

## Poverty as Social Discourse in *Joko Anwar's Nightmares and The Daydreams* (2024)

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### ABSTRACT

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The series *Joko Anwar's Nightmares and The Daydreams* goes beyond genre-based supernatural science fiction and horror by embedding a layered social commentary on poverty and structural inequality. Poverty in the series is depicted not simply as financial deprivation, but as a complex condition marked by vulnerability, constrained agency, unequal access to resources, and dependency shaped by social structures. This article investigates how poverty operates as social discourse by analyzing narrative patterns, cinematic representation, and authorial perspective within the series. The study applies a qualitative method using Teun A. Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, focusing on the interrelated dimensions of text, social cognition, and social context. Data are drawn from dialogues, character arcs, visual settings, and filmic techniques, and are interpreted alongside public statements by the director and current Indonesian social issues such as job insecurity, unequal educational access, precarious housing, and domestic violence. The analysis indicates that poverty is consistently framed through images of spatial confinement, limited opportunity, asymmetrical power relations, and systemic constraints that reproduce hardship across characters' lives. The director's creative choices position entertainment as a vehicle for social reflection, although the symbolic and indirect mode of critique means the deeper social message is more readily recognized by critically literate viewers than by general audiences.

### INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology has significantly shifted media consumption patterns from conventional television toward internet-based or Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms. OTT services such as Netflix, Disney+, Viu, and Vidio enable on-demand and cross-device distribution of audiovisual content, allowing audiences to access media more flexibly and independently of broadcast schedules (Putri & Kleden, 2022). In Indonesia, the OTT market value reached approximately USD 2.4 billion in 2023, driven by increasing internet penetration and changing audience preferences toward personalized content consumption. Netflix has emerged as one of the dominant platforms, with around 4.22 million subscribers by the end of

2024, and is widely recognized for its premium content and continuous innovation in digital entertainment formats (Fix Patrol, 2025).

Compared to conventional television, which operates under strict broadcasting regulations and censorship frameworks, OTT platforms generally offer broader creative flexibility. This condition enables filmmakers to present social realities more openly and with fewer formal restrictions. From a media representation perspective, audiovisual content does not function solely as entertainment but also plays a role in shaping social meaning and audience understanding. Media texts actively construct meaning and ideology rather than merely reflecting reality, making digital series a potential site for the production

of social discourse, including narratives about poverty and inequality (Ayunda et al., n.d.).

One Indonesian filmmaker known for consistently embedding social reflection within popular genres is Joko Anwar. His previous works integrate horror and thriller conventions with social critique through symbolic elements, character construction, and narrative settings. This tendency continues in the Netflix original series *Joko Anwar's Nightmares and The Daydreams* (2024), which presents interconnected stories across different time periods, combining supernatural elements with social problems. The series centers on individual struggles against extraordinary threats while simultaneously portraying the family as a critical space for moral protection and human values (Pamugari, 2024)

The series also holds global significance because it is produced and distributed directly by Netflix across more than 190 countries. Within two weeks of release, it entered the global Top 10 list for non-English TV series, indicating that locally grounded stories carrying Indonesian social issues can achieve international resonance (Ostby, 2024). This achievement positions the series as a relevant object of study within popular culture texts that construct and circulate social discourse at a global scale.

Previous studies have demonstrated that film functions as an important medium for representing social realities and power relations. Research on *Nanti Kita Cerita Tentang Hari Ini* (2022) analyzed family power dynamics using Fairclough's three-dimensional model, while a study on *Jakarta vs Everybody* (2024) examined urban social inequality through Barthes' semiotic approach. Another study on *Little Women* (2022) employed Sara Mills' Critical Discourse Analysis to explore gender marginalization and patriarchal domination.

