

Symbolic Violence against Subordinated Women in Fredrick Backman's *Beartown*

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Abstract

This research identified form of symbolic violence in *Beartown* novel written by Fredrik Backman. The novel displays a social phenomenon where social ideas and expectation constraint women's life. Symbolic violence helps explaining the phenomenon by looking on how dominant people imposed their view over women for granted. In analyzing the object, the research is equipped with Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence. The research is designed in qualitative framework which allows an analysis of interactive variables. In collecting the data, the research applied close reading to the novel. Then, the data is analyzed with latent content analysis. The research found that symbolic violence is exerted mostly through censorship and then euphemism. On censorship, the community preserved desirable view from referring to biased psychological assumption, enforcing dominant view in social, limiting the women's role, and limiting inclusion of women in sport. On euphemism, symbolic violence is rendered as gentle through gift-debt, familiarity, hospitality, concern, worries, obligation, confidence, and jokes. There is two interesting findings in the analysis. Both forms imposed dominant values which subordinated women in social, education, and sport fields. The second finding is the implication of censorship as frequent used. It displays and confirms the community's attitude as defensive and protective towards threat on their dominance; including their dominant view.

Keywords: *Beartown*; Bourdieu; Feminist; Symbolic violence

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengidentifikasi bentuk kekerasan simbolik di dalam novel *Beartown*, yang ditulis oleh Fredrik Backman. Novel ini menunjukkan fenomena sosial seperti ide dan ekspektasi yang mengekang kehidupan perempuan. Kekerasan simbolik mampu menjelaskan fenomena ini dengan melihat bagaimana orang dominan membenamkan pandangan mereka kepada perempuan supaya diterima tanpa syarat. Untuk menganalisis objek ini, penelitian menggunakan teori kekerasan simbolik dari Bourdieu. Penelitian ini didesain dengan kerangka kualitatif yang memungkinkan sebuah analisis pada variabel interaktif. Untuk pengumpulan data, penelitian menerapkan pembacaan dekat pada novel. Lalu, data dianalisis dengan teknik konten analisis laten. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa kekerasan simbolik terjadi banyak melalui sensorisasi dan disusul eufemisme. Pada sensorisasi, masyarakat mempertahankan pandangan yang sesuai perspektif dominan melalui acuan asumsi psikologis yang bias, penguatan pandangan dominan di sosial, pembatasan peran perempuan, dan pembatasan inklusi perempuan dalam olahraga. Pada eufemisme, kekerasan simbolik dialter menjadi halus melalui balas jasa, pendekatan, keramahan, perhatian, kecemasan, kewajiban, kepercayaan diri, dan candaan. Ada dua temuan yang menarik dari analisis ini. Kedua bentuk membenamkan nilai dominan yang mensubordinasikan perempuan di arena sosial, pendidikan, dan olahraga. Temuan selanjutnya adalah implikasi seringnya sensorisasi. Ini menunjukkan dan mengkonfirmasi sikap masyarakat yang defensif dan protektif atas ancaman terhadap dominasi mereka; termasuk pandangan sosial yang dipegang.

Kata Kunci: *Beartown*; Bourdieu; Feminis; Kekerasan simbolik

1. Introduction

Literature is not solely a mirror or a portrait or a document of social reality, but it could normalize ideas. The initial idea of this research starts from the rising awareness of how literature is powerful in controlling discourse or perspective. There are readers who enjoy reading with/without aware of it

consisting sexism or misogyny or toxic ideas and expectation of women. If questioned, the reader might take this as trivial, or, worst, as true. One way or another, this response lets the idea spurred. By letting, it contributes in preserving toxic ideas which ultimately restricts one's movement, or in this case, the woman. It is important to recognize that author has the

symbolic power to amplify the victim of inequality, and recognize that literature could revolutionize people's mind (Bourdieu as cited in Speller, 2011). Eventually, this helps breaking the chain of inequality for literary and social world. One of the way to revolutionize people's mind is to return to literature where the normalization of constraining ideas flourish. By displaying the phenomenon, it helps the reader to better understand the problem that also happens in social.

