



THE DYNAMICS OF POWER RELATIONS IN SHAPING JEMIMA STARLING'S SUBJECTIVITY IN *THE STARLING GIRL* (2023) THROUGH FOUCAULDIAN THEORY

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis dinamika relasi kuasa yang berkembang dalam film *The Starling Girl* (2023) menggunakan teori Relasi Kuasa dari Michel Foucault. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi bagaimana relasi kuasa beroperasi sebagai mekanisme pengawasan dan membentuk subjektivitas pada Jemima di dalam komunitas Kristen konservatif. Hasil dari penelitian ini menunjukkan terdapat lima mekanisme relasi kuasa yang beroperasi di dalam film melalui institut religius komunitas yang membentuk subjektivitas karakter utama dari anak yang patuh menjadi pendosa dan subjek yang diampuni hingga subjek yang memberontak melalui diskursus, kekuasaan disipliner, kekuasaan pastoral, panoptikon dan resistensi. 1) Diskursus beroperasi sebagai dasar mekanisme pengawasan pada tokoh utama. 2) Kekuasaan disipliner beroperasi melalui pengaturan tubuh secara terus-menerus. 3) Kekuasaan pastoral beroperasi melalui bimbingan pastor dan ritual pengakuan dosa di depan umum. 4) Efek panoptikon digambarkan pada karakter utama melalui pengawasan komunal. 5) Resistensi muncul sebagai bentuk perlawanan dari struktur kekuasaan yang membentuk kesadaran Jemima akan subjektivitas.

Kata kunci: Relasi Kuasa, Diskursus, Kekuasaan Disipliner, Subjektivitas, *The Starling Girl*

Abstract

This research analyzes the dynamics of power relations depicted in *The Starling Girl* (2023) through the lens Power Relations theory by Michel Foucault. This research aimed to identify how power relations operate as a control mechanism and shaped Jemima's subjectivity within Christian conservative community. The result of the study describes five mechanisms of power relations in the film that operating through the community's religious institutions and discourses, which construct the main character's subjectivity transforming her from an obedient girl into a sinner, a forgiven subject and finally a resistance subject through discourse, disciplinary power, pastoral power, panopticon and resistance. 1) Discourse operates as the foundational control mechanism shaping the main character. 2) Disciplinary power operates through the continuous regulation of the body. 3) Pastoral power operates through pastoral guidance and exomologesis. 4) The panopticon effect in the main character's portrayed through surveillance. 5) The emergence of resistances in response to the power structures shapes Jemima's awareness of her subjectivity.

Keywords: Power Relations, Discourse, Disciplinary Power, Subjectivity, *The Starling Girl*

1. Introduction

Film is a medium for expressing ideas and representing social reality through fictional narratives. Beyond its function as an entertainment industry, film often reflects human behavior, personality and social structure. Moreover, film serves as a medium for emphasizing cultures, political issues, education, the environment and social values (Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2021). In relation to film study, issues of power relations are significantly interpreted and produced within narrative studies. One example of the implementation of power relations in the film depicted in *The Starling Girl* (2023). Set in the traditional Christian community in Kentucky, United States, this film explores themes of dynamic power relations within a demanding religious community. The main Character's *Jemima Starling* becomes involved in an affair with a young Pastor *Owen Taylor* who was married. The film addresses critical issues such as communal repression, subjectivity and spiritual abuse. This film represents how repressive social structures and uncritical obedience can distort personal subjectivity through discourse, disciplinary power, pastoral power, panopticon and resistance.

Michel Foucault's theoretical framework of power relations and subjectivity describes power as not fixed but produced through the operation of power relations embedded within social institutions, everyday practices, and systems of knowledge. Central concepts such as discourse, disciplinary power, pastoral power, and panopticon function as mechanisms that regulate behavior, establish norms, and construct individual identities. At the same time, Foucault emphasizes that power is never absolute, as resistance continually emerges within power relations and contributes to the negotiation and transformation of subjectivity (Hancock, 2018).

