface, but it performs **power-laden functions** as (1) **evaluative** that the chief positions himself as someone with the authority to comment on her appearance; and (2) p**ersonal** that he takes the interaction into a **personal, aesthetic register**, bypassing the professional tone expected in formal introductions. According to Mills (2009), **politeness is not neutral**; it often **masks power asymmetries**. Compliments from superiors—especially when gendered—can function to **diminish or domesticate authority**.

Figure 3. Data from script line number 174 (00:11:42)
**[Source: Researcher's Documentation]**

This line from Bujang, a male character, though seemingly cooperative, positions Sanja as a "police lady," a label that draws attention to her gender in a professional setting where it should be irrelevant. The choice of words "lady" underlines her deviation from the male norm, both highlighting and objectifying her gender rather than her professional title as a police officer. It exhibits how she is outstanding because of her gender in a male-dominated profession, instead of her job performance. The marked noun *"police lady"* is a gender-marked form of the neutral term *"police officer"*. It makes her gender visible and salient, whereas male officers are rarely called *"police men"* in casual speech. This signals an exception, not the norm—a woman in a man's role. Mills highlights how marked terms marginalize women in male-dominated fields. It is not just a description—it is a discursive positioning that suggests difference, novelty, or improper belonging. The phrase "Hey, hey" is informal, repetitive, and potentially mocking or overly familiar, which can cause underestimation or impoliteness. It lacks the professional deference expected in addressing a law enforcement officer. Mills notes that informal or mocking address forms are often used to undermine women's authority—especially when they are in powerful positions. It is a politeness strategy violation that reveals an attempt to relationally diminish her status.

From Mills' feminist CDA lens, "Hey, hey, police lady" is not an innocent or neutral phrase. By combining casual address ("hey hey") with gender marking ("police lady"), the speaker subtly

positions her not as a serious authority figure, but as a spectacle (someone to be pointed out), an outsider (not a 'real' police officer), or possibly as amusing or trivial. The use of this expression constructs women as "play-actors" in positions of authority, rather than legitimate holders of power. It is a gendered discursive act that (1) marks the woman's gender in a way that undermines professional identity; (2) uses informality to reduce the seriousness of her role; (3) reinforces the idea that women in authority are novelties, not norm-bearers; and (4) constructs a power dynamic where the speaker playfully or dismissively challenges institutional respect. Such linguistic choices, though brief, reveal how gender hierarchies are maintained in everyday speech. This represents a moment of symbolic subordination—a subtle, normalized way of reminding a woman in power that she is out of place.

Figure 4. Data from script line number 193 (00:13:04)
[Source: Researcher's Documentation]
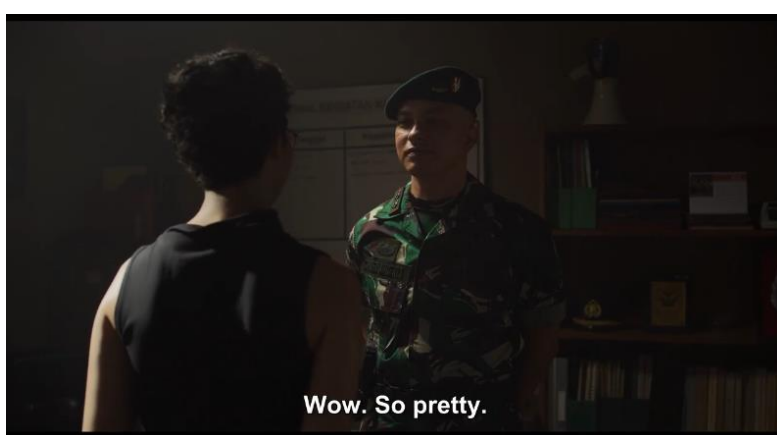
Upon meeting Sanja, an army officer, Daniel, comments on her physical appearance rather than her professional qualifications. The utterance "Wow. So pretty." seems like a compliment. However, there is a stereotype that pretty girl tends to be stupid, spoiled, and weak. Thus, this expression indicates underestimation. Moreover, in male-dominated jobs, any single woman will look pretty in the middle of male partners as she is watched by her physical appearance instead of her competence. The use of "Wow" indicates surprise or admiration, which suggests unexpected beauty in a non-beauty setting (i.e., a woman in uniform), and a breach of perceived norms—the subtext being: *"You're attractive even though you're in this serious role."* Meanwhile, the word "pretty" is infantilizing (compared to terms like "attractive" or "striking"), associated with softness, passivity, and traditional femininity. This word directly evaluates a woman's appearance. Thus, the utterance "Wow. So pretty." implies evaluative control: he assesses her worth visually, and contributes to a gendered imbalance: a male officer asserting dominance by reducing a female officer to an object of admiration. Mills would point out that this is not "just a compliment," but a power move wrapped in politeness—a subtle way of reinforcing patriarchal norms that women's value lies in how they look, not what they do. It reinforces the idea that femininity and professional authority are incompatible, and that beauty is an intrusion or anomaly in masculinized institutions like the army or police. This utterance frames Sanja as an object of visual appreciation rather than an authoritative figure. Such remarks diminish her professional identity, aligning her more with societal expectations of beauty rather than competence. It implies a representation of the female as the object of appearance based on the patriarchal view. According to Mills, it is a classic discursive move that frames the woman as an object of visual pleasure, not as a professional peer. It operates through gendered positioning, placing the woman in a role to be looked at, rather than respected for competence.