Fredrik Backman joins the symbolic struggle by writing a novel entitled *Beartown*. This novel displays social inequalities including women who is the victim of patriarchy. The story tells about how a community responds to an accusation of sexual assault done by a highly admired hockey player in the town. When the town is at its lowest in terms of economy, the prosperity of the town depend on the winning of the hockey tournament. This is so because the winning would invite many sponsor and investor. However, a girl named Maya reported the player named Kevin who had just sexually assaulted her at the time before final. This is so because she had to built courage. She had predicted that people would turn back on her, and it happened.

Beartown novel revolutionizes people's mind through displaying ideas and expectation of women that is restrictive to women. One of the example could be seen in the following quotes:

This is a serious allegation, they remind her, as if it's the allegation that's the problem. She is told all the things she shouldn't have done: ... If only she hadn't existed, then none of this would have happened, why didn't she think of that?

She's fifteen, above the age of consent, and he's seventeen, but he's still "the boy" in every conversation. She's "the young woman." (pp. 274-275)

In this excerpt, Maya was asked by the investigators with questions and advices that implied her as the liar, or the lure. From all of the advices, she is expected to do "things she shouldn't" when in fact it hardly to be when Maya had put trust on Kevin, but he abused it. In police station, there is also a difference in treatment where Kevin is "the boy" and Maya is "the young woman". There is a social expectation that men is not capable to control his desire and women is capable to lure his partner.

This particular phenomenon is effective to be analyzed through feminist approach.

Feminist approach examines aspects such as femininity and women subordination through either psychological, sociological, cultural, political, or economic attempt (Dobie, 2012). In relation to the novel, there is a phenomenon of restrictive ideas and expectation of women. For this, the research applies social theory called symbolic violence by Bourdieu. Symbolic violence means an invisible type of violence which imposes dominant values to the subordinated (Bourdieu, 2013). This theory helps explaining how patriarchal values are imposed to women and how women become complicit to it without question.

The research is proposed based on said concern that is found from literature in general and *Beartown* novel in particular. In order to obtain information from the novel, the research sets objectives which is to identify forms of symbolic violence in *Beartown* novel. This helps describing how dominant people imposed their values to the subordinated people. The result of this research could give a significant contribution to feminist field and symbolic violence analysis. Most importantly, the result contributes in socializing what ideas and expectation that constraint women's life.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theory of Practice

One must learn the theory of practice in order to better understand symbolic violence. Toi (Moi, 1991, 2001) addressed this significance to all researcher who wants to apply Bourdieu by not dispensing theory of practice in analysis. This is so because Bourdieu presented these concepts as interrelated. This means the analysis would be incomplete or hollow because theory of practice helps situating or contextualizing the symbolic violence in the novel. Hence, this chapter is reserved in reviewing the concepts as the basis for understanding symbolic violence.

Pierre Bourdieu is a French philosopher, anthropologist, and sociologist. In theorizing how social structures and produces culture, Bourdieu returned to sociology to develop theory of practice. He introduced three interrelated elements; habitus, field, and capital. Habitus in general is a collection of disposition imprinted in individual's mind or collective's if they share similar dispositions (Maton, 2014). This disposition is acquired from direct and indirect experience of the social world. From childhood to adulthood, an individual's mind keeps recording everything they observe including how other people behave, act, respond, and do something (Jenkins, 2006). Sometimes, this disposition is

gained from learning consciously whether in school or family or other institutions, but most often habitus is acquired unconsciously from social. Habitus is what shapes individual's perspective and practices according to what they have been observing. If they observe regularly that a man usually do heavy jobs and a woman usually do domestic jobs, this would be the habitus they acquired (Bourdieu, 2001).

The other elements are field and capital. Field is basically a social arena where relation of individuals and capital appear (Thomson, 2014). This social arena is filled with individuals having position that is determined by how much capital they have gained or ascribed. They could have economic capital, cultural capital, social capital, and/or symbolic capital (Moore, 2014). On one hand, having more capital would give a resource or power to the individual or collective to do something in a field. On the other hand, having less would limit individual's movement. This is so because there is an unequal distribution of capital. This situation results the appearance of dominant and subordinate position in a field. Simultaneously, when an individual or collective is dominant, their habitus becomes dominant too. In other words, what is dominant is what to be followed. In this situation, symbolic violence in subordinated position occurs.