Scholars have examined the operation of power relations, surveillance and religious authority in film through Foucauldian perspective. Although power relations in contemporary cinema have been researched, *The Starling Girl* (2023) has limited academic attention. One of the research analysis of *The Starling Girl* (2023) film from Anisa Dwi Utari, Pricilla Mega Anindita and Angelia Alexa Vega Sunarko (2025) in journal "*Between Gender and Religion: Looking back on Gender Performativity in The Film The Starling Girl (2023)*" this research analyzed *The Starling Girl* (2023) film using Judith Butler gender performativity theory to examine external and internal factors in Jemima's gender identity that constructed through repeated acts under institutional and emotional pressures. However this study did not address specific religious institutional power operations, such as pastoral guidance and exomologesis nor did it trace the gradual and evolving process through which Jemima's subjectivity is constructed. This study aimed to address that gap by applying Michel Foucault's Power

Relations theory to examine how discourse, disciplinary power, pastoral power, panopticon, subjectivity, and resistance contribute to the formation of Jemima Starling's subjectivity in *The Starling Girl* (2023).

2. Literature Review

This study employs Michel Foucault's theory of power relations as the main analytical framework to examine the construction of subjectivity in the main character in the film *The Starling Girl* (2023). Foucault argues that subjectivity is not an inherent and fixed form but is produced through the operation of power relations embedded within social institutions, discourse and everyday practice (Foucault, 1982). This concept is particularly relevant for understanding the mechanism of power relations in shaping an individual's thought, behavior and identity.

Foucault's concept of discourse identified a four formation; the formation of objects, the formation of enunciative modalities, the formation of concepts and the formation of strategies, which establish the norms, values and forms of knowledge that define what is considered acceptable and legitimate within a particular society, through discourse power regulates and produces subjects (Mir, 2019). Foucault examined institutions such as prisons, schools, and hospitals, showing how observation and normalization techniques create compliant individuals whose behavior can be managed. Foucault distinguished anatomo-politics, which refers to disciplinary techniques directed toward optimizing, regulating and disciplining individual bodies (Grewe-Salfeld et al., 2021).

This mechanism is closely related to panopticon, a model of surveillance in which individuals internalize the possibility of constant observation and discipline themselves. The panopticon appears as the theorization of a surveillance society, derived from Bentham's prison design which relies on an all-seeing inspector (Foucault, 1977; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2022). The panopticon maintains the effectiveness of surveillance by instilling the individuals the belief that they may be observed at any moment. This system includes omnipresent surveillance, a continuous visibility in which subjects remain constantly aware of the possibility of being watched, while the observer remains unseen (Poorghorban et al., 2023).

Pastoral power operates through guidance and moral direction, encouraging individuals to accept authority for their well-being. To maintain this obedience, various techniques are employed including spiritual examination, which later developed into the practice of confession, along with the direction of conscience by the pastor. The earliest form of confession was known as exomologesis, which refers to a practice performed by individuals who had

committed serious sins that threatened their membership with Christian community (Foucault, 1993; Bigoni, 2021). Nevertheless, power is never absolute; wherever power operates, resistance also emerges through alternative discourse and practices that challenge dominant norms, authority and subjectivity (Poorghorban, et al., 2023).

Applying the power relations framework enables the study to describe how discourse, disciplinary power, pastoral power, panopticon and resistance contribute to the construction and transformation of Jemima's subjectivity in *The Starling Girl* (2023). Through this perspective, the film is understood as a cultural text that illustrates the complex relationship between control mechanism, subjectivity and resistance.

3. Research Method

This research applies a qualitative descriptive research design to examine how *The Starling Girl* (2023) represents the dynamics of power relations in shaping Jemima's subjectivity. This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach combined with the close reading of cinematic elements. This method is appropriate because it enables systematic examination of selected scenes and dialogues as cultural texts that carry ideological and discursive meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The primary data in this research consist of scenes and dialogues from *The Starling Girl* (2023) that reflect how the dynamics of power relations play a crucial role in shaping Jemima's subjectivity. These data include verbal elements such as dialogue, and character statement as well as non verbal elements such as, character actions, body languages, visual composition, and emotional expressions. The data are categorized according to scenes classified under discourse, disciplinary power, pastoral power, panopticism and resistance, to allow systematic analysis of how Jemima subjectivity's constructed and evolves. The analysis follows four steps procedure; first, identifying the discursive and visual elements in selected scenes including dialogue, body language, character positioning, and visual composition according to Foucauldian concepts; discourse, disciplinary power, pastoral power, panopticon, resistance and subjectivity; second, dialogue, gestures and visual representations interpreted using Foucault's theoretical framework to examine how power mechanisms operate and shape Jemima's subjectivity; third, connecting analyzed scene to trace the construction, negotiation and resistance of her subjectivity through the narrative; and fourth, draw the result from the identified pattern of power relations to address how discourse, disciplinary power, pastoral power, and panopticon functions as mechanisms of control and contribute to the formation of Jemima's subjectivity in *The Starling Girl* (2023).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Discourse as a Foundational of Control Mechanism