These studies confirm that cinematic texts can serve as vehicles of social critique. However, existing research predominantly focuses on feature-length films and has not sufficiently examined serialized narratives distributed through global OTT platforms such as Netflix. Moreover, limited attention has been given to how poverty discourse is constructed across episodic storytelling structures using van Dijk's integrated framework of text, social cognition, and social context. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by analyzing the construction of poverty discourse in *Joko Anwar's Nightmares and The Daydreams* (2024) as an OTT-based series. By examining how poverty is

narratively and visually constructed across seven episodes and relating it to broader Indonesian socio-economic conditions, this research offers a new perspective on how streaming-based popular culture participates in shaping structural understandings of inequality in contemporary society.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Elements of Film*

Film and serialized audio-visual texts construct meaning through the integration of narrative and cinematic elements. Narrative elements, including character construction, conflict, setting, and causal plot development provide the structural foundation through which social issues are dramatized (Gede et al., 2021). Through narrative choices, certain groups may be positioned as vulnerable, dominant, marginalized, or resistant, thereby shaping audience interpretation of social inequality.

Cinematic elements function as visual and auditory mechanisms that reinforce or modify narrative meaning. *Mise-en-scène* (setting, lighting, costume, props, and performance), cinematography (shot size, camera angle, and composition), editing, and sound design work together to produce atmosphere and ideological emphasis (Sya'Dian & Oktiana, 2021). These elements do not merely support the story but actively construct symbolic meanings related to class, power, and vulnerability.

Within this research, narrative and cinematic elements are treated as textual manifestations in van Dijk's CDA framework. They function as sites where poverty discourse becomes visible through spatial positioning, visual contrast, character framing, and symbolic representation. By integrating film theory with CDA, this study demonstrates how audio-visual techniques participate in shaping ideological constructions of poverty.

### *Concept and Dimensions of Poverty*

Poverty is commonly defined as the inability to meet minimum living standards, particularly regarding basic needs and access to social services. In Indonesia, poverty measurement is formally based on the poverty line approach, which calculates minimum food and non-food expenditure (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2025c). However, contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualizes poverty as a multidimensional condition that includes limited access, vulnerability, social exclusion, and restricted participation in economic and political life.

Structural factors such as unemployment, unequal education access, housing insecurity, and weak social protection contribute to persistent marginalization across generations. Robert Chambers conceptualizes poverty as a cluster of disadvantage comprising material deprivation, vulnerability, powerlessness, dependence, and isolation (Diyah & Adawiyah, 2020). This perspective aligns with the concept of the vicious circle of poverty, in which low income, limited education, poor health, and restricted capital access reinforce one another (Marsitadewi et al., 2024).

In this study, poverty is understood as a structural and discursive phenomenon rather than solely an economic condition. This conceptualization allows the researcher to examine how the series frames poverty either as individual limitation or systemic inequality. By integrating Chambers' multidimensional framework with van Dijk's CDA model, poverty is analyzed as a discourse constructed through representation, ideology, and social context within the audio-visual narrative.

#### ***Critical Discourse Analysis Model***

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as proposed by Teun A. van Dijk conceptualizes discourse not merely as linguistic text but as a form of social practice shaped by ideology, power relations, and social structures. Discourse is produced through the interaction between textual strategies, cognitive frameworks, and broader socio-political contexts. Therefore, CDA enables researchers to move beyond surface meaning and examine how social realities are constructed, legitimized, or challenged through representation.

Van Dijk's model consists of three interconnected dimensions: text structure, social cognition, and social context (Nurani, 2020). The textual dimension analyzes narrative organization, rhetorical emphasis, and representational patterns that foreground particular meanings. The social cognition dimension explores the knowledge, beliefs, and ideological perspectives of discourse producers that shape how issues are framed. Meanwhile, the social context dimension situates discourse within wider structures of inequality, institutional power, and socio-economic conditions.

In the context of this study, van Dijk's framework is employed to analyze how poverty is constructed in an audio-visual narrative. The textual dimension is used to examine how narrative and visual strategies represent poverty; the social cognition dimension explores the Joko Anwar's ideological positioning;

and the social context dimension connects the series' representation to contemporary socio-economic realities in Indonesia. Through this integration, poverty is examined not merely as a theme but as a structured discourse embedded within power relations.

