

## **Reproductive Control And Female Subordination In Batak Culture: A Muted Group Theory Analysis Of “Catatan Harian Menantu Sinting”**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to analyze the patriarchal system and the subordination of women within Batak culture as depicted in the film *Catatan Harian Menantu Sinting*. The research focuses on how cultural control over women's bodies and reproductive expectations is reflected in the social structure and family relationships. A qualitative approach was used, employing Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis to identify cultural symbols and myths that reinforce patriarchal norms. In addition, Muted Group Theory was applied to understand the silencing of women's voices within the patriarchal system. The findings reveal that the film represents women's subordination through reproductive pressure, where women are expected to bear male children to continue the family lineage. This norm not only restricts women's autonomy in making life choices but also reinforces gender inequality that disempowers women across social, cultural, and psychological dimensions. The study affirms that patriarchal culture in Batak society plays a significant role in perpetuating the subordination of women through reproductive control.

*Keyword: Womens's Subordination; Patriarchal System; Muted Group Theory; Roland Barthes' Semiotics.*

### **Introduction**

Film is a medium of cultural communication that plays a significant role in the exchange of cultural values rooted in heritage and identity

(Futeng, 2024). By embedding cultural elements, film not only captures public attention but also presents a critical discourse on the prevailing social norms within society (Chen, 2024). In general, culture can be understood as a product that reflects social dynamics and human life (Arisoy, 2019). Therefore, film often serves as a means to highlight the culture and social practices that occur within a country (Hossain et al., 2023).

In the film industry, men are often portrayed as dominant figures in society, while women are frequently marginalized and their roles restricted (Kamble & Biswal, 2023). These limitations are influenced by customs and cultural norms that significantly shape perceptions of women's existence (Sitorus, 2024). The restriction of women's roles arises as a consequence of social realities reflected in patriarchal culture.

Patriarchal culture places men as the authority figures within families and society. Patriarchy itself is a cultural system that creates gender inequality in society, positioning men as the ones with power in social interactions (Swari & Udayana, 2023). With the emergence of the patriarchal system, men easily claim that their primary need is to have male offspring, as seen in Batak society. This belief remains deeply embedded in the male mindset constructed through cultural contexts, shaping their attitudes toward women.

Generally, Indonesian society believes that boys and girls have equally important roles. However, in practice, many Indonesian communities still adhere to patriarchal systems, where women are often perceived as subordinate to men (Swari & Udayana, 2023). This patriarchal system is present in Batak society, where it strongly reinforces the limitations placed on women's roles in both social and family contexts. The Batak people are a customary community that upholds a patriarchal system, in which men hold power and dominate roles within the social structure, thus creating value distinctions between boys and girls (Sianturi & Hidir, 2023).

Batak women do hold respected positions within their kinship system, such as in sacred traditional ceremonies where they play key roles, like presenting *ulos* to newlyweds as a symbol of prayer and support—demonstrating their function as guardians of harmony and cultural continuity. On the other hand, a study by Naibaho (2023) Found that Toba Batak women are subordinated due to norms established by a clan-based cultural belief system, which views women primarily as bearers of male heirs. This system also reinforces gender inequality, harming women socially, economically, and psychologically.

Patriarchal culture in Batak society is also reflected in inheritance rights, which are granted only to sons, often excluding wives and daughters

from wealth distribution (Sihotang, 2018). Moreover, in politics, women's leadership is assessed through a male-dominated lens, further positioning women as weak. This normalization is perpetuated through social upbringing, reinforcing the subordination of women (Sibarani & Gulo, 2020). The deeply rooted patriarchal culture in Batak society not only strengthens gender inequality but also places women in a subordinate position that is difficult to change. Male dominance across social, economic, and political domains creates norms that continue to disadvantage women.

Subordination places women in a secondary position, as everything is viewed from a male perspective, which labels women as weak. This subordination limits women's space in various activities, including social engagement, and places them under male control (Tarigan et al., 2023). Emile Durkheim, through his concept of the division of labor, stated that the different roles of men and women are based on their natural capacities, with women being more suited for aesthetic functions and men for instrumental ones. This view deliberately legitimizes the subordination of women as "natural," arguing that such differences are necessary to maintain social harmony and stability (Saragih & Ningrum, 2023).

