

Gender, Signs, and Existence: A Semiotic Interpretation of A Normal Woman Through Simone de Beauvoir's Existentialist Feminism

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Abstract

A Normal Woman (Lucky Kuswandi, 2025) is the focus of this research which uses a qualitative descriptive method with media text analysis of Lucky Kuswandi's *A Normal Woman* (2025). Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory, and Simone De Beauvoir's Feminist Theory are combined and used as lenses to explore the ways in which visual elements, dialogue, symbols and narrative patterns create meanings of femininity within Modern Patriarchal Culture. In addition to using both theories as lenses to explore the representations of women in *A Normal Woman*, this research used Barthes' signifier and signified as well as the stage level of Denotation, Connotation and Myth to analyze the ways in which film signs have multiple meanings that relate to each other and create an interconnected system of meaning. This research finds that *A Normal Woman* presents a critical perspective of the ways patriarchy controls women bodies, emotions, and identities through the use of these mechanisms, stereotypes, subordination and objectification, where they are interconnected as a system of control that confines the main character in this film, in a state of immanence. At the same time, *A Normal Woman* shows the resistance through Milla's movement towards transcendence as she begins to reclaim her bodily autonomy, self awareness and existential agency back. Overall, *A Normal Woman* functions as a cultural critique that questions the dominant ideologies of what it means to be a normal woman, and the way in which gender is presented in this movie illustrates how gender is a social and ideologically constructed and therefore not a predetermined or by fate. Through combining Barthes' semiotics with Beauvoir's feminist theory, this research hopes to make a contribution to the fields of feminist film and communication studies. Specifically, this research demonstrates the potential for contemporary Indonesian Cinema to provide a site for ideological negotiation and the redefinition of women's existence.

Keywords: Roland Barthes' semiotics, existentialist feminism, gender representation, patriarchal culture, feminist film studies.

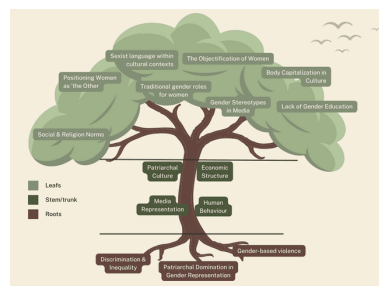
INTRODUCTION

Gender has long been a central issue in cultural, literary, and communication studies, particularly in relation to how femininity and

masculinity are socially constructed through communication practices and cultural texts (Fixmer-Oraiz & Wood, 2019). One of the most influential contributions in gender theory is Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), which explains how women are historically and symbolically constructed as *the Other* in relation to men as the universal *Self* (Beauvoir, 2010). Women in patriarchy societies are rarely seen as individuals, and thus are often defined, judged, and defined based on male-centered norms and expectations that determine their actions, appearance, and lives. Simone de Beauvoir finds that women are positioned as *the Other*, while men on the other hand is the Subject, who defines meaning, values, and social norms. This means that experiences for women are often not acknowledged as expressions of freedom or agency, but rather as part of the social process that has been constructed.

But, this still holds much relevance in a modern society, particularly in Indonesia, where gender is still largely misunderstood as a natural extension of biological sex. While the line between sex and gender is frequently ambiguous, this has led to rigid role differentiations that shape women's identities in the home, economy and in the public. These divisions can lead to multiple forms of gender injustice, including marginalization, subordination, stereotyping, violence, and a double burden for women. These inequalities may appear to be normalized in everyday life, but they can be perpetuated in cultural systems that continuously repeat patriarchal values.

Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework of Gender Inequality Analysis



Source: Developed by the author

The gender inequality tree model is used for this analysis primarily to discuss gender injustice in context, rather than an isolated or individual problem. Gender inequality does not arise from any one cause, but is built on multiple bases that exist to maintain a larger system. These roots provide support to the trunk, symbol of patriarchy, media, and social behaviour. Out of this structure are visible outcomes for each element that interlocks with and reinforces the other to create a complex system that normalizes marginalization, subordination, stereotyping, violence, and the double burden women bear.

These injustices that positioned women as secondary beings whose primary roles are confined to the domestic sphere are further maintained through symbolic and discursive practices, often said in these kinds of words “kitchen, bed, well” (Rohmah, 2021). Women often face social and religious pressure from the society and their surroundings for being perceived as deviating from their natural roles when they attempt to move beyond these prescribed roles. Similar patterns have also been identified in various studies, from the subordinate representation of women in textbooks and print media to existential feminist analyses of the film *Bombshell*, which depict women as *the Other* within a patriarchal system while simultaneously engaging in resistance to achieve existential freedom (Zulaeha, 2017; Al Kayed, 2020 ; Lestari, Aggraeni, & Bowo, 2023). Semiotic studies have also shown how films encode patriarchal ideology through visual and narrative signs (Natasha, 2023; Wardah & Kusuma, 2022). These studies demonstrate that gender inequality is continuously reproduced through cultural texts, including film.