## **METHOD**

### ***Research Design***

This study applies a qualitative descriptive approach within a critical paradigm to examine the construction of poverty discourse in Joko Anwar's *Nightmares and The Daydreams* (2024). The main analytical framework is Teun A. van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis, which emphasizes three interconnected dimensions: text structure, social cognition, and social context. The unit of analysis consists of narrative and cinematic elements representing poverty across the seven episodes of the series. Scenes were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria: (1) the presence of explicit or implicit references to economic hardship, inequality, or limited access to social resources; (2) visual or narrative indicators of class position such as housing conditions, occupation, dialogue about employment, or institutional interaction; and (3) scenes that illustrate power relations between marginalized characters and dominant institutions. Based on these criteria, a total of 20 key scenes were identified and analyzed in depth.

### ***Data Collection***

Data were collected through four complementary techniques:

#### **1. Documentation**

All seven episodes of the series were repeatedly viewed, and relevant scenes, dialogues, and visual frames were transcribed and catalogued as primary data. Official synopses, media reviews, and related written materials were also collected as supporting documentation.

#### **2. Literature Review**

Scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and official reports were reviewed to strengthen conceptual and theoretical foundations regarding poverty, media representation, and van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis.

#### **3. Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the director to gain insight into creative intentions, narrative decisions, and social issues embedded in the series. The interview with Joko Anwar took place on

2 December 2025, during Netflix Creative Asia 2025 at JAFF'20, held at the Ballroom, Hotel Tentrem, Yogyakarta. The interview consisted of guiding questions about thematic choices, narrative framing, and social commentary in the series. Prior to the interview, informed consent was obtained from the participant, and ethical procedures were followed, including voluntary participation and permission for recording and citation.

#### 4. Indirect Observation

Secondary sources such as video interviews with the director were analyzed to triangulate primary data. Two online interviews relevant to narrative intention and social themes were sourced from YouTube, *Hype Talk - Joko Anwar Bongkar Teori di Nightmares and Daydreams* (Kompas.com, 2024) and *INI CARA JOKO ANWAR KONSEP SEMUA FILMNYA! MAU BIKIN HIGHSCHOOL DRAMA? - Iso-Late Show* (Tahir, 2024).

## RESULT

This study analyzes the representation of poverty in audio-visual media through the series *Joko Anwar's Nightmares and The Daydreams* (2024) using a Critical Discourse Analysis approach. The units of analysis include narrative structure, dialogue, character construction, and cinematic elements that signify economic limitation, lower-class living conditions, and forms of social marginalization.

### *Representation of Poverty in the Series*

Based on the sequence of scenes across episodes 1–7, the text constructs poverty as a structural condition that extends beyond economic deprivation to include vulnerability, powerlessness, and limited access to decent work, legal protection, and proper living space. This representation is conveyed through characters positioned in socially weak locations who continuously face systemic pressures.

**Figure 1.** Bandi's Home



Through the story of Bandi and Dewi on episode 5, poverty is represented through housing insecurity and weak bargaining power. They live in an abandoned building without legal ownership and face threats of eviction and economic pressure from extended family members. The conflict indicates that power relations

operate not only at the institutional level but also within the family sphere. Bandi interprets his condition as a failure to fulfill his role as head of household, while Dewi tends to accept their limitations, showing that poverty also shapes psychological burden and self-perception.

**Figure 2.** Ali's job-seeking scene in Episode 6



Through Ali and Ningsih, the text highlights how access to formal employment can be restricted by structural requirements. Ali is rejected from a job due to color blindness despite having experience and motivation. The rejection is framed as a procedural company rule rather than a personal decision, illustrating how institutional mechanisms can exclude vulnerable individuals. Economic pressure then pushes Ali to consider illegal hypnotic practices offered by Iwan, while Ningsih rejects the option on moral grounds. This conflict represents the tension between economic necessity and ethical values, positioning deviant actions as survival strategies under constrained choices.

In Adi's family narrative, poverty is discursively constructed through a deep distrust toward the legal system. This is explicitly articulated in the dialogue:

*Valdy:* "Apa Mbak gak mau cari keadilan buat suami Mbak? Orang-orang yang bertanggung jawab atas ini semua..."

