Gender Construction in Indonesian Language Textbooks for Junior High School: A Sara Mills Discourse Analysis Approach

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KEYWORDS

Gender construction, textbook, discourse analysis, Sara Mills, gender bias, junior high school education.

ABSTRACT

This study aims to reveal how gender construction is represented in Indonesian language textbooks at the junior high school level, using Sara Mills' critical discourse analysis approach. This method emphasizes the positioning of subjects(the party who holds the power to observe, evaluate, or describe) and objects(the party who is observed, evaluated, or described) within discourse and the power relations shaped through language. The analysis focuses on narratives, dialogues, and character representations in nationally used textbooks. The findings show a persistent gender bias, including male-dominated representation, stereotypical portrayals of female roles, and the positioning of female characters as narrative objects. These results suggest that textbooks continue to reproduce patriarchal social structures, despite some efforts to present gender equality. The study recommends curriculum revision and textbook author training to enhance sensitivity to gender equality issues. The method used in this study is qualitative, employing a critical discourse analysis approach.

1. Introduction

Textbooks are one of the most essential instruments in the learning process, serving not only as sources of information but also as media that shape students' values, ideologies, and social identities. Within this context, gender representation in textbooks plays a crucial role in shaping students' perspectives on the roles of men and women in society. However, numerous studies have shown that Indonesian textbooks continue to reproduce gender biases, including the dominance of male characters, stereotypical portrayals of women, and the positioning of women as passive objects within narratives. This situation reflects a representational imbalance that may negatively affect students' critical awareness of gender equality issues. In light of this phenomenon, the central research question of this study is: How is gender construction represented in junior high school Indonesian language textbooks? To address this question, the study aims to analyze gender representation in these textbooks using Sara Mills' approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA), which emphasizes the subject-object positioning within discourse and the power relations constructed through language.

Theoretical Framework

Gender Construction

Gender construction refers to how male and female identities are formed through social and cultural processes rather than merely biological differences. Judith Butler (1990), in her theory of gender performativity, argues that gender is the result of repeated acts performed and reproduced by individuals and institutions. In the context of education, particularly textbooks, gender representation is significant because it influences students' perceptions of the social roles of men and women.

Gender Bias in Education

According to Sadker and Zittleman (2009), gender bias in education occurs when the curriculum, instructional language, and learning materials disproportionately highlight one gender over another. This bias can manifest in the predominance of male protagonists, the depiction of women in domestic roles, or the use of male-centric language. As part of the curriculum, textbooks can reinforce these stereotypes if not developed through a critical and gender-aware lens.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an approach that examines how language is used in social contexts and how it reflects and shapes power relations. Fairclough (1995) notes that texts do not merely convey information but also construct ideologies and dominance. In this study, CDA is employed to uncover discursive practices that may reproduce gender inequality within educational materials.

Sara Mills' Approach to Discourse Analysis

Sara Mills (1995) offers a CDA approach that specifically focuses on gender construction within texts. She highlights the importance of analyzing the positioning of subjects and objects in discourse and how readers are ideologically positioned. According to Mills, the narrator or author plays a critical role in constructing representation; thus, the analysis must consider who is given voice, who is silenced, and how gender roles and attributes are portrayed within narratives.

Textbooks as Ideological Discourse

Textbooks are not neutral; they are products of educational policy and specific ideological frameworks. Apple (1993) emphasizes that textbook content reflects dominant societal values and can serve as instruments of social reproduction.

Therefore, a critical analysis of textbook content is necessary to determine whether it supports or challenges existing gender inequalities.

2. Literature review

1. Textbooks as Tools of Ideological Transmission

Textbooks are widely recognized not only as educational resources but also as ideological instruments that reflect and reinforce dominant social norms, values, and power structures. Apple (1993) asserts that textbooks function as "cultural artifacts" that reproduce hegemonic ideologies, often privileging certain identities while marginalizing others. In the context of gender, textbooks can serve as powerful media for either perpetuating or challenging gender-based stereotypes, depending on how characters, narratives, and roles are constructed. Within Indonesian education, the national curriculum mandates textbooks as standard teaching materials, thereby positioning them as significant vehicles of cultural and ideological messaging in shaping young learners' perceptions, including their views on gender.