As we know, we cannot only explain with approaches that stress objectivity and simple cause and effect. Male-dominated social and cultural structures embed gender inequality. In my view we need a paradigm to examine how power relations and ideas shape women’s positions in society. The critical paradigm emerged from the Frankfurt School tradition. The critical paradigm treats communication not as a tool of domination but also as a route to freedom, Azwar (2022). From this point of view the critical analysis of the paradigm becomes the base. The critical analysis of the paradigm finds the biases that keep gender inequality in texts, films and cultural practices.

Film is a form of mass communication and cultural production. Film has a role in building gender norms, copying gender norms and sometimes testing gender norms (Monaco, 2009; Fixmer-Oraiz & Wood, 2019). Film can also question gender norms. Scholars use Barthes’ semiotics to show how denotation, connotation and myth work together to make gender ideology feel natural in cinema (Dewayani & Azwar, 2024; Gunadi & Azwar, 2024). Visual signs, narrative structure, character development and dialogue in the film are not for entertainment. As we can see that visual signs, narrative structure, character development and dialogue from film also can carry ideas about femininity, masculinity and power relations (Monaco, 2009). Previous studies show films often repeat ideas through visual signs, narrative structure, character development and dialogue. Therefore, the cinema can become a space where people negotiate and critique the ideas about gender.

Lucky Kuswandi directed *A Normal Woman* (2025), a film that talks about gender issues. When it was released worldwide on Netflix on July 24 2025. *A Normal Woman* (2025) got a lot of attention reached, about 6.6 million viewers in the week and got into the Top 3 global non-English-language films. The story follows a woman who struggles to keep a woman’s sense of self against expectations, cultural stigma and ideas about what a normal woman should be. A woman’s daily life in the family, relationships and in the world shows the clash between a woman’s desire for freedom and the pressure to

follow social rules. The film uses symbols and built scenes to show how women's bodies, emotions and choices are constantly controlled and judged.

To analyze these representations, this study combines Roland Barthes' semiotics with Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism. Barthes' framework allows us to read signs in terms of denotation, connotation and myth, thus shows how visual and narrative elements carry meaning and ideology. While Beauvoir's existentialist concepts such as woman as the Other, immanence, and transcendence give a lens to examine the protagonist's existence in the film. The female protagonist can stay in passivity or the female protagonist can move toward becoming a subject.

Previous studies have widely explored gender representation and patriarchal ideology in Indonesian cinema, particularly through semiotic approach and feminist perspectives. They often use this approach to show how the cinematic signs work and make the gender inequality, the stereotypes and the patriarchal values seem normal. Studies of signs, in movies and TV shows such as *Yuni*, *Imperfect*, *Layangan Putus* and *Gadis Kretek* show how women's bodies, feelings and social roles are controlled by the images and the story structure (Hanifah & Ningsih, 2023; Hasanah & Ismail, 2023; Sakinah & Muary, 2024). While these studies effectively uncover the ideological meanings that are embedded in filmic signs, they tend to remain descriptive in nature and primarily focus on representation of how women are shown rather than look at women's lived experience and choice.

Simultaneously, feminist film studies grounded in Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism have begun to address women's position within patriarchal social structures. Another research for example such as *Representation of Patriarchy in Basri and Salma in a Never Ending Comedy* (Fernanda et al., 2025) and *A Comprehensive Analysis: Feminism in Losmen Bu Broto* (Khusna et al., 2024) highlights how female characters experiences are limited, subordination, and resistance within family and social institutions. However, these studies generally emphasize thematic and narrative interpretation, without systematically examining how visual and symbolic signs operate at the cinematic level to construct women's existential conditions.

Although these previous studies provide important insights into gender, patriarchy, and feminism in Indonesian film, studies that combine Barthes' semiotic analysis with Beauvoir's existentialist feminism remain relatively limited, particularly in the context of contemporary Indonesian cinema. Moreover, the lack of academic studies that specifically focus on contemporary Indonesian cinema and critically examine women's existential struggles within modern patriarchal contexts is still there, and since *A Normal Woman* (2025) is a recent film that explicitly addresses issues of gender, normality, and female autonomy, scholarly analysis of this film is still scarce. For that reason, this research offers an integrated semiotic-existential feminist analysis of gender values in *A Normal Woman* through visual signs, dialogue, and symbolic representations, as well as how the female

protagonist's existential experience reflects broader patriarchal structures in society, to fill the gap.