*Istri:* "Suami saya difitnah aja, polisi gak bisa bantu. Difitnah sama orang cecunguk juga. Apalagi sama orang yang punya kuasa kaya begini."

The wife's response frames the legal system as structurally inaccessible to the lower class. The clause "polisi gak bisa bantu" positions law enforcement as ineffective, while the comparative structure "apalagi sama orang yang punya kuasa" constructs power as a determining factor in justice. Poverty here is not represented merely as economic deprivation but as a condition of legal marginalization. In contrast, Valdy's question reflects a middle-class social cognition that still assumes the availability of institutional justice. The discursive tension between these two perspectives reveals an unequal distribution of symbolic and social capital, where justice is

implicitly constructed as contingent upon power rather than rights. Thus, poverty is framed as structural exclusion from formal mechanisms of protection, reinforcing an ideological critique of institutional inequality.

Across the seven episodes, lower-class characters such as Bandi, Dewi, Ali, Ningsih, and Adi's family are portrayed as lacking economic, social, and symbolic capital, making upward mobility difficult. In line with multidimensional poverty theory, their condition reflects material shortage, vulnerability, and powerlessness. From a capital distribution perspective, unequal resources shape a survival-oriented habitus that is realistic yet mobility-limiting. Poverty is therefore framed not as an individual failure but as a product of unequal and continuously reproduced social structures (Puspitasari et al., 2023).

Besides being constructed through narrative conflict and character experience, poverty in the series is also consistently strengthened through cinematic elements. The story shows economic hardship through characters, dialogue, and situations, while the visuals reinforce it through setting, framing, lighting, and production design. The frequent use of long and medium shots places characters within modest and vulnerable living spaces such as crowded flats, landfill settlements, coastal houses, abandoned buildings, and narrow alleys, making poverty appear as an environmental and structural condition.

**Figure 3.** POV of Laras's conflict inside the bunker.



Tight framing, enclosed compositions, and mostly eye-level static cameras create an observational and realistic tone that highlights limited mobility and pressure in everyday life. Low-key lighting dominates lower-class spaces, while more formal and wealthy environments are shown with brighter and softer light, producing a clear visual class contrast. Costumes, makeup, props, and especially housing conditions are presented in a naturalistic way and repeatedly function as the main visual markers of poverty. Together, narrative and cinematic strategies work in the same direction to present poverty as a lived social reality rather than a purely personal problem.

### *Film as a Medium of Social Criticism*

This section approaches the findings through a social cognition perspective, examining how the director's way of seeing, understanding, and interpreting social reality shapes the discourse built in *Nightmares and The Daydreams*. The narrative patterns found across the series indicate that the depicted conflicts are strongly rooted in the lived experiences of urban lower-class communities and other socially vulnerable groups. This suggests that the creative vision behind the series is not detached from everyday socio-economic realities, but deliberately shaped by them.

In media interviews at *Hype Talk - Joko Anwar Bongkar Teori di Nightmares and Daydreams* (2024), Joko Anwar explains that although the series employs science fiction and supernatural elements, its narrative foundation is intentionally anchored in real social issues. He repeatedly connects the story world to themes such as poverty, unstable employment, and sandwich-generation pressures. The recurring portrayal of characters working in informal and precarious sectors such as drivers, scavengers, and fishermen functions as a representational choice to highlight hardworking groups whose economic security remains fragile. This pattern shows a cognitive framing in which social struggle is treated as central narrative material rather than background context.

The conflicts presented are not only external or fantastical, but also socio-economic and moral in nature, including survival-based decisions, ethical compromises, and family sacrifices. Domestic and everyday spaces are frequently used as key sites of tension, positioning economic hardship as both a personal and structural condition that shapes relationships and future opportunities. From a social cognition perspective, this reflects how the creator frames poverty as embedded in daily moral negotiations and relational pressures, not merely as statistical or abstract inequality.