Previous studies examining the construction of patriarchal culture in Batak society are depicted in the film "Ngeri-Ngeri Sedap", which portrays the dominance of masculinity closely tied to the patrilineal kinship system of Batak culture (Ginting et al., 2023), as well as the social norms that influence family dynamics (Andriyanti et al., 2024). Patriarchal dominance is not exclusive to Batak society; it is also found in Javanese culture, where traditions maintain gender hierarchies and create complex pressures for women to fulfill their roles (Varlina & Rachmatullah, 2024). From the female perspective, Wibowo (2019) A study on the film "Siti" found that cultural pressures shape women into submissive, patient individuals who face their realities with resignation.

Building on previous studies that explore patriarchal dominance in Batak society, this research focuses on how such cultural values are reflected and reinforced through film. As a medium that embodies and critiques societal norms, film provides a lens to examine the symbolic representation of power and gender roles (Umaroh & Adibatul Maulida, 2025). Catatan Harian Menantu Sinting (CMS), a 2024 film directed by Sunil Soraya and adapted from the novel by Rosi L. Simamora, presents Minar, a young woman caught between modern aspirations and traditional expectations. She faces intense pressure from her mother-in-law to produce a male heir, making her body the site of reproductive control and cultural subordination rooted in Batak patriarchal values. It stars Ariel

Tatum as Minar, Raditya Dika as Sahat, and Lina Marpaung as the mother-in-law (Mamak Mertua). According to CMS, the story of a newlywed couple building their life amidst a Batak family. Minar marries Sahat, the youngest of four siblings, consisting of one unmarried older brother and two married sisters. There is a contrast in perspectives between Minar and her mother-in-law regarding love and marriage. For Minar, marriage is about forming a harmonious relationship with her husband. However, for the mother-in-law, marriage is a means of continuing the family lineage through the birth of a male heir. The film presents a conflict between the mother-in-law and Minar, and this study highlights the societal pressure on both men and women in Batak culture to have male children in order to carry on the family name.

This study addresses a gap in existing scholarship by analyzing how reproductive control and female subordination are represented in film narratives rooted in Batak patriarchal culture. This topic remains underexplored within media and communication studies. While prior research often examines patriarchy through sociocultural or anthropological approaches, limited attention has been given to how these structures are symbolically embedded in cinematic storytelling. The film CMS provides a relevant case to explore how reproductive expectations are normalized through cultural symbols, and how women's autonomy is shaped by collective family and social pressures.

To analyze this phenomenon, the study applies Muted Group Theory (MGT). In this theory, Shirley Ardener introduced the concept of Muted Groups, which questions whether certain individuals or communities must modify their language or ideas to remain socially accepted (Kartikawati & Aryanto, 2023). This concept was later expanded by Cheris Kramarae in 1974, who emphasized that dominant communication systems are structured around male experiences. Her research found that women are often depicted as emotional, overly apologetic, or indecisive, reflecting a form of male dominance that suppresses women's voices in society (Griffin et al., 2019).

In MGT, Kramarae proposes three main assumptions; (1) Women have a different worldview than men, as men typically work outside the home, while women manage domestic responsibilities; (2) Male political dominance allows their system of perception to control women's expression, making it difficult for women to say what they truly mean; (3) To be accepted in society, women must adapt their thoughts and behavior to fit norms established by male modes of expression (West & Turner, 2021).

However, by challenging the construction of language, which is central to MGT as a male-dominated system designed to marginalize women's voices, Kramarae highlights the silencing of women as a critical site of feminist resistance (O. Alichie, 2023). MGT has been widely applied in media and cultural studies to critique how mainstream narratives perpetuate gender-based silencing. Media content, including film, often reflects the dominant group's ideology, making it challenging for marginalized voices to be authentically represented (Karam, 2016). This supports the idea that women are not only underrepresented but often misrepresented in popular culture.

MGT outlines four processes through which silencing occurs: ridicule, ritual, control, and harassment. MGT is used to examine how the patriarchal system in Batak society limits women's freedom to express their views. By applying MGT, the researcher seeks to explore the film CMS, which represents the subordination of women in Batak culture, particularly in terms of decision-making over their bodies and reproductive roles, influenced by social norms and patriarchal values.