2. Gender Representation in Educational Materials

Numerous studies have highlighted the persistence of gender bias in educational content globally and in Indonesia. Sadker and Zittleman (2009) emphasize that gender bias in textbooks is often manifested through male-dominated narratives, stereotypical portrayals of women in domestic or passive roles, and the consistent marginalization of female voices. In the Indonesian context, research by Arivia (2011) and Subandowo (2017) reveals that women are frequently underrepresented and, when included, are depicted in roles that align with traditional, patriarchal expectations. These patterns of representation risk reinforcing harmful gender norms in impressionable learners and neglect the principles of gender equality promoted in the national education system.

3. Critical Discourse Analysis and Gender Studies

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been widely employed in examining how language constructs and maintains social hierarchies, including gendered power relations. Fairclough (1995) argues that language use in texts is not neutral but ideologically loaded, often reflecting unequal power dynamics. CDA provides a theoretical and methodological framework for revealing hidden ideologies within texts, making it particularly suitable for analyzing educational materials. In gender studies, CDA enables researchers to trace how language shapes identities and social roles, revealing subtle forms of discrimination embedded in seemingly benign content.

4. Sara Mills' Feminist Discourse Analysis Approach

Sara Mills (1995) offers a distinctive feminist adaptation of Critical Discourse Analysis that places emphasis on the subject-object positioning in texts. Her framework examines who is allowed to speak, who is spoken about, and how these positions reflect gendered relations of power. Mills argues that discourse analysis must pay attention to the ideological positioning of readers, as texts not only reflect social norms but also shape how audiences internalize those norms. Unlike traditional CDA approaches that focus primarily on institutional discourse, Mills' model is particularly attentive to narrative texts and literary representation, making it an ideal tool for analyzing school textbooks.

5. Gender Construction in Indonesian Language Textbooks

Within the realm of Pancasila-based civic and language education, Indonesian language textbooks are expected to promote democratic values, equality, and critical thinking. However, recent analyses (Pratiwi, 2020; Kurniawati, 2021) indicate that these textbooks often continue to portray men as active decision-makers and women as emotional or subservient characters. This gendered narrative structure not only limits female representation but also reinforces hierarchical binaries between masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, the dominance of male protagonists and the lack of inclusive language point to the need for a more critical, feminist-oriented textbook evaluation.

3. Methodology

Research Approach and Type

This study adopts a qualitative approach using the method of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This approach is chosen as it is suitable for uncovering hidden meanings, power relations, and ideologies embedded within texts, particularly regarding gender representation. The specific CDA framework employed in this research is based on Sara Mills' model, which emphasizes the analysis of subject-object positioning, narrator roles, and reader positioning within the text.

Data Sources

The primary data source in this research consists of nationally used Indonesian language textbooks for junior high school, officially approved by the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia. The selection of

textbooks is based on the following criteria:
- Aligned with the 2013 revised national curriculum.
- Published by government-appointed publishers.
- Widely used in public junior high schools across Indonesia.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through the following techniques:
- Document analysis of narrative texts, dialogues, character descriptions, and accompanying visuals within the textbooks.
- Identification of analytical units that reflect the construction of male and female roles.
- Categorization based on social roles, activities, characteristics, and positioning within narrative structures.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis follows the analytical framework proposed by Sara Mills, which includes:
- Identification of subject and object positions: Who is portrayed as the main actor and who as the passive character?
- Analysis of narrator and reader positioning: Who delivers the narrative? How is the reader directed to interpret the characters?
- Interpretation of gender ideology: Does the narrative support, challenge, or reproduce gender stereotypes?