This study ought to analyze how gender values and women's existential positions are constructed in the film *A Normal Woman* (2025) using qualitative descriptive approach within Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis to explore meanings at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth in the movie through visual signs, narrative structure, dialogue, and cinematic symbolism. The results of this semiotic reading are then interpreted through Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist perspective, specifically the concepts of woman as *the Other*, immanence, and transcendence, where the analysis can move beyond descriptive accounts of representation to examine how cinematic signs are actively shape women's existential subjectivity and agency within contemporary patriarchal contexts.

This research also hopes to make a contribution to feminist film and communication studies by showing how contemporary Indonesian cinema can articulate existential feminist critique through semiotic strategies. By framing women's bodies, emotions, and choices as contested sites of meaning, *A Normal Woman* challenges dominant narratives of femininity and normality. The film therefore functions not only as a cultural representation but as well as an ideological intervention that questions patriarchal definitions of womanhood and reclaims women's right to existential freedom.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1. Gender as Social Construction in Media Representation

A critical communication perspective believes that film cannot be considered and understood as a neutral medium, as it actively plays a big role in reproducing as well as challenging power relations within society, including those related to gender, thus this research also believes that film is not simply just an entertainment product, but also a cultural text filled with signs, symbols, and ideologies. In this case, Lucky Kuswandi's film *A Normal Woman* (2025) is positioned as a cultural text that not only represents social realities, but also contributes to shaping public understandings of women and femininity.

Within this study, gender is understood as a social and cultural construct rather than a simply biological difference between men and women, where gender meanings are continuously produced and reproduced through communication practices, language, symbols, and media representations. This perspective aligns with gender studies in communication, which emphasize the role of media as a central arena in the formation of gender meaning and identity (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017).

Film plays an important role as a form of audiovisual communication in shaping public understanding of women's roles, identities, and social positions are being understood, where such as representations that are not neutral but always intertwined with dominant values, norms, and ideological framework.

These can be proved by previous studies that have shown where media often reproduce gender inequality through language, visual symbols, and narratives shaped by patriarchal assumptions (Rohmah et al., 2021; Zulaeha, 2017).

This research not only describes how women are represented in film but also examines the power relations and ideologies that underlie those representations using a critical paradigm. Therefore, this perspective agrees that communication is seen as a site of struggle over meaning and ideology, rather than a simple process of transmitting objective messages (Azwar, 2022).

2. Roland Barthes' Semiotics: Signs, Meaning, and Myth

Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis concept is understood as the science of signs, allowing researchers to uncover how meaning is produced, circulated, and naturalized through symbolic systems, specifically in the context of film where signs are present in visual forms, dialogue, gestures, bodily expressions, costumes, settings, and narrative structures. Therefore, to examine gender representation as a symbolic construct in *A Normal Woman*, this study employs Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis to uncover the meaning.

Barthes developed three layers of meaning in signs within these level, denotation, connotation, and myth (Barthes, 1967). Denotation refers to the literal meaning directly apparent in a film scene, where connotation refers to the cultural and emotional meanings attached to the sign, often related to social values about femininity, masculinity, and gender roles. At this stage, representations of women begin to contain ideological content that is not always recognized by the audience.

Then the deepest layer of meaning is myth, which is a system of ideological meaning that naturalizes certain social constructs and makes them seem normal and unquestionable. On this basis, myths in the context of gender serve to normalize the view that certain roles are the nature of women, and also allows patriarchal ideology to operate subtly and symbolically in film texts (Gunadi & Azwar, 2024).

3. Simone de Beauvoir's Existentialist Feminism

This study specifically uses Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminist theory for the framework of feminism, as formulated in *The Second Sex* (1949), Beauvoir put forward the fundamental idea that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," which asserts that women are not born as subordinate beings, but are constructed by the social, cultural, and ideological systems of patriarchy (Beauvoir, 1949).

Therefore, a key concept in Beauvoir's existentialist feminism is *the Other*, where namely the position of women as "others" defined in relation to men as the primary subject (*the Self*), since men are positioned as the universal standard of humanity, while women are reduced to objects, complements, or deviations from that norm in a patriarchal societal structure. Sadly, this

position is consistently reproduced through social institutions, culture, and the media.

Beauvoir also emphasized the dilemma women have between immanence and transcendence, where often when woman in immanence, it refers to women's confinement to domestic, repetitive, and passive roles legitimized as "natural." Conversely, women in transcendence refers to the ability of humans to transcend these limitations through choice, action, and responsibility, thus becoming subjects who determine their own existence and having a freedom likewise humans should have (Rohmah et al., 2021; Aydinalp, 2020).

Furthermore, to assess how female characters are represented in *A Normal Woman*, whether they are positioned as *the Other* trapped in immanence, or as subjects who strive to achieve transcendence amidst the pressures of social and cultural norms, this study ought to use Beauvoir's existentialist feminism as an interpretive lens.