Additional interviews discussing the conceptual background of the series note that each episode is designed around different yet interconnected social problems, ranging from intergenerational responsibility and lack of social protection to structural inequality and class pressure. References to field observations, historical violence toward marginalized groups, and symbolic constructs such as Agarthas as an imagined escape for powerless

communities indicate that the narrative is informed by social awareness, research references, and personal reflection.

**Figure 4.** Joko Anwar as a speaker



The researcher interprets these statements as evidence that entertainment is used intentionally as an entry point, while social critique operates beneath the surface of the story. This interpretation is reinforced by statements delivered by Joko Anwar during Netflix Creative Asia 2025 as part of JAFF'20, which the researcher attended on December 2, 2025, at Ballroom Hotel Tentrem, Yogyakarta. In that forum, Joko Anwar emphasized that genre and popular storytelling function as strategic vehicles to engage broader audiences, while social realities and structural issues are embedded within the narrative layers.

The director thus positions film and serial storytelling not merely as creative commodities, but as communicative instruments capable of provoking public reflection on inequality and power relations. In this sense, the series operates cognitively as a mediated form of social criticism: genre elements attract viewers at the surface level, yet the underlying discourse subtly invites audiences to interpret structural poverty and institutional injustice as systemic, rather than incidental, conditions within contemporary Indonesian society.

### ***Power Relations and Social Critique in Poverty Discourse***

Poverty in the series is portrayed as a multidimensional condition rather than merely an economic shortage. This representation aligns with Robert Chambers' view that poverty consists of overlapping disadvantages, including vulnerability, insecurity, limited access, and powerlessness. In the narrative, this condition is reflected through characters working in informal sectors such as drivers, scavengers, fishermen, and manual laborers whose livelihoods are unstable and who face continuous exposure to health risks, violence, and insecure housing. Their struggles illustrate that poverty in the

series involves restricted opportunities and constrained choices shaped by unequal access to education, healthcare, and legal protection.

Such portrayals resonate with broader social realities in Indonesia. Statistical reports indicate that a large portion of the productive-age population attains only basic to secondary education, while participation in higher education remains limited (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2025b). Educational constraints affect eligibility for formal employment, which generally requires certified qualifications. Consequently, many individuals enter informal work sectors with uncertain income or remain unemployed. The unemployment rate and the large number of underemployed workers recorded in 2025 suggest that labor vulnerability is strongly connected to structural labor-market limitations rather than solely to individual capacity (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2025a).

Structural inequality is also visible in housing conditions and living environments. The persistence of inadequate housing and slum settlements, including in urban areas, indicates restricted access to safe and proper living space among low-income communities (Hakiki, 2025). Vulnerability further appears within domestic settings, where economic pressure and unequal authority relations can intensify conflict and violence. From Chambers' perspective, these conditions demonstrate how vulnerability operates as a core component of structural poverty.

The discourse constructed in the series positions informal workers, lower-class urban families, women, and children as the most exposed groups. Characters such as Ali, Panji, Iyos and Ipah, Laras, Wahyu, and coastal villagers are depicted as facing hardship due to systemic constraints rather than personal shortcomings. Meanwhile, power is concentrated in institutions, authorities, and actors who control legal and economic resources. From Bourdieu's framework, this imbalance reflects unequal distribution of economic, social, and symbolic capital, which weakens the bargaining position of marginalized groups within the social field.

This recurring pattern corresponds with the concept of the vicious circle of poverty, where limited resources reduce access to education and stable work, leading to low income, unsafe living conditions, and repeated vulnerability across generations. The series reinforces this cycle by showing characters who remain trapped in hardship despite persistence and sacrifice, suggesting that poverty is structurally

reproduced and not easily overcome by individual effort alone.

At the discourse level, the series operates as a form of social criticism toward unequal systems of access and protection. However, the critique is conveyed indirectly through symbolic, horror, and speculative-fiction elements, making its critical message more easily recognized by viewers with higher media literacy. As a result, the series functions both as entertainment and as a reflective social text, with its critical force shaped by how audiences interpret its metaphors and social signals.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study both support and extend previous research on media representation of poverty. Consistent with earlier studies in media and cultural studies, *Nightmares and The Daydreams* reflects recognizable social realities in contemporary Indonesia, including limited access to decent work, sandwich-generation pressure, the vulnerability of low-income families, and unequal power relations between citizens and institutions. These findings align with prior scholarship arguing that media texts often function as mirrors of socio-economic inequality. However, this research extends previous studies by demonstrating how poverty is not merely represented narratively, but discursively constructed through implicit storytelling strategies, genre conventions, and symbolic framing within an OTT serial format.