Figure 5. Data from script line number 206 (00:14:03)
[Source: Researcher's Documentation]

Your father asked me to look out for you.
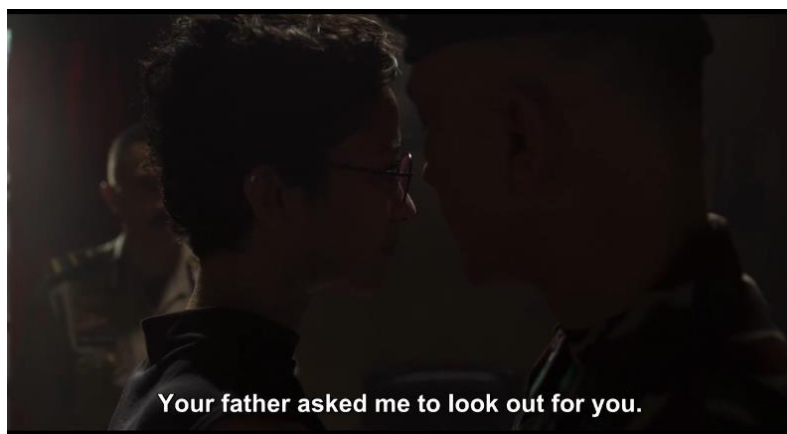
A male character reveals he has been tasked with overseeing her, implying a lack of trust in her ability to handle the role independently. The utterance "Your father asked me to look out for you." suggests an underlying belief that women need additional support or supervision in roles of authority, reinforcing gendered power relation. The phrase "Your father asked me…" refers to a male-male agreement, positioning the woman as the object of a private understanding or duty between two patriarchal figures. It represents a woman as an object of take-and-give between two men. In this case, the giver is the woman's father and the taker is the woman's supervisor. It is a representation of how female is objectified as weak party who need patron to protect and nurture.

The male supervisor positions himself as a surrogate guardian ("look out for you"), implying that the female officer's safety or success is not her own responsibility but something delegated to him by another man (her father). The father is invoked as an authorizing figure—his request legitimizes the supervisor's intervention, framing the workplace relationship as an extension of familial (male) oversight. The female officer is positioned as: (1) a dependent entity (needing male protection); (2) responsibility passed between men ("your father asked me"), rather than an autonomous professional; and (3) an object of transaction—her presence in the workplace is mediated by male figures, not her own competence. This mirrors Claude Lévi-Strauss's concept of women as objects of exchange in patriarchal systems, where male social bonds are strengthened through control over women (Reichert, 2003). The female officer is dislocated from autonomy. Her professional identity is overridden by a personal, paternalistic narrative. Two men manage her protection, establishing her as something to be looked after, not listened to or consented. The whole utterance introduces that the father's concern personalizes the relationship and undercuts the woman's professional status. It frames her presence in the workplace as conditional, requiring male sanction or oversight. This resonates with Mills' observation (2009) that *"gendered discourse often undermines professional female identities by importing familial or emotional associations."* The following excerpt supports the above statement.