Throughout *The Starling Girl* (2023), discourse not only functions as a spiritual belief system within Christian conservative community, but also as a control mechanism that is actively depicted to regulate and control the mind and body of its members. This is consistent with the Foucault concept of discourse, which established norms, values and forms of knowledge that define what is considered acceptable and legitimate within particular society, through discourse power regulates and produces subjects. One of the representations of discourse depicted in the scene involved Jemima's praying before performing with her dancing troupe in the church with the statement "*I want to reflect on your holiness*" in the beginning of the film in the minute (01.04) is presented as a performative way to worship God. This scene reflects the formation of the object along with Foucault's theory where discourse functions by constructing certain actions, bodies, or practices as objects of attention assigning specific meaning to them within social context, in this film religious norms playing a crucial role of discourse.

Another form of discourse formation of enunciative modalities is fundamentally concerned with who is authorized to speak, in what institutional context, and what with authority. This form represented in the film when each community member approaches Jemima and offers forgiveness is enacting the institutional discourse of the community, they are not speaking as private individuals but as representative of the community's moral authority, which has been authorized by the pastor to judge and forgive Jemima's transgression. The statements "*May God forgive you*" that depicted in the minute (01.37.25) are addressed to Jemima from the members of the community are not merely religious expressions rather they constitute speech acts that reinforce hierarchical Power Relations.

Jemima's dancing is labeled as too self-centered when Misty Taylor, an older member of the community, evaluates her choreography within the statement "*Again, a little individual-focused*" in the minute (01.06.26). Misty's statement is not merely personal opinion, it is a conceptual judgement that operates through a specific organizational principle embedded within the community's discourse namely, binary opposition between individual and collective. This scene provides compelling evidence of Foucault's formation of concepts, which refers to the organizational principal underlying statements, including the transformation of behavioral observations and rhetorical structures into qualitative moral interpretation.

The scene involves Pastor Taylor asserting in which the statement "*This is a spiritual attack*" when confronts Jemima for her relationship with Owen Taylor and offers Jemima's forgiveness is proclaimed. Pastor Taylor claimed that the inappropriate relationship between Jemima and Owen Taylor is an influence of Satan. This scene provides the most explicit evidence of Foucault's concept, the formation of strategies, which examines the broader external relations of discourse, including its engagement with competing discourse and its claims to provide superior explanation or solutions. Pastor Taylor continuous proclamation "*God is our strength, our victory over satan*" depicted in the minute (01.33.54), is not merely spiritual affirmation, rather it's also a strategic discursive act that positioned the community of religious discourse in direct opposition to an external competing discourse and secular desire such as Jemima's affair with Owen represented here by the figure of Satan, which functions a symbolic stand-in for everything that exists outside the boundaries of the communities religion norms. This statement constitutes the first strategies discursive act in this sequence, through which Pastor Taylor identifies Jemima's transgression in moral terms but immediately classifies it as a spiritual attack originating from the external domain, the domain of Satan.

4.2. Disciplinary Power

Throughout Foucault's concept of normalization, such intervention operates by defining behavioral standards through which individuals are assessed and corrected when they fail to conform. Jemima Starling's mother reprimands her with the firm gesture and commanding statement "*Hey, walk like a lady*" in the minute (01.35.58) when they are in a public space. By reprimanding Jemima in a grocery shop setting, Mrs. Starling not only reinforces these normative expectations but also publicly performs and reproduces the community's ideals of appropriate behavior. Within this context, Jemima's body is transformed into an object of regulation, shaped and governed by discourse, norms and communal expectation, rather than serving as a medium of self-expression.

4.3. Pastoral Power



Figure 4.2 (01.36.09) Jemima's exomologesis ritual for admitting her sin

Throughout Foucault's theory, the salvation of followers can only be achieved through complete submission to the pastor's guidance, and obedience is further reinforced until individuals remain in a state of submission even without direct command. This concept is especially depicted when Pastor Taylor asks the final question, "*Do you want to be saved?*" during Jemima's confession regarding her inappropriate relationship with Owen Taylor. It is not a genuine question inviting uninhibited answers, rather it is a rhetorical instrument of pastoral control that frames the entire subsequent interaction within the discourse of salvation and damnation. Pastor Taylor has the power to make a decision about Jemima's life, movement, and future, based on the spiritual knowledge he gains through her confession.