2.1.1. Symbolic Violence

Symbolic violence is the object of this research. Bourdieu defined this as the imposition of dominant doxa or social values to every individual. This phenomenon is caused by unequal distribution of capital in a field. This results one's dominant over the other, and simultaneously dominant people exert dominant doxa from their habitus. However, symbolic violence is exerted mostly without deliberate or conscious attempt. This is so because both dominant and subordinated people misrecognize the dominant doxa that they encounter regularly as an unquestionable truth, or fate, or law of nature (Jenkins, 2006). However, not all doxa applies to everyone. Often, this dominant doxa restricts the practices of subordinated people which leads to suffering. In his *The Weight of the World* book, Bourdieu (1999) invited other researchers to interview subordinated people which suffered through symbolic violence; minorities of race, gender, and class.

Symbolic violence appears in many forms. However, Bourdieu never formulated specifically the form or practices of symbolic violence. Instead, he provided two types of mechanism; euphemism and censorship

(Bourdieu, 2013). Through these mechanisms, an analysis could then identify how the form of symbolic violence is achieved or done.

a. Euphemism

Euphemism is a personal approach of symbolic violence. It is personal because it is achieved through familiarity, solidarity, and hospitality. In *Outline of Theory of Practice*, euphemism appears in the form of gift-debt, obligation, piety, confidence, loyalty, gratitude, and hospitality (Bourdieu, 2013). By presenting familiarity, symbolic violence is rendered invisible and gentle. This gentleness produces complicity in the subordinated position. In other words, by serving good, the subordinated feel obliged to follow or complicit (Bourdieu, 1998).

b. Censorship

Censorship is an orthodox approach of symbolic violence. It is universal because it is achieved through preservation or conservation of dominant values (Bourdieu, 1998). This creates distinction between right/wrong, moral/immoral, formal/informal, and high/low. One is uphold by the dominant as desirable whereas the another value is censored as undesirable, or low. Often, these dominant values are preserved within rites of institution. This place is effective so as to appear legitimate, natural and unquestionable to everyone (Bourdieu, 1991, 2013).

2.2. Previous Research

Recent research on *Beartown* is difficult to access. One of the accessible articles using *Beartown* novel is a study conducted by Daria (2019). This study analyzed 11 selected literary text including *Beartown* to identify pragmatic potential of emotional utterances.

Interestingly, there are many recent articles on symbolic violence analysis. One of them is a study conducted by Amaliah (2021). The study identified symbolic violence in *A Thousand Splendid Sun* novel using Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence. The result showed symbolic violence in the form of (1) mother's cynicism, (2) marriage arrangement by the father, and (3) women's appearances.

3. Research Methodology

Considering symbolic violence as the object being analyzed, the research applies qualitative framework. Qualitative not only allows a descriptive analysis, but it also allows an analysis of interactive variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This is so because symbolic violence possess variables that influence each other. Form of symbolic violence (euphemism

and censorship) needs theory of practice (habitus, field, capital). Without one, the analysis is incomplete. Even taking these two variables within relation of cause-effect would also be unjust to the nature of the object and to Bourdieu's intent with this theory (Moi, 2001). By recognizing this core of qualitative, it helps deciding effective strategies in obtaining and analyzing the data.

In obtaining the data of the object in *Beartown* novel, the study implements close reading of the novel. This technique allows a detail reading of literary elements (Rapoport, 2011). It starts from (1) reading the novel entirely and (2) highlighting every description that fits to the variables. After collecting the data, (3) everything is sorted. In analyzing the data, the study applies latent content analysis (Flick, 2014). It starts from (1) codifying every sorted data based on similar characteristics. Then, the research (2) criticizes and (3) evaluates data under the codes by equipping theory of symbolic violence to describe the data. Finally, the result of the analysis is presented in discussion. It is presented in descriptive-narrative which consists of quotes and the description.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. Result

The research collected 65 data from *Beartown* novel that accords to the description of form of symbolic violence. From 65 data, it is found that censorship mechanism is frequently appeared. Censorship preserves dominant narrative or values through rites such as psychological assumption, enforcing view in social, and limiting women's opportunity in sport. For euphemism, the community often imposes their dominant value through gift-debt, familiarity, hospitality, concern, worries, obligation, confidence, and jokes. Surprisingly, these violences appear gentle that one might mistake it as a form of concern to the subordinated. Some of these violences too enforces assumptions that are not tested its validity, especially one who make psychological claims. This particular violence, and other violences would be discussed in the following section. It discusses 3 data of euphemism and 2 data of censorship. These are chosen for its most frequent appearances in the novel.