Daniel said to Sanja: "Be careful. And if this gets too much for you, you contact me." Sanja is advised to seek help if she cannot manage her work. This expression indicates the underestimation of female performance in doing a job. Mills (2009) emphasizes that *"certain linguistic acts, while appearing caring or neutral, can function as positioning mechanisms to subordinate others, particularly women."* Though the sentence seems caring, they suggest an expectation of her fragility or incompetence, reducing her position of power. The imperative "Be careful" carries an implicit assumption that the female officer is in need of protection, which positions her as less competent or more vulnerable than man. It functions as a paternalistic warning, reinforcing a traditional male

protector/female protected binary (Reichert, 2003). The directive "*Be careful*" assumes that the female officer might not be cautious enough on her own, subtly undermining her professional judgment.

Figure 6. Data from script line number 210 (00:14:15)
[Source: Researcher's Documentation]

The clause "If this gets too much for you" implies anticipation of failure or being overwhelmed. The conditional "if" hedges the statement but still suggests a lack of resilience, and the phrase "for you" personalizes potential failure. It indicates individual inadequacy, not external challenges. The conditional "if this gets too much for you" implies that the task is inherently risky or overwhelming for women, reinforcing stereotypes about women's resilience in high-pressure roles. This aligns with Mills' idea that women are often discursively constructed as emotionally vulnerable or unstable, especially in male-dominated professional contexts.

The clause "you contact me" suggests male superiority in a dominant, authoritative role, reinforcing hierarchy. It also grants the supervisor control over the resolution, positioning men as the problem-solver while relegating women to a dependent role. While it might appear supportive, it maintains inequality in the patriarchal dynamic life —man is powerful than woman. Mills discusses how supportive language can disguise power asymmetry, especially when male authority is softened through seemingly caring discourse.

The whole utterance employs benevolent sexism—a form of sexism that appears positive but still perpetuates gender hierarchies. The supervisor may believe he is being supportive, yet his language reinforces the idea that women need men oversight. In institutional hierarchies (e.g., law enforcement, corporate settings), such language can subtly maintain male authority by positioning women as less capable. The supervisor's speech act functions as a regulatory discourse, subtly reminding the female officer of her subordinate position while masking it as care.

The scene when Sanja tries to arrest Agam, a person of interest, shows another support for the idea of **men's** abjection over women's power. Agam reports Sanja's action to the Malaysian police officer. The term "girl" is a gendered diminutive, implying youth, inexperience, or lack of seriousness. It is often used to infantilize adult women, especially in positions of power. It contrasts heavily with her actual role as a police officer, where terms like "officer", "sergeant", or "detective" would imply authority. Mills argues that gendered language like "girl" undermines professional identity and recasts the woman as emotionally driven, immature, or not fully legitimate in her role. The use of deictic expression "this" with pointing gesture performs a public naming and objectification. The speaker identifies and labels her as a threat or perpetrator, while drawing attention

to her gender and body, not her institutional role. This enacts symbolic control: she is not Officer X, but "this girl"—stripped of title, rank, or neutrality.

Figure 7. Data from script line number 670 (00:49:45)
[Source: Researcher's Documentation]

The utterance *"she is assaulting me"* reverses expected roles that (1) the **law enforcer becomes the criminal**; and (2) the **male civilian claims victimhood**. The male character in this scene asserts himself as a victim while simultaneously framing Sanja as an aggressor and puts aside her authority as a police officer by referring her as "girl". The **tag question "See?"** functions as a **bid for validation** (to bystanders, public, or authorities) and an invitation to **observe the female officer's 'wrongdoing'**. It implies that he seeks external reinforcement of his interpretation. This suggests an attempt to solidify his control over the narrative. This **discursive reversal challenges institutional power**, but does so by **leveraging gender norms**: implying that a **woman acting physically** is unnatural, aggressive, or out of control. Mills would argue this is a rhetorical strategy rooted in **gendered double standards**: a man accused of assault may be expected, but a woman using force—even lawfully—is framed as **deviant or monstrous**. This reflects what Mills describes as **discursive manipulation**: appealing to **shared gendered assumptions** (e.g., that women are too emotional or out of control) to delegitimize female authority.