METHODOLOGY

A critical paradigm is being used to view social reality in the film as a product and media texts as ideological constructions of power relations, ideology, and domination that operate within social, cultural, and symbolic structures (Azwar, 2022). From a critical perspective, media texts, particularly films, are not neutral representations of reality, thus ideological constructions that reflect and reproduce unequal social relations, including gender hierarchy and patriarchy. Therefore, to interpret meaning and also uncover the hidden power structures, domination, and forms of oppression embedded in cultural texts, the critical paradigm is being utilized. The object of this research is the representation of gender values in the film *A Normal Woman* (2025), where the analysis focuses on selected scenes that illustrate gender inequality, symbolic oppression, marginalization, objectification, and women's existential struggles within domestic and social spaces. Then, these scenes are going to be examined as ideological texts that construct meanings about femininity, normality, and women's position in society.

This research aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings embedded in gender representation in the film *A Normal Woman* (2025), employing a qualitative descriptive approach that emphasizes the interpretation of meaning rather than numerical measurement, making it particularly relevant for examining visual, audio, and narrative signs that are laden with ideology and social construction (Moleong, 2017). This approach also allows the researcher to critically analyze visual imagery, dialogue, gestures, narrative structure, and cinematic symbols as meaningful signs, prioritizing interpretive depth over measurement to reveal how gender ideology is constructed and communicated through filmic elements.

Through media text analysis and literature study, data collection was then conducted by repeatedly watching the film to identify scenes relevant to

gender representation and power relations, including documentation in capturing screenshots, transcribing dialogues, and recording significant visual symbols and narrative moments that support the analysis. These data serve as the primary material for interpreting gender meanings within the film, where the analytical framework is based on Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, which understands culture as a system of signs shaped by ideology. Barthes' model consists of three levels of meaning, denotation, connotation, and myth (Sobur, 2006). For the level of Denotation refers to the literal elements presented in the film, such as actions, expressions, settings, and objects, whereas connotation examines the cultural and emotional meanings attached to these elements. On a deeper level, to reveal broader ideological messages that naturalize certain values and beliefs, including patriarchal norms and gender expectations, Myth is being used.

Barthes' semiotic analysis in this context is also combined with Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism to deepen and increase the accuracy of the critical interpretation. For that reason, Beauvoir's concepts such as women as *the Other*, immanence, transcendence, objectification, and existential freedom are used to interpret how the female protagonist's experiences reflect gender oppression and resistance (Beauvoir, 2010; Aydinalp, 2020), this combined approach enables the analysis to uncover not only how gender meanings are symbolically constructed, thus also how the film critiques patriarchal control over women's bodies, identities, and choices. Through a critical semiotic-existential feminist approach, this study aims to reveal how *A Normal Woman* functions as a cultural text that exposes gender injustice and represents women's struggle to reclaim subjectivity within a patriarchal system.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through its dramatic narrative structure, *A Normal Woman* (2025), directed by Lucky Kuswandi, presents gender representation that goes beyond depicting differences in roles between men and women. Instead, the film exposes ideological constructions that oppress and restrict women's existence (Natasha, 2023). Femininity in *A Normal Woman* is revealed as a regulated performance rather than a natural condition, echoing feminist critiques that view gender as a socially produced identity (Fixmer-Oraiz & Wood, 2019). It portrays the reality of women trapped within modern patriarchal systems, systems that subtly demand women to be perfect, obedient, and beautiful according to male-centered and socially imposed standards.

A Normal Woman (2025), presents gender representation that goes beyond depicting differences in roles between men and women through its dramatic narrative structure, whereas the film exposes ideological constructions that oppress and restrict women's existence (Natasha, 2023). While the film exposes ideological constructions that oppress and restrict women's existence (Natasha, 2023), it also portrays the reality of women

trapped and that subtly demanded to be perfect, obedient, and beautiful according to male-centered and socially imposed standards within modern patriarchal systems.

This film also demonstrates how femininity is not a natural condition, but a performance that is continuously regulated and disciplined, for instance there is a scene where the female protagonist, Milla's appearance, facial expressions, and repetitive utterances such as "*I am grateful*" reflect the internalized pressure imposed on women to remain polite, emotionally restrained, and socially acceptable. Thus, through these representations, *A Normal Woman* critiques how modern patriarchal culture disguises control as virtue and normality, framing obedience, and emotional suppression as signs of a good woman.


The results show that stereotyping, subordination, and objectification in *A Normal Woman* do not function as isolated mechanisms of oppression, moreover they form progressively confines Milla within an interconnected system, together, these mechanisms reinforce patriarchal power and delay the possibility of transcendence. (Al Kayed, 2020). Whereas stereotyping reduces her identity to predefined roles, then subordination regulates her social position, and objectification controls her body as a social and symbolic asset.