## **Research Method**

This study adopts a constructivist paradigm and a qualitative approach to explore how patriarchal values are represented in cultural narratives through film. The constructivist paradigm assumes that knowledge is actively constructed through social interaction and interpretation, rather than being discovered as objective truth (Doychinova, 2023). This framework aligns with the interpretive aim of the study, highlighting the importance of reflexivity and the researcher's subjective positioning in analyzing social phenomena such as film narratives (Stewart, 2010).

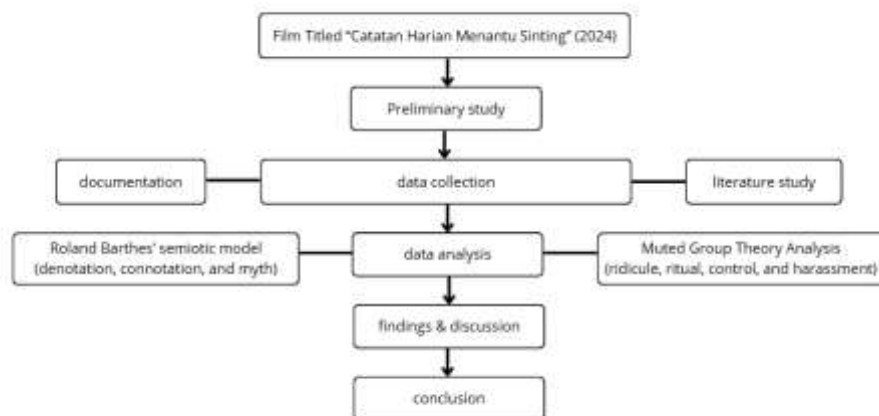
The unit of analysis is the film *Catatan Harian Menantu Sinting*, which illustrates family pressure and reproductive expectations in a Batak cultural setting. The film was selected purposively because it presents narrative elements closely tied to gender roles, family control, and symbolic authority over women's bodies. The version analyzed was accessed through the Netflix platform.

Data were collected through documentation and literature study. Selected scenes were analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic model, which consists of three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation refers to the literal meaning of a sign, connotation to the cultural or emotional associations, and myth to the broader ideological meanings that appear natural within a culture (Al-Kadi & Alzoubi, 2023). Scenes were selected based on their relevance to themes of reproductive control, silencing, and symbolic domination within the family structure.

Visual elements such as character positioning, gestures, objects, dialogue, and recurring motifs were examined for meaning.

The analysis also draws on Muted Group Theory to understand how the film portrays communicative silencing and structural subordination of women. The four silencing processes identified in the theory, ridicule, ritual, control, and harassment were used to interpret narrative instances where female characters are marginalized in decision-making and expression.

The two frameworks are integrated to provide a layered and complementary analysis. Semiotics is used to decode visual and symbolic representations that express patriarchal values at the surface level, while Muted Group Theory is applied to examine the deeper social implications of those representations in terms of communicative power and gendered marginalization. In this way, semiotics identifies what is shown and how it is encoded, and MGT explains how those representations reflect or perpetuate systems of gendered inequality. This integrative approach allows for a more comprehensive interpretation of how the film constructs both visible and invisible forms of control over women. Such integration has been supported in recent feminist media research as a way to bridge symbolic and discursive levels of analysis (Kartikawati & Aryanto, 2023).






**Figure 1.** Research design diagram

## Results and Discussion



The researcher identified several scenes that illustrate reproductive pressure placed on women in Batak society, where they are held responsible for continuing the family lineage by giving birth to male offspring. Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis is used to determine the meaning embedded within signs and symbols. The results are as follows:

**Table 1.** Scenes from the film CMS analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach


Scene	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
 <p>Minute 3:01</p>	Monang, the eldest son in the family, is still unmarried	He does not have a partner yet, which means there is little expectation that Monang will get married anytime soon or have children	Men in Batak families are expected to continue the family lineage by having sons within their marriage
 <p>Minute 3:57</p>	Sahat's sister has five children because four of them are girls, and she still desires to have a son.	There is a sense of fulfillment and the feeling of having fulfilled one's obligation after having a son	In Batak society, sons are considered the heirs of the family lineage.
 <p>Minute 6:47</p>	The mother-in-law gives Sahat and Minar a sacred bed, telling them that she once used the same bed and became pregnant with her first child within a week.	The sacred bed is believed to be an effective means for Minar to quickly give the mother-in-law a grandchild.	The main purpose of marriage is to produce offspring in order to continue the family lineage.