From Mills' feminist CDA perspective, the utterance "This girl here, she is assaulting me. See?" is a discursive act of gendered delegitimation. It does the following: (1) reduces a female officer's authority by replacing professional titles with a gendered diminutive; (2) reverses power relations by claiming victimhood in a way that weaponizes gender stereotypes; (3) uses public performance and objectification to undermine her institutional position; and (4) reflects deep-rooted patriarchal discourse, where a woman enacting power is seen as inherently suspect or threatening. The female officer, though institutionally empowered, is linguistically and symbolically repositioned by the male speaker as unruly, illegitimate, and emotionally dangerous—a framing that can have real-world consequences in how others respond to her authority.

When Sanja shares her thoughts and stories to her police partner, Thomas, she tells him how society view women in public. The clause "**I only got in because of my father" shows women's position in society. Women are depicted as low and inferior.** This line underscores a recurring narrative where women's accomplishments are dismissed or attributed to nepotism or external factors rather than their abilities. This reflects a gendered discourse that undermines women's credibility and capabilities in professional settings. The discourse around "underestimation" highlights her

marginalization within the institution of the police academy, which likely reflects broader societal stereotypes about women's roles in traditionally male-dominated fields.

Figure 8. Data from script line number 927 (01:14:13)
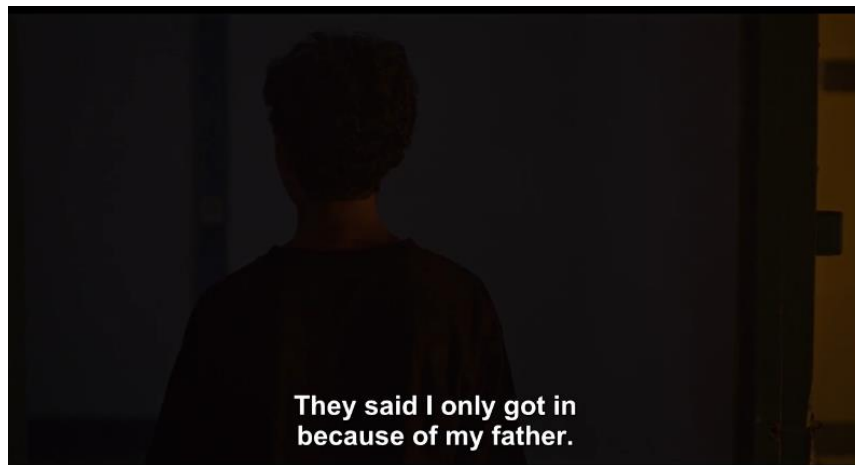**[Source: Researcher's Documentation]**

Figure 9. Data from script line number 949 (01:15:29)
[Source: Researcher's Documentation]

Sanja continues her narrative to Thomas **"But if I come clean, all my mates, all my superiors, they've all got their careers now. I'll be taking them all down with me. They threatened me. 'Don't be a saint,' they said. 'It's too late. We've all cleaned up your shit.'"** Sanja positions herself in a moral dilemma, expressing a desire to act ethically ("come clean, take responsibility, apologize") while acknowledging the cascading consequences of such actions for others ("I'll be taking them all down with me"). This self-positioning as both remorseful and constrained by systemic pressures reflects a conflict between individual and collective power structures. She reveals systemic complexity within her professional environment, highlighting how superiors and peers exert control through threats ("They threatened me," "Don't be a saint"). This illustrates an institutional power structure that prioritizes self-preservation and collective cover-ups over individual accountability or justice. The line "We've all cleaned up your shit" signifies both collective responsibility and shared corruption, creating a power relation where Sanja is pressured into silence by the system.