Milla's journey in the movie proved Simone de Beauvoir's concept of immanence, in which women exist primarily for others rather than as autonomous subjects and patriarchal culture in the film is depicted through male dominance in decision-making processes, as well as through practices of stereotyping, subordination, and objectification that confine women to passive roles. Therefore Milla experiences self-erasure as her identity is shaped by external expectations rather than personal desire. However, the film also portrays a gradual movement toward transcendence, marked by Milla's growing awareness and resistance, reflects Beauvoir's notion of transcendence, where women assert subjectivity through conscious choice (Beauvoir, 2010), she then begins to reclaim her subjectivity and agency, challenging the limitations imposed upon her body and emotions. From an existentialist perspective, such resistance constitutes an assertion of being, where women dismantle identities imposed by others to create themselves as subjects (Sartre, 1960; Aydinalp, 2020).

3.1 Stereotyping

These relentless social stereotypes trap women in immanence, a mode of existence marked by repetition, passivity, and being defined solely by others, never as the central subject of their own lives. This specific scene really drives home how women are pressured to perform these ideals of perfection just to maintain the family's image, denying them the right to define themselves, (Al Kayed, 2020). Through Beauvoir's lens, women like Milla end up functioning as visual and moral objects and prop in someone else's story instead of autonomous individuals with the freedom to express who they truly

are. Reflecting on this case, it's striking how these patterns persist, shaping women's lives in ways that feel so deeply ingrained yet so unjust.

<p>Visual (Signifier) 00:30:10 - 00:31:12</p>	<p>Dialogue</p>
	<p>Milla: Something is wrong with me, Jon. Jonathan: No. Dr. Garry said it's just gerd. Jonathan: You took the medicine on an empty stomach, that's why you've been vomiting. Milla: No. I vomited shattered glass earlier. Jonathan: What are you talking about, Mil? You're fine. Don't be paranoid. Milla: Can you please believe me, just for once!? Mother-in-law: This is because you rarely go to church. Dark forces are making you thinking strange things.</p>

This scene shows Milla lying helpless in a low-lit room after experiencing a panic attack and vomiting in this scene, while Jonathan explains that the doctor diagnosed her condition as gastric acid caused by taking medication on an empty stomach, Milla's then claim of vomiting glass is rejected, and her distress is framed as paranoia, Her mother-in-law further responds by interpreting Milla's condition as a spiritual problem caused by weak religious devotion, all of these actions that are happening in this scene are at the denotative meaning

This scene also reveals how a woman's subjective experience of pain and trauma is invalidated through patriarchal and religious authority. Jonathan represents rationalized male dominance, where women's bodily experiences are reduced to medical explanations that minimize their suffering, through his response reflects a patriarchal tendency to dismiss women's distress as emotional instability, meanwhile, the mother-in-law symbolizes moral and religious control, shifting Milla's suffering from a physical reality to a spiritual fault. Together, these reactions demonstrate how women's voices are silenced through both modern rationality and traditional religious ideology at the connotative meaning. Thus this scene also shows that women are frequently perceived as irrational, leading their experiences to be dismissed by male authority and religious institutions. Milla's weakened physical position reinforces her lack of authority, symbolizing the loss of epistemic control over her own body aligns with Rohmah's (2021) findings

This scene reinforces the patriarchal belief that women are inherently weak, irrational, and unreliable when expressing pain or emotional distress,

whereas women who deviate from ideals of obedience, faith, and emotional stability are easily labeled as paranoid, hysterical, or morally flawed, and religious–patriarchal ideology operates subtly by framing women’s suffering as spiritual failure rather than legitimate experience in this scene. In Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialist feminist perspective, this scene illustrates how Milla is confined within immanence in the myth level, where her existence and suffering are defined by male authority and religious norms. Her body and mind are treated as objects to be corrected and controlled, reinforcing her position as *the Other* whose experiences require external validation.

From this scene, gender stereotypes function as mechanisms that confine Milla within a state of immanence, in which she is denied the space to exist as a subject with authority over her own body and experience, instead, she becomes a version of womanhood shaped by others’ expectations, her emotions are medicalized and dismissed by her husband, her moral worth is regulated through religious discourse by her mother-in-law, and her lived reality is continuously invalidated. Within Beauvoir’s framework, this condition reflects the construction of women as the Other, where the self is not the center of one’s own existence but merely a reflection of external definitions and desires.

When a woman articulates pain or existential anxiety, the patriarchal order responds with medical denial, labeling it as gastric acid or moral judgment, framing it as a lack of faith, this scene critically exposes forms of subordination and the delegitimization of women’s voices. Milla thus becomes a symbol of women who are stripped of epistemic authority over their own bodies, and religious discourse functions here as a mechanism of social control, transforming women’s suffering into moral or spiritual failure and thereby silencing their existential freedom.