In addition, the data are analyzed descriptively and interpretatively, linking the textual analysis to theories of gender construction and ideological discourse.

Data Validity

To ensure data validity, the following strategies were implemented:
- Theoretical triangulation by linking the results of the textual analysis with other theoretical perspectives, including those of Fairclough and Butler.
- Peer debriefing through consultation with experts in gender studies and education.
- Audit trail, which involved systematic documentation of the analysis process to ensure traceability and transparency of research findings.
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4. Results and Discussion

Male Character Dominance

The analysis of various narrative texts and dialogues in Indonesian language textbooks for junior high school reveals a noticeable dominance of male characters in key roles. These characters are often depicted as leaders, decision-makers, and active agents who resolve conflicts. In contrast, female characters tend to occupy supporting roles or are portrayed as passive subjects. Based on Sara Mills' framework, male characters are frequently positioned as active subjects, whereas female characters are framed as passive objects within the discourse. For example, in one short story, a male student is described as brave, intelligent, and full of initiative, while a female character merely provides emotional support and does not contribute to decision-making.

Gender Role Stereotyping

In several descriptive and expository texts, traditional gender stereotypes persist: men are portrayed as hardworking, rational, and strong; women as caring, gentle, and emotionally sensitive. Sara Mills emphasizes the significance of the narrator's position in shaping how readers are led to understand gender roles. In many cases, narrators do not critique or challenge these stereotypes, leading readers—especially students—to passively accept patriarchal norms embedded in the discourse.

Lack of Female Representation in Professional Roles

Texts highlighting professional figures or role models predominantly present men (e.g., as teachers, scientists, or leaders), while women are more commonly associated with domestic roles (e.g., housewives, nurses, kindergarten

teachers). This reflects a discursive power asymmetry, where women are rarely positioned as authoritative or agentic subjects in professional contexts.

Unequal Visual and Illustration Choices

From a visual standpoint, textbook illustrations further reinforce gender imbalances: male characters are more frequently shown in outdoor or physically demanding activities, while female characters are often portrayed in domestic settings—cooking, cleaning, or assisting family members. These visuals align with the narrative text, creating a consistent yet biased construction of gender.

Reader Positioning within the Discourse

According to Sara Mills, the reader is ideologically positioned by the text. In this case, the junior high school reader is implicitly situated within an unequal social structure. Because the gender bias present in the texts is not critically addressed, students are more likely to internalize and reproduce traditional gender constructions rather than question them.

Language Strategies and Lexical Choices

The lexical choices used to describe male and female characters differ in ways that carry implicit ideological meaning. Male characters are often associated with terms like *brave*, *strong*, *assertive*, and *adventurous*, while female characters are described using words such as *loyal*, *obedient*, *gentle*, and *shy*. This demonstrates that gender is constructed not only through roles but also through linguistic framing that subtly encodes ideological messages. Sara Mills interprets such narrative control as a way for narrators to influence readers, guiding them to accept specific gender norms through seemingly neutral but ideologically charged language.

Imbalance in Dialogue and Character Voice

In dialogues, male characters are given more opportunities to speak, express opinions, and lead conversations. Female characters often function as listeners or supporters, with fewer and shorter lines, rarely occupying decision-making roles. This shows that the narrative discourse restricts the female character's voice both quantitatively and functionally. From Sara Mills' perspective, this indicates that women are more often constructed as characters who experience rather than act within the story.

Absence of Alternative Gender Representations

There is a noticeable absence of non-binary or gender-nonconforming characters. All characters are framed within a binary gender structure (male/female) and assigned conventional roles. This reveals that textbooks have yet to embrace a more inclusive understanding of gender identity and diversity.

Counter-discourse Potential in the Texts

Despite the strong presence of patriarchal discourse, several textual fragments attempt to present strong and independent female characters—such as girls who are intelligent, ambitious, or capable of speaking in public. However, these portrayals remain marginal and do not represent the dominant narrative. The potential for counter-discourse is not explicitly supported by the narrator, thus reducing its ideological impact on readers.