Figure 10. Data from script line number 1083 (01:26:43)
[Source: Researcher's Documentation]

As it is unveiled by Sanja that the head of the police station, Panca, is a corrupted cop deeply involved the human trafficking case, Panca condemns her directly in front of Sanja's partner, Thomas: "The bitch is gone. She came to the black market. Your girl is causing more trouble." The subject of the statement, Sanja, is referred to in demeaning and derogatory terms "the bitch", positioning her as an object of scorn, contempt, and delegitimization. This term is not only insulting but also loaded with connotations of aggression, unreasonableness, and worthlessness, reinforcing negative stereotypes about women. Sanja is objectified through the dehumanizing label "bitch" and her relational positioning "your girl". This dual objectification reinforces her lack of identity or voice within the discourse, reducing her to a problem to be addressed rather than a person with authority. It also indicates that the male character who spills the utterances disrespects and feels threatened by Sanja's performance. In addition, by referring to Sanja as "your girl," the utterance positions the woman in relation to another (likely male) character, further emphasizing her lack of autonomy within the narrative. The phrase "your girl is causing more trouble" perpetuates the trope of women as disruptors or problems in male-dominated narratives. This framing shifts responsibility for her actions onto the male figure she is associated with, suggesting that her behavior is his burden or failure to control, although her actions prove that she is a smart and professional police officer.

4   Discussion

Based on the findings to answer the first research question, the female detective, is linguistically represented in a way that both challenges and reinforces patriarchal norms. She is objectified through comments focusing on her physical appearance, fashion, and femininity (e.g., "Nice glasses. Very fashionable."). Male characters refer to her with diminutive or gendered labels like "police lady" or "your girl," which trivialize her professional role. She is often spoken to or about in patronizing tones, as seen in advice like "Be careful. And if this gets too much for you, contact me," implying fragility and lack of competence. At moments of professional achievement, she is still dismissed or insulted, as in "The bitch is gone," showing how success does not exempt her from misogynistic language. These discursive patterns reveal how language is used to undermine her authority and to position her as a secondary or problematic figure within a male-dominated professional space.

As a female protagonist operating in a male-dominated profession, Sanja defies traditional gender stereotypes that often depict women as soft-spoken, submissive, weak, or passive. Her character

challenges the male-gaze construct (Jackson, 2023), which typically frames women as objects fulfilling patriarchal fantasies. Reichert (2003) refers to this construction as *sexual embeds* or *subliminal sexuality*. For years, the media have consistently portrayed women's appeal primarily in terms of sexual objectification; therefore, the female body is frequently exploited for commercial gain (Madina and Kumala, 2020). Such representations are not always overt, especially in terms of how women are positioned as objects intended to fulfill male desires (Bungin, 2005).

The second question of the research refers to several key utterances from both male and female characters that contribute to constructing Sanja's identity. External utterances by male characters like "A hotshot detective from Jakarta" subtly diminish her credentials by using a colloquial label that implies showiness. Another utterance by saying "Police lady" – highlights her gender in a setting where professionalism should be prioritized. The other mentions "Your girl is causing more trouble" – reduces her to a relational object rather than an autonomous agent. Internal utterances by Sanja herself like "When I joined the police academy, everyone underestimated me…" – establishes her as resilient and determined to prove her worth. Additionally her own utterance "I want to come clean, take responsibility…" – shows her ethical integrity and personal accountability, contrasting with the institutional corruption around her. Through these utterances, Sanja's identity is shaped as both marginalized and morally steadfast, offering a complex figure who embodies resistance within systemic inequality.

By applying Mill's CDA, the representations of Sanja in *Borderless Fog* carry several significant social implications elaborated below.

4.1 Reader Positioning

The narrative in the film guides readers to view Sanja as an "exceptional woman" in a male-dominated space, which paradoxically emphasizes her gender over her competence. Still, her resilience in solving the murder case is coupled with her struggle to prove her professionalism beyond her gender. The film readers are vulnerable to constructing her image as both a tough detective and an ordinary woman with complex past stories and trauma. However, Sanja's persistence and strategic leadership reframe her as a resilient subject, potentially inspiring readers to critique the systemic barriers she faces. Her interactions with male colleagues show how she manages to survive in integrity in institutional biases. This portrayal of Sanja represents how society behaves towards a female police officer, which tends to be underestimating, disrespectful, and misogynic (as referred in the data analysis on figures 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 11).

The narrative guides audiences to view Sanja as both exceptional and vulnerable, a tension noted in studies of female detectives globally (Rahim, 2024). This duality risks reinforcing the "double bind" women face in authoritative roles (Mills, 2005). By contextualizing findings with references like Asheva & Tasyarasita (2022) and Baghbaderani (2024), the discussion underscores how *Borderless Fog* reflects and resists Indonesia's gendered sociocultural norms.