From Beauvoir’s existentialist feminist perspective, when Milla pleads, “*Can you please believe me, just for once?*”, in this moment Milla’s existence is not recognized as rational or autonomous but treated as an object, she becomes profoundly existential, she demands recognition of her own consciousness and lived truth. The refusal to acknowledge her experience reveals a fundamental conflict between immanence, her enforced submission within familial and religious structures, and transcendence, her struggle to assert herself as a sovereign subject with authority over her own body and reality.

3.2 Subordination

Simone de Beauvoir explains that women are often positioned in opposition to one another because their value is determined by male validation and social status, This dynamic illustrates a form of internalized subordination, in which women themselves become agents who reproduce patriarchal values because they are shaped by the same structural conditions, based on the book in In *The Woman in Love* chapter (Beauvoir, 2010). Whereas

in this scene, subordination emerges in a more subtle form through the relationship between Milla and Grace.

This scene shows Milla is confined to her bedroom after being accused by her husband and mother-in-law of embarrassing the family. Her body is visibly ill, covered in rashes, but Grace, her longtime friend, visits her under the pretext of offering help by bringing soup. While Milla rejects the gesture and confronts Grace by asking whether she is enjoying Milla's suffering. Grace responds briefly, stating that it is a matter of survival. Milla then dresses Grace in her own gown, places her signature necklace around Grace's neck, and observes their reflection in the mirror while saying, "Now, you're perfect". The camera also emphasizes the contrast between Grace's unblemished face and Milla's diseased one within a single frame, at the denotative level, .

<p>Visual (Signifier) 01:13:10 - 01:26:48</p>	<p>Dialogue</p>
	<p>Milla: You're enjoying this, aren't you? Why?</p> <p>Grace: (pauses for a moment, then smiles at Milla) To survive, Milla.</p> <p>Milla: (puts a dress and a necklace on Grace while looking at her through the mirror) Now, you're perfect.</p>

The scene signifies a symbolic transfer of roles between the two women starting when Milla becomes aware that Grace envies the social status, beauty, and perceived perfection she represents, then by giving Grace her dress and necklace, Milla performs a bitter symbolic gesture rather than an act of kindness. These objects represent the ideal femininity that has cost Milla her autonomy and identity, it shows when the mirror functions as a metaphor for the dual reality of women under patriarchy, the admired public image and the hidden private suffering. At the connotative level the scene shows the visualization of the contrast reinforces how female worth is constructed through appearance and social recognition, rather than lived experience.

The scene deconstructs the ideology of the ideal woman on a level of myth, exposes how patriarchal and capitalist systems create competition among women by defining their value through external validation, particularly male approval and economic security. Grace's envy and Milla's suffering reveal how women may internalize and reproduce patriarchal values, becoming both victims and agents of subordination. The scene critiques the myth that women achieve fulfillment through conformity to socially constructed ideals, showing

instead that such ideals function as mechanisms of control rather than sources of genuine empowerment, which equates female success with beauty, marriage, and social status.

3.3 Objectification

The objectification of women in *A Normal Woman* is evident in how Milla's body is treated as an image, a commodity, and even a social project. Beauvoir (2010) explains that women are constructed not as subjects with their own will, but as visual objects whose bodies must conform to standards determined by society, in this film, Milla's body is not merely a biological body, but a social body, one that is shaped, evaluated, and exploited to serve the interests of others. This aligns with the view of Inyang & Essien (2025), who argue that in modern culture, women's bodies are often positioned as symbols of family pride and instruments of status representation, thus this moment illustrates how the female body is placed as a performative medium rather than an existential space for women themselves.

Beauvoir emphasizes that women are often forced to view their bodies through the perspective of men or society, causing the body to no longer be experienced as part of the self, but rather as an object to be seen, evaluated, and commented upon. This can be called as objectification of the female body where it becomes even more evident in this scene when Milla appears at the family gathering with her face covered in rashes, and the guests' immediate reactions of shock and discomfort reveal how women's faces and bodies are expected to be flawless in order to be considered acceptable in public spaces. When a woman's body fails to conform to beauty standards, it is automatically treated as a source of embarrassment or humiliation.

Then Jonathan's as the husband command for Milla to return to her room signifies that her body is no longer deemed appropriate for public display, within patriarchal logic, a woman's body functions as an extension of male honor, when the body is perceived as damaged, the family's image is likewise considered tarnished. This scene reinforces Sobur's (2006) argument that women's bodies are socially constructed and symbolically regulated, such that physical imperfection is interpreted as a threat to aesthetic norms and familial morality.