Scene	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
 <p>Supaya cepat kalian punya anak, paham?</p> <p>Minute 13:32</p>	<p>The mother-in-law expresses her concern by directly scolding her daughter-in-law, assuming that the couple rarely engages in intimate relations.</p>	<p>This reprimand symbolizes the social pressure to have children, reinforced by the interference of the mother-in-law.</p>	<p>This scene represents Batak cultural expectations regarding the importance of having offspring and the traditional purpose of marriage as a means to bear children.</p>
 <p>aku sama Sahat udah berencana ga mau langsung punya momongan.</p> <p>Minute 13:55</p>	<p>Minar's statement about her and Sahat's decision to delay having children and prioritize their careers.</p>	<p>The freedom to determine life priorities, including career and relationships.</p>	<p>There is a prevailing myth in the modern era that women are free to determine their life goals, including the choice to delay having children and pursue a career.</p>
 <p>Sudah lama aku kepengen punya cucu dari anak laki-laki</p> <p>Minute 16:01</p>	<p>The mother-in-law expresses her frustration over Minar and Sahat's decision to delay having children by using contraception, as she</p>	<p>Social pressure to have children in Batak culture is rooted in the expectation to continue the family name. In addition, the scene reveals</p>	<p>There is a patriarchal ideology in which women are considered responsible for bearing children as heirs to the family.</p>



Scene	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
	strongly desires the continuation of the family lineage.	the dominance of the mother-in-law over the life decisions of the young couple.	
 <p>Minute 19:47</p>	<p>The mother-in-law pressures Sahat not to use a condom, and his compliance with her request leads to visible disappointment on Minar's face.</p>	<p>Sahat's oath reflects his submission to traditional values and family pressure, which contrasts with Minar's modern way of thinking.</p>	<p>A wife must follow her husband's wishes. When disagreements arise, the wife is expected to yield and follow her husband's opinion.</p>
 <p>Minute 20:44</p>	<p>Sahat questions Minar's fear of childbirth, her trauma from her mother's death, and her request to agree to pregnancy only on the condition that they move out to avoid interference</p>	<p>A symbol of the struggle for privacy, the independence of the young couple, and women's empowerment in facing traditional pressures.</p>	<p>In Batak culture, living with the extended family after marriage is often considered a norm that reflects familial closeness. Minar's request to move out challenges this myth.</p>

Scene	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
 <p>Minute 29:24</p>	<p>from the mother-in-law.</p> <p>Sahat's promise to move out if Minar became pregnant leads to conflict when he honors Minar's request, prompting his mother's objection, as she believes only the male head of the family should make such decisions.</p>	<p>A traditional view of the husband as the head of the family who must "control" his wife disregards the modern dynamics of a more equal marriage.</p>	<p>In traditional patriarchal views, the husband (like Sahat) is seen as the head of the family who must lead and control his wife.</p>
 <p>Minute 40:53</p>	<p>The mother-in-law moves into Sahat's house and asks every month whether Minar is pregnant, even going so far as to call her foolish for supposedly being unable to have</p>	<p>There is a form of judgment toward the couple by questioning deeply personal and private matters.</p>	<p>The traditional belief that the core of marriage is to produce offspring overlooks other important aspects, such as love and the couple's happiness.</p>

Scene	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
 <p>Minute 1:31:30</p>	<p>proper sexual relations.</p> <p>The mother-in-law expresses her joy by saying, "Long live the descendants of the Purba family," after learning that Minar is pregnant.</p>	<p>The mother-in-law's happiness marks the end of the tension in the story, which had previously been filled with pressure on the couple to have a child.</p>	<p>Minar's pregnancy reinforces the patriarchal myth that women bear the primary responsibility for producing heirs to the family.</p>

The findings of this study reveal how patriarchal ideology and female subordination are symbolically and discursively represented in the film CMS. This subordination is manifested through various forms of silencing, one of which is the control exerted by the mother-in-law over Minar. In the scene where the mother-in-law scolds Minar and Sahat for using contraception, contraception is denotatively portrayed as a medical device used by couples to plan pregnancies. However, in the context of the film, contraception is connotatively framed as a symbol of defiance against cultural norms that demand women to promptly fulfill their reproductive roles. Through Barthes' semiotic lens, contraception becomes a signifier of bodily autonomy, yet it is mythologized as a disruption to family order. Here, the myth system operates by narrating control over women's bodies as a form of care or morality, thereby obscuring the unequal power relations.