4.2 Media Representation

By situating the script within Mills's CDA framework, there are some highlights on how this film represent some issues as follow.

4.2.1 Challenging and reinforcing gender stereotypes

Sanja's success and moral aspirations challenge traditional stereotypes of women as either incapable or morally compromised in authoritative roles. Her character disrupts these narratives by emphasizing competence and ethical integrity. While Sanja's journey is empowering, the narrative

also exposes the systemic marginalization of women in male-dominated institutions. Her need to "work hard to prove herself" reflects the persistent inequities that demand extra labor from women to gain acceptance (as referred in the data analysis on figure 9 and 10). This evidence supports the perspective that mainstream media often apply unequal standards to the representation of women, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in comparison to their male counterparts (Murtiningsih et al., 2017).

Sanja's success challenges stereotypes that women are unfit for high-stakes leadership. However, the script's focus on her gender—via fashion comments and derogatory labels—shows how deeply embedded these biases are, even in narratives of empowerment. Her portrayal aligns with findings by Adriani et al. (2020) and Wibawani & Anwar (2023) on the persistence of patriarchal framing in Indonesian media. Sanja's struggle for authority reveals the challenges women face in masculine professions, where they are often treated as outsiders. On one side, Sanja plays a role as a pillar of professionalism in a male-dominated occupation. On the other hand, she is also portrayed as a vulnerable person due to her dark background story. The stereotype of how to view women is dominantly performed by male characters. The focus of male characters on Sanja's appearance and style aligns with traditional gendered narratives that often position women as objects to be admired rather than subjects to be taken seriously, particularly when the power relation is not equal due to the job rank. This finding is in line with Feng's (2023) who observes that recent cinematography on women tends to break the patriarchal order.

4.2.2 Critique of institutional power

The systemic complicity backgrounded Sanja's past story reveals how institutions can perpetuate harm by prioritizing collective preservation over justice, providing critical commentary on the structures that enable such practices. Sanja's ideality to "come clean" frames her narrative to be righteous. This phenomenon represents the actual perspective of society on law institution in Indonesia. Essentially, Sanja's persistent efforts to assert herself despite systemic biases challenge patriarchal norms, suggesting a critique of the broader societal structures depicted in the film (as referred in the data analysis on figures 9 and 10). Sanja's struggle against corruption parallels findings by Dewi & Hamdani (2023), who note how institutional power structures silence women. The film's portrayal of systemic complicity (e.g., superiors threatening Sanja, Figure 10) aligns with Lazar's (2007) argument that gendered oppression is often institutionalized. Sanja's struggle against corruption and silencing mirrors real-world critiques of law enforcement in Indonesia. Her ethical stance challenges patriarchal norms and reflects broader systemic issues, as echoed in studies by Supriyono & Mathew (2024) and Fitriawan et al. (2025).

5 Conclusion

The female protagonist, Sanja, in the film *Borderless Fog* is verbally represented by male characters in a manner that diminishes her capabilities and authority, portraying her as trivial and infantile. Sanja is objectified through utterances that predominantly focus on her physical appearance and personal style, rather than her professional competence. Additionally, she is depicted as fragile and vulnerable, largely due to references to her past trauma. Even when Sanja successfully solves the case, the male characters respond not with appreciation but with condemnation. Her portrayal in a male-dominated profession not only reflects societal perceptions of women as burdensome and vulnerable but also serves as a critique of the corrupt institutional systems that perpetuate such vulnerabilities. Through this representation, the film underscores the intersection of gender inequality and systemic corruption, challenging the entrenched patriarchal norms that marginalize women in positions of authority. This finding confirms the previous research on the trend of women in cinematography, which challenges the patriarchal tradition.

For future researchers, it is suggested to further explore the representation of female protagonists in other thriller genre films, both within Indonesian cinema and beyond, to examine how gendered discourse operates across different cultural and narrative contexts. Subsequent research could expand the scope by comparing multiple films or incorporating audience reception analysis to assess how such portrayals are interpreted by viewers. Investigating how female agency is constructed or undermined in various narrative structures will deepen the understanding of how genre conventions interact with patriarchal ideologies and contribute to broader conversations on gender, power, and media representation.

Disclosure Statement

The author(s) claim there is no conflict of interest.

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