The denotative meaning of this scene shows the activity that after being confined to her bedroom for a long period, Milla finally appears during her mother-in-law's birthday celebration, she is neatly dressed in a red gown but wears no makeup, allowing the rashes on her face to remain fully visible. The guests immediately stop singing and stare at her in shock and disbelief, while her husband, Jonathan, firmly and angrily orders her to go back to her room, but Milla calmly responds to him, while She continue to grabs the cake knife and cuts the birthday cake carelessly, causing it to fall apart. The atmosphere becomes tense and Jonathan roughly pulls Milla away and takes her to their room forcefully, whereas the guests remain silent, witnessing the scene.

<p>Visual (Signifier) 01:29:48 - 01:30:56</p>	<p>Dialogue</p>
	<p>Jonathan: Milla, go back to your room! Milla: I just want to celebrate. <i>(Milla cuts the cake carelessly.)</i> Milla: What's wrong? Are you ashamed that everyone can see how rotten we really are?</p>

The connotative meaning of this scene marks the climax of Milla's journey as the female protagonist, as she finally emerges both physically and symbolically, starting the moment she escapes the bedroom signifies stepping outside the domestic space controlled by her husband and mother-in-law, and appearing without makeup represents the removal of the mask of perfection that has long concealed her suffering, while entering the public space directly confronts the judging gaze of society. The red dress symbolizes courage, anger, and a desire for life, and Milla's act of cutting the cake is not merely impulsive, thus it is an expression of long-suppressed autonomy. In this state, she refuses to remain a decorative figure who quietly fulfills expectations at a family celebration, specifically when she said her statement, "*Are you ashamed that everyone can see how rotten we really are?*" serves as a powerful exposure of the false image of the ideal family built upon silence, suffering, and deception.


While the level of myth of this scene challenges the patriarchal myth that positions women as guardians of family honor and perfection where a woman's value lies in her beauty and the image she represents for the family. Within patriarchal ideology, women are expected to appear graceful, calm, and compliant, concealing domestic problems to protect the family's public image but by revealing her blemished face without makeup in a public setting, Milla directly dismantles this myth and forces an uncomfortable truth into visibility. The celebration, once filled with laughter, transforms into a space of social tension, marked by the presence of a woman who refuses to continue performing perfection, furthermore Milla's refusal to feel shame becomes a radical act, exposing what patriarchy fears most, a woman who no longer submits to guilt, silence, or symbolic control.

By exposing her wounds and her imperfect face, Milla refuses to remain the Other and this act is not merely a physical gesture, but a visual sign that reflects resistance to oppressive beauty ideology (Sobur, 2006). For once, she finally chooses to exist as herself, authentically, even at the cost of judgment. This scene marks the full awakening of Milla's consciousness, whereas she no longer hides behind beauty or social status, but instead reveals her wounds

and courage openly. By walking through the celebration without makeup, Milla rejects the ideal of the perfect woman and discovers strength precisely in her imperfection by what is perceived as shameful by her husband becomes the most honest form of resistance. The scene ultimately reveals that what society defines as normal femininity is nothing more than a mask of oppression.

3.4 Transcendence

Women can achieve freedom only when they dare to leave the condition of immanence, a passive and repetitive state imposed by society, and move toward transcendence, a mode of existence created through their own choices and consciousness (Beauvoir, 2010), this process toward

Visual (Signifier) 01:42:18 - 01:43:48	Dialogue
	<p>Novi: You really are selfish. Novi: And you can't even control your own face. Novi: There is no place for women like us. Milla: You erase me, Mom. Novi: All of this is for your happiness, Mil. Milla: If you truly cared about my happiness, then let me go, Mom. Novi: If you no longer care about your life, then at least repay your debt to me! Milla: <i>(stabs her face with scissors)</i> I don't owe you anything anymore.</p>

transcendence is never instantaneous, but it emerges through struggle, pain, and the courage to reject identities and definitions imposed by others.

This scene shows the denotative level of when Milla prepared to escape from the house with Bi Irah and Hatta in the early morning, only to be stopped by her mother, Novi. But then, a heated argument ensues between them, whereas Novi accuses Milla of being selfish and ungrateful, while Milla initially attempts to restrain herself before breaking down and crying out. Milla pleads to be released when Novi responds by asserting that everything she has done is for Milla's happiness, but Novi persists in claiming that Milla owes her a debt of gratitude. At the emotional climax of the confrontation, Milla then grabs a

knife and stabs her own face while staring intensely at her mother, declaring that she no longer owes her mother anything.