A more invasive form of control is depicted when the mother-in-law decides to move into Minar and Sahat's home and repeatedly asks Minar whether she is pregnant. While seemingly simple, these questions serve as symbolic surveillance of Minar's body within her private space. In Barthes' semiotics, the repetitive nature of these inquiries functions as a symbolic mechanism to reinforce social norms. These questions form a discourse of surveillance masked as familial concern, yet their true function is to uphold control over women's reproductive functions. Within the myth structure,

such surveillance is normalized, framed as an expression of family affection and adherence to tradition.

From the perspective of Muted Group Theory (MGT), these scenes reflect a form of silencing enacted through control mechanisms, specifically the direct domination of women's communicative and expressive rights. MGT explains that men, as the dominant group, possess the power to define public communication systems, including language, symbols, and access to significant decisions (Manuhoro Setyowati & Setya Watie, 2024). In Minar's case, although she has her own opinions and desires regarding pregnancy, the family's social system does not allow her voice to be acknowledged. Reproductive decisions are taken over by others, notably the mother-in-law and the husband, who succumb to external pressure.

Furthermore, control in the film does not always manifest as explicit prohibitions but also through narrative regulation, who may speak, who is heard, and who is ignored. In several scenes, Minar speaks, yet her words do not influence decision-making. This illustrates how women's voices are not only silenced literally but also structurally weakened, leaving them without agency in dominant discourse. In MGT, such a condition constitutes a covert form of silencing, in which women are subordinated and must adapt their ways of speaking and thinking to the male standard to be accepted in the patriarchal social order. (Syawal et al., 2024).

The film also portrays invasive control, domination not only of discourse but extending into personal spaces and women's bodies. This is evident in the scene where the mother-in-law moves in with the young couple and routinely questions Minar about pregnancy. Such behavior is not simply an expression of family hope but a form of constant surveillance integrated into daily life. Control no longer takes the form of verbal restriction but becomes a persistent physical presence, generating psychological pressure and erasing women's autonomy. (Beddows & Mishra, 2024). In the context of MGT, this form of control is total: it monitors, frames, and ultimately silences women even within spaces meant to be private.

Whereas control focuses on regulating discourse and suppressing women's voices within communication structures, harassment in CMS emerges through verbal intimidation and repeated psychological pressure of a personal nature. In the scene where the mother-in-law openly calls Minar stupid for not yet being pregnant, the word is more than an insult—it becomes a signifier of Minar's failure to perform the ideal role of womanhood in patriarchal culture. The term implies that women who fail

to meet reproductive expectations are deemed socially and morally incompetent.

This act not only shames Minar but also symbolically intimidates her, operating within a value system that idealizes fertility as the measure of a wife's success. Connotatively, the insult reinforces social stigma and instills shame, which works deeply to subdue female resistance. Under MGT, such harassment is a form of linguistic abuse designed to silence by attacking self-worth and creating a sense of inferiority. Moreover, MGT highlights that women often face social risks when speaking openly, especially on sensitive issues such as pregnancy, sexuality, or gender roles. In the film's context, Minar lacks the space to express personal reasons for delaying pregnancy, surrounded by emotionally intimidating pressure. (Rowlands, 2023). Such harassment functions as a strategy of symbolic control. It does not physically restrain women, but instead makes them feel unworthy, inadequate, or even inherently flawed for failing to conform to cultural expectations.

Beyond harassment, CMS also portrays the silencing of women through cultural ritual. This is seen in the scene where the mother-in-law gives the couple her old bed, claiming it helped her quickly conceive after marriage. The act is framed as a family tradition imbued with reproductive hopes. Yet beneath the surface lies strong symbolism of control over Minar's body and sexuality. What should be a private experience becomes a collective expectation, conveying that Minar's body exists to ensure her husband's family lineage. Through a semiotic lens, the bed is not merely a functional object; it acts as a signifier that is culturally encoded. On the denotative level, it appears as a familial heirloom. But connotatively, it carries ideological meaning as the site where women's reproductive roles are enacted, controlled, and preserved to ensure male lineage continuity. The bed becomes a mythologized symbol, constructed to appear natural but laden with specific values and domination. Culture is thus used to cloak patriarchal practices that subjugate and subordinate women under the guise of tradition.