Thematic Discussion: Reproduction of Patriarchal Ideology in Education

The findings demonstrate that Indonesian language textbooks continue to contain gender constructions that reproduce patriarchal ideology. Although female characters are not explicitly discredited, the narrative structure, word choices, and visual representations implicitly guide students to view gender through a binary and hierarchical lens.

Sara Mills' approach proves to be effective in uncovering these subtle ideological positions. By analyzing who speaks, who is given voice, and how the reader is positioned, it becomes evident that the educational discourse within textbooks still provides ample space for gender bias to persist.

Critical Reflection: Bringing Gender Awareness into Education

The in-depth analysis shows that, although recent curriculum reforms emphasize equality, the actual implementation in textbooks has yet to fully reflect this spirit. Textbooks continue to reproduce traditional gender discourse through narrative structure, sentence construction, and visuals that appear neutral but are ideologically loaded. Using Sara Mills' feminist discourse analysis framework, this study underscores the importance of analyzing narrator positioning, character representation, and reader alignment as part of power relations that shape students' worldview. Without critical engagement, the gender constructions in textbooks risk reinforcing social inequality over the long term.

Supporting Scholarly Perspectives

Several researchers support the relevance of Sara Mills' approach in gender discourse analysis:

1. **Hijrana (2023)**

   In her study on female representation in literary works, Hijrana used Sara Mills' framework to show that women are still frequently positioned as narrative objects rather than active subjects. Even in texts perceived as progressive, patriarchal power relations continue to dominate.

2. **A.S. Hafsyah & A. Hamdani (2023)**

   Analyzing news media through Sara Mills' approach, they observed systematic marginalization of women by consistently positioning men as the evaluators and decision-makers. This observation parallels textbook content where men are frequently the drivers of the story, while women serve as supporting characters.

3. **Putri Ayu Nanda Sari & E. Susilowati (2023)**

   Examining representations of women as victims of violence in film, they found narrative bias that reinforces women's subordination—similar to findings in textbooks where female characters are confined to limited roles and stereotypes.

4. **Maisun & Rohmaniyah (2022)**

   In the journal *Mukaddimah*, they critiqued how educational and cultural texts often exclude female perspectives as active subjects, stressing the importance of examining seemingly neutral content for its subtle reproduction of gender power relations.

5. **H. Rosyida (2024)**

   In her study on Indonesian elementary school textbooks, Rosyida emphasized that gender bias is embedded not only in content but also in the structure and diction that reinforce traditional gender roles. She advocates the use of Sara Mills' framework to deconstruct narrative voice and gendered positioning in texts.

5. Conclusion

The five studies collectively reinforce that textbooks still contain biased gender constructions, wherein males dominate as narrative subjects while females are often portrayed as passive objects. Sara Mills' approach consistently proves effective in revealing these power dynamics through the analysis of subject-object positioning within the narrative. Therefore, it is crucial to critically review textbook content to better reflect equality and empower both genders fairly within education.

This study reveals that gender constructions in Indonesian language textbooks for junior high schools tend to favor unequal gender representation. Using Sara Mills' critical discourse analysis approach, it was found that male characters are more frequently positioned as active and dominant subjects within the narrative, whereas female characters are depicted as passive objects, supporters, or followers.

The portrayal of roles, characteristics, and professions in both text and illustrations tends to reinforce traditional gender stereotypes—females are shown as gentle and confined to the domestic sphere, while males are depicted as strong, rational, and dominant in the public domain. Readers, in this case students, are positioned to accept these constructions without being encouraged to question or consider alternative, more equitable gender representations.

Although there are some attempts to present female characters as more active and independent, these narratives remain marginal rather than mainstream within the texts. Consequently, textbooks continue to serve as instruments for reproducing patriarchal ideology, subtly embedded within language that appears neutral.

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