Unlike earlier research that primarily focused on single-film analysis or semiotic symbolism, this study reveals how episodic streaming narratives repeatedly normalize structural exclusion across multiple story arcs. The findings therefore provide a new perspective by showing that in digital serial storytelling, social criticism may operate subtly beneath genre entertainment, making its ideological message dependent on audience media literacy and social awareness. For some viewers, the series remains genre-based entertainment; for others, it functions as a reflective cultural text that frames poverty as a structural condition rather than an individual failure.

The findings also reinforce Pierre Bourdieu's structural perspective that poverty results from unequal distribution of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital (Haerussaleh & Huda, 2021). The series illustrates how limited capital restricts access to education, formal employment, and institutional protection, thereby reproducing unequal life chances.

In this sense, the study supports Bourdieu's framework while empirically contextualizing it within Indonesian digital media representation.

Furthermore, the results resonate with Robert Chambers' multidimensional poverty framework (Pratiwi et al., 2022), particularly regarding vulnerability, powerlessness, and limited capacity to respond to structural risks. However, this study contributes a discursive dimension to Chambers' model by demonstrating how vulnerability and powerlessness are narratively framed and linguistically constructed in media texts. Poverty is therefore not only an economic or social condition but also a mediated discourse shaped by representation.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of Critical Discourse Analysis by applying van Dijk's multidimensional model to an Indonesian OTT-based serial format, showing how text structure, social cognition, and social context interact in constructing structural poverty discourse. For media studies, the study highlights how streaming series function as contemporary sites of ideological negotiation, where entertainment and social critique coexist. For poverty studies, this research adds a cultural-communicative dimension, emphasizing that public understanding of poverty is influenced not only by policy and economics but also by narrative framing and symbolic representation.

Poverty is understood not merely as material deprivation, but as a discursively mediated structural condition whose meaning is shaped through interaction between media representation, ideological positioning, and socio-economic context.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that poverty in *Nightmares and The Daydreams* is not merely presented as a narrative background within a science fiction and supernatural horror framework, but is discursively constructed as a multidimensional structural condition. Poverty is represented not only as economic deprivation, but also as vulnerability, powerlessness, and restricted access to employment, education, healthcare, legal protection, and domestic security. Through recurring narrative conflicts and visual strategies, the series frames poverty as a systemic cycle shaped by unequal capital distribution and power relations rather than as individual failure.

Beyond these findings, this research contributes theoretically by extending the application of van

Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis to Indonesian OTT-based serial storytelling. The study demonstrates how textual structures, creator ideology (social cognition), and broader socio-economic contexts interact in constructing poverty discourse within popular digital media. By situating streaming series as sites of discursive production, this research enriches CDA scholarship through its integration of narrative, cinematic, and socio-structural analysis. It also contributes to media studies by highlighting how entertainment platforms function not only as cultural commodities but as arenas of ideological negotiation where social critique can be embedded implicitly. In the field of poverty studies, this research adds a communicative dimension, emphasizing that public understanding of structural inequality is shaped not only by economic data and policy discourse, but also by mediated representation.

The implications of this research are threefold. First, for theory development, the study confirms the relevance of multidimensional and structural approaches to poverty while demonstrating the importance of analyzing media texts as discursive agents in shaping social meaning. Second, for media practitioners, the findings suggest that genre storytelling can serve as an effective vehicle for social critique, but the accessibility of its critical message depends on narrative clarity and audience literacy. Third, for policymakers and social institutions, the study underscores the need to recognize media as a significant space where perceptions of inequality are formed and negotiated, which may influence public discourse and policy debates.

This research opens opportunities for further studies to examine audience