As a result of this salvation guidance, Jemima admits her sin and asks forgiveness from the members of the community in a public confession ritual, actively participating in the formation of herself as a guilty subject rather than merely passively receiving communal judgment. Jemima accepted his ritual without resistance, explicitly through the verbal statement "*I humbly ask for your forgiveness.*" This statement constitutes the explicit representation of exomologesis in the film. Jemima actively performs as a repentant sinner that the community religious discourse has assigned to her, rather than simply receive forgiveness passively. Her downcast posture, her subdued and remorseful tone, and her willingness to stand alone before the entire community all constitute the physical and verbal manifestation of her internalization of the "sinner" identity, aligned with Foucault concept that refers to a practice performed by individuals who have committed serious sins

threatening their membership within Christian community, culminating in a dramatic public confession in which sinners humiliate themselves before the community.

4.4. Panopticon

Foucault argues that the panopticon operates by rendering individuals continually visible and constantly assuming they might be observed, creating conditions in which power automatically operates through internalized self-regulation. The emphasis of “*The bra that you chose visible through your clothes*” in the minute (04.00), this statement assigns personal responsibility to Jemima, positioning her as a subject whose judgement has failed and whose conduct requires correction. This scene demonstrates the capacity of panopticon to produce self-regulating subjects. By directing this observation toward Jemima in a semi-public setting, the community performs as a panopticon function, rendering her body visible and accountable to the collective gaze of the community. When Owen Taylor asks “*Why were you crying that night?*” Right after Jemima’s being confronted by community members, Jemima responds “*I wasn’t being mindful*” reveals the internal dimension of communal surveillance, and it is here that the panopticon effect becomes more analytically visible. This is an effect of the communal surveillance revealing Jemima’s carelessness in choosing clothing appropriate in the community’s standard of modesty. This response is the most compelling evidence that the film that the panopticon effect has successfully completed in this disciplinary cycle.

4.5. Resistance Against Subjectivity

Foucault considered resistance to the process of subjectivity especially important, as it challenges the mechanism through which individuals become attached to particular identities and modes of self-understanding. This mechanism is reflected in the film, after Jemima being forgiven by community members, Jemima is expected to go to the forgiveness camp, Kings Valley, but she decides instead to run away from the community’s domination and Owen to follow her own desire and go to Memphis. This final scene in the films shows Jemima dancing freely in a bar in Memphis outside of the community’s area, spinning with her hair loose and her expression open and liberated, accompanied by the lyric “*The gift I hold is believing.*” This scene represents the most complete and explicit manifestation of resistance in the film. The moment in which Jemima’s resistance against subjectification moves from subtle linguistic deviation and quiet uncertainty to an embodied, physical, and joyful assertion of resistance subjectivity. Throughout the film, her body has been the

primary site of disciplinary power. Her walking was corrected, her appearance should be perfect, her dancing was corrected and follows the community's standard and her clothing subjected to communal surveillance. Although Jemima is repeatedly constituted as an object of religious norms through disciplinary practices, Foucault argues that power relations are never absolute and always generate resistance.

5. Conclusion

From the results of the research and discussion, several important findings were identified. First, *The Starling Girl* (2023) demonstrates how discourse functions as a mechanism of power that shapes moral values, regulates behavior, and constructs individual identities within a conservative religious community. Second, the film illustrates the operation of disciplinary power and panopticon through communal norms, constant observation, and self-regulation, which encourage Jemima to conform to the expectations imposed upon her. Third, the film portrays pastoral power through guidance, confession, and forgiveness, enabling religious authorities to influence Jemima's actions and self-understanding. Fourth, *The Starling Girl* (2023) reveals that power is never absolute, as resistance emerges through Jemima's efforts to negotiate and challenge the subject position imposed upon her. Her resistance ultimately reflects the ongoing process of subject formation, in which identity is continuously shaped through the interaction between power and resistance.

This study focuses on the discussion of discourse, disciplinary power, pastoral power, panopticon, resistance, and subjectivity in *The Starling Girl* (2023). Suggestions for future research include several areas. First, audience reception studies could explore how viewers interpret the film's representation of religion, power, and resistance. Second, comparative studies could examine similar themes in other films depicting conservative religious communities.

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