4.2. Discussion

Euphemism

Data 1

When he realized his mistake he just laughed, as if Kira ought to find the situation funny too. When she didn't, he

*sighed and said: "You mustn't take things too seriously, eh?" **When he heard that she was thinking of carrying on with her career in parallel with Peter's, he exclaimed in surprise: "But who's going to take care of the kids?"** She really did try to keep quiet. (pp. 34-35)*

Euphemism renders symbolic violence to be gentle and this is approached personally and hospitably. In this excerpt, Kira attended her husband's little party among members of Hockey Club. Kira's character possess habitus that differs with many individuals in *Beartown*. She tended to be very independent and assertive. She is also a lawyer with busy schedule and people would perceived her as career woman. However, the dominant habitus in *Beartown* social field, women are perceived to be the one who is "standing proudly in the doorways, waving them (husband) off" (2017, p. 34). Despite Kira's position as lawyer and a wife of General Manager of the club, she was still expected to abide her obligation as a mother. In this excerpt, the president club did a symbolic violence which is euphemised or disguised as concern. He concerned about "who's going to take care of the kids?" as if Kira had never thought about it before. This gives an implication that he imposes dominant's view of mother who is responsible in managing the family; the husband and the children. It becomes certain that this is symbolic violence when men in the social field never encounter the question as if taking care the children is not part of his responsibility.

Data 2

When she was very little, Ana wanted to be a professional hockey player. She played one season on the girls' team in Hed, but she was too restless to do what the coaches told her and kept getting into fights the whole time. In the end her dad promised to teach her to hunt with a rifle if she stopped making him drive her to training sessions. She could see he was ashamed of the fact that she was so different, and the offer of learning how to shoot was too good to turn down. (p. 261)

In this particular excerpt, Ana is imposed with view that restricted her dream. She was imposed through euphemism in the form of gift-debt. When symbolic violence appeared as gift-debt, it is difficult not to refuse what social wanted. Initially, she dreamed to be "a professional hockey player". She dared to go to Hed despite the absence of girls club in *Beartown*. However, the dominant habitus in

social field is against her habitus. The dominant habitus is “teenage girls were primarily supposed to be interested in hockey players, not hockey” (2017, p. 261). At the end of the line, it is found that her father “was ashamed of the fact that she was so different”. This shame drives him to show concern to his daughter with “the offer of learning how to shoot”. On one hand, she had to retreat her dream to be a hockey player. On the other hand, she accepted her father’s offer. In other words, she is gifted with another good opportunity, but with debt to stop “making him drive her to training sessions”.

Data 3

“Well . . . it’s not that hard, you just set it up. There’s always young lads who want to play hockey.”

“What about girls?”

Sune frowns several times. His breath wheezes out of his heavy frame.

“There’s a girls’ team in Hed.”

“We’re not from Hed,” Adri replies.

He can’t help smiling at that, but mutters:

“It’s probably not the right time for a girls’ team in Beartown. We’ve got enough problems as it is right now.” (p. 460)

In this excerpt, an old dismissed coach named Sune came to Adri’s kennel to meet Benji. However, Benji was not there. Sune wanted to rebuild the hockey team after losing players that transferred to another town. Adri provoked him about the absence of girls team. Here, Sune exerted symbolic violence that is euphemised as worries. He reasoned that it was “not the right time” because there was “enough problems” at the time”. This response is very much gentle and subtle because it does not impose directly and clearly. His response unconsciously contributed in imposing dominant values that girls team is unnecessary. This is justified in his previous response saying that he needed “young lads who want to play hockey” to rebuilt the team. Therefore, Sune’s concern had unconsciously done a symbolic violence that imposed the insignificance role of girls in hockey team. Considering, the dominant habitus of the sport field is “teenage girls were primarily supposed to be interested in hockey players, not hockey” (2017, p. 261).