In MGT's view, such a ritual represents culturally institutionalized silencing. Ritual serves to preserve male dominance over women through symbolic practices. Minar loses not only control over her body but also over her narrative. She lacks the language or symbolic space to express resistance, as meanings about her body are pre-assigned through sacred, unquestioned cultural practices. As such, the bed does not merely convey messages about fertility but affirms that women's roles are predetermined generationally without their participation in shaping those meanings. Silencing here does not occur via explicit prohibition but through the

normalization of roles within symbols deemed legitimate by the community (Cabezas, 2022). Women like Minar must accept prewritten representations, and their silence stems not from voicelessness but from being denied communicative space within a masculine and exclusive system.

Alongside control, harassment, and ritual, CMS also depicts female silencing through ridicule. In one scene, the mother-in-law mocks Minar by calling her stupid and questioning her sexual capability. On a denotative level, this may appear as spontaneous maternal concern. Yet connotatively, the word stupid and the insinuations about Minar's biology are laden with derogatory meaning that reinforce stereotypes, reducing women's worth to reproductive success.

In MGT, ridicule is a form of verbal harassment that undermines women's authority. These disparaging remarks not only induce shame but also serve to discipline women who deviate from normative roles. MGT observes that women are often targets of ridicule when expressing desires inconsistent with dominant communicative systems. In Minar's case, ridicule arises from her failure to fulfill the ideal role of a pregnant wife, rendering her subject to open denigration. This strategy effectively silences women, as ridicule prompts them to withdraw, conform, or even doubt the legitimacy of their own intentions.

The mechanisms of control, harassment, ritual, and ridicule in this film do not operate independently but instead support one another in creating an internalized form of subordination. Women like Minar are not only silenced symbolically and verbally, but also deprived of the space to negotiate their roles and ownership of their bodies. In this context, subordination is not merely the result of explicit prohibition but arises from a series of cultural strategies that normalize female compliance through traditional values and symbolic representations. The analysis by Hutahae et al. (2025) The film *Ngeri-Ngeri Sedap* reveals that 50% of the analyzed scenes depict the subordination of women, particularly in domestic contexts and family decision-making. Women are portrayed not only as individuals whose voices are often disregarded but also as figures framed through the lens of devotion and sacrifice, tasked with serving the family and maintaining harmony. This emphasis aligns with the findings from CMS, where control over women's bodies and voices is manifested both symbolically and through seemingly normal social practices, such as the expectation of bearing a male grandchild to continue the family lineage.

These findings also correspond with the study by Simatupang et al. (2024), which shows how sociolinguistic patterns within Batak families position women as inferior entities, whose access to discursive space and

public decision-making is frequently restricted. Subordination is not merely a matter of power relations between husband and wife, but part of a broader social system that places women within a value framework that disadvantages them, such as absolute obedience and self-sacrifice for the dignity of the extended family. Therefore, CMS is not simply an artistic representation but also a reflection of a broader sociocultural reality. Through the lens of Muted Group Theory, this study affirms that the silencing of women's voices is part of a larger structural mechanism designed to maintain male dominance within the Batak family institution.

## Conclusion

The film *Catatan Harian Menantu Sinting* portrays how patriarchal values in Batak society are reproduced through cultural structures that regulate gender relations in a hierarchical manner. Mechanisms such as control, verbal harassment, cultural rituals, and ridicule operate subtly and systematically to silence women's voices, creating a form of subordination that is often unrecognized even by the women themselves. One of the most prominent forms is reproductive pressure, where women are expected to quickly give birth to male children to continue the family lineage. This norm limits women's freedom to make decisions about their own bodies and lives, while reinforcing gender inequality in social, cultural, and psychological aspects.

By combining semiotic analysis and Muted Group Theory, this study shows that the silencing of women occurs not only through explicit prohibitions but also through symbols and traditions that have been accepted as normal within society. Therefore, reforming values within family culture, especially those related to women's reproductive rights, is an important step toward achieving a more meaningful form of gender equality.

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