This scene shows a powerful symbol of resistance against control over women's bodies and identities on a connotative level, Milla's face, which is the result of plastic surgery imposed by her mother, becomes a concrete representation of how women's bodies are often treated as social projects and instruments of status mobility, while Novi represents a generation of women trapped within patriarchal structures who internalize and transmit values of obedience, beauty, and sacrifice as measures of success and happiness. By stabbing her own face, Milla symbolically destroys the identity constructed by her mother, an identity defined by beauty, compliance, and perfection, this act signifies a reclamation of bodily autonomy and existential agency, asserting that her body now belongs to herself rather than to familial, social, or patriarchal authority, since the wound she inflicts is not simply a physical injury, but a symbolic rupture that dismantles the idealized feminine image that has long functioned as a social and emotional burden.

This scene critically challenges the patriarchal myth of beauty as women's salvation, where within this ideology, women are considered worthy of acceptance and value only when they conform to socially sanctioned standards of beauty. Novi, as the mother, functions as an agent who transmits this myth to the next generation, believing that beauty guarantees happiness and security, however, beneath this belief lies a subtle yet persistent form of oppression, in which women's bodies are commodified and instrumentalized to preserve family honor and social status. By destroying the surgically constructed face, Milla rejects this myth entirely, and she then finally breaks the chain of intergenerational patriarchal inheritance and asserts her freedom to exist on her own terms, without submission to imposed standards. The wound on her face becomes a symbol of rebirth, marking the emergence of a new identity, not as the ideal woman, but as an authentic and autonomous subject.

Transcendence reaches its peak too in this scene, when Milla confronts her mother and this moment reveals the deepest conflict, where Milla's body has never truly belonged to herself but has functioned as her mother's social project, an instrument of status mobility and a symbol of beauty that must be preserved. When Novi states that Milla owes her for her new face, it exposes how patriarchal control can be inherited and reproduced among women, as discussed in earlier sections, hence Milla's act of stabbing her own face represents the climax of existential resistance. Moreover, the wound is not an act of destruction, but of rebirth, she dismantles an image that was never hers, an identity shaped by her mother's desires and reinforced by social structures.

From Aydinalp (2020) perspective, where an extreme act constitutes an assertion of existence, in which a woman destroys the version of herself constructed by others in order to create herself as a subject, this aligns with the scene and the Beauvoir's perspective in chapter *The Independent Woman* in *The Second Sex*, where Beauvoir argues that women can only live freely

when they create meaning through personal consciousness and choice (Beauvoir, 2010; Lestari, Aggraeni, & Bowo, 2023). Therefore, Milla's transcendence does not emerge through heroic victory, but through the courage to break free from the lies that confine her, the wound on her face, her decision to leave, and the calmness with which she begins to live on her own terms symbolize that women's freedom is not always born in beautiful forms, but it always arises through the process of becoming a subject of one's own existence.

Conclusion

Based on the main research problem, the findings of this study found that on *A Normal Woman* (2025), directed by Lucky Kuswandi, represents gender values through symbols, visuals, and narrative structures that expose the social pressures imposed on women within a modern patriarchal system, thus The film portrays how women are expected to be perfect, beautiful, gentle, obedient, and devoted, while concealing the invisible unhappiness and inner suffering produced by these demands. This study demonstrates that gender representation in the film goes beyond depicting differences between men and women, it reveals ideological constructions that oppress and limit women's existence through Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, at the level of denotation, Milla's life is presented as ideal, marked by luxury, a successful husband, and flawless appearance, while at the connotative level, elements such as makeup, high heels, jewelry, elegant clothing, and a composed smile signify coercion and social pressure, and finally the film critiques patriarchal ideology that normalizes women's suffering in the name of love, honor, and moral respectability in the level of myth.

The film portrays Milla's journey from being positioned as the Other toward becoming an autonomous subject, initially confined within immanence, her identity is shaped by male-centered norms and societal expectations, and as the narrative unfolds, Milla moves toward transcendence, recognizing her freedom and asserting her right to determine the course of her own life. The final scene then shows in which she walks freely under the sunlight, symbolizes existential liberation and affirms that being a woman does not mean submitting to predetermined roles, but having the courage to live according to one's own consciousness, this proved existentialist feminism from the perspective of Simone de Beauvoir's.

In conclusion, *A Normal Woman* critiques how cultural norms and patriarchal ideology shape femininity, identity, and women's emotional lives, while foregrounding women's capacity for resistance and self-definition, especially through the combined of Barthes' semiotics and Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, this study also demonstrates that gender meanings in film are not fixed or natural, but socially constructed, negotiated, and contested. This finding also reinforces Beauvoir's claim that "*one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,*" emphasizing that femininity is not destiny and womanhood is actively shaped through social relations and individual choice

in this sense, *A Normal Woman* functions not only as cultural representation but also as a critical intervention that invites reflection on how womanhood is constructed and how it may be reclaimed beyond patriarchal constraints.

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