Censorship

Data 1

*“Anyone can see she’s just some sort of attention seeker. **There’s a groupie***

*mentality around these guys—that’s perfectly natural. I’m not saying she did it on purpose; it must be something psychological. She’s a teenager, for God’s sake, and we all know what happens to their hormones. But if she gets drunk and goes into a boy’s room, then she’s putting him in one hell of a position, isn’t she? One hell of a position. **It’s hardly that bloody easy for the lad to interpret signals like that!**” (p. 405)*

Censorship is another mechanism in which dominant value is preserved as desirable and opted out another values as undesirable. In this case, social field in *Beartown* novel preserved a view or doxa that women’s mentality is difficult to understand. This is displayed in above excerpt. At the time, people were given a chance to speak their thoughts and concerns about the sexual assault report by Maya against the most admired hockey player named Kevin.

In response to this case, one citizen imposed their view that Maya is an “attention seeker”. They claimed it is “perfectly natural” for a teenage as she is. They also claim it was for “psychological” reason or “their hormones”. This part implies how particular doxa or view was prevalent in psychological institution. This claim helps rendering the imposition as true or natural, when it is scientifically biased and not valid. Due this reason, the citizen pandered to the desirable view that women are unstable, indecisive, and uncertain, and these attributes explain how difficult for men in the novel, especially Kevin, to “interpret signals like that”. This violence simultaneously censored the actual view that Maya had “said no” frequently (2017, p. 204). Maya had tried to “tear two deep scratches in his skin” with her nails, and she had pulled “his hand away” and “hits him as hard as she can across the cheek” (2017, pp. 205–206). In short, this violence censored undesirable view where Kevin actually raped Maya. Instead, this citizen opted a desirable view where Kevin is actually not wrong because Kevin is just a “lad” who mistook signals what Maya wanted.

Data 2

Girls aren’t allowed to like hockey even just a little bit in Beartown. Ideally they shouldn’t like it at all. Because if you like the sport you must be a lesbian, and if you like the players you’re a slut. Ana feels like pushing her neighbor up against the wall and telling him that the locker room where those boys sit telling their stupid jokes ends up preserving them like a tin

can. It makes them mature more slowly, while some even go rotten inside. And they don't have any female friends, and there are no women's teams here, so they learn that hockey only belongs to them, and their coaches teach them that girls are a "distraction." So they learn that girls only exist for fucking. She wants to point out how all the old men in this town praise them for "fighting" and "not backing down," but not one single person tells them that when a girl says no, it means NO. And the problem with this town is not only that a boy raped a girl, but that everyone is pretending that he DIDN'T do it. So now all the other boys will think that what he did was okay. Because no one cares. (p. 386)

In this excerpt, Ana was in rage to people who was silent the entire time in *Beartown* over toxic culture that restricted her and other women's life. This silent is actually a symbolic violence. By remaining silent, the dominant value is preserved as it is complete with distinction of desirable and undesirable view. Here, their silent censored undesirable view of girls playing hockey "even just a little bit" because that either means you are "a lesbian" or "a slut" if liking the players. The silent too preserved the dominant view spurred in sport and social field where "girls are a "distraction"" and "exist for fucking". This silent ultimately imposed a tendency or impression that what boys (Kevin) did "was okay". In other words, what Kevin did was not wrong. It is because their dominant habitus tended to see women (Maya) failed to give signals that "it's hardly bloody easy for the lad to interpret signals like that".

5. Conclusion

Symbolic violence analysis is interesting to study, especially in explaining feminist issues such as constraining ideas and expectation of women in *Beartown* novel. The research aimed to identify form of symbolic violence. The result showed 65 data or excerpts that accords to the description of form of symbolic violence. The most frequent is censorship in which the community preserved their dominant value to be followed by everyone without questioned. This is achieved through biased psychological assumption, shame, silence, enforcing dominant's view in social, and limiting women's role and inclusion in playing Hockey. These attempts were supported from rites of institution which renders their view as true, or natural for women. On the other hand, euphemism is achieved through gift-debt,

familiarity, hospitality, concern, worries, obligation, confidence, and jokes. From these two forms, it is found another findings. The two forms basically imposed dominant's view over women in their own ways such as women should only take care of the child, women should not play hockey, attractive women should not be a teacher, women should be accomodating, women is indecisive, women is men's pleasures and women is the one seducing men to rape them. Another finding is also worth to be noticed. The frequent used of censorship displays and confirms how defensive and protective the attitude of the community towards any threats to their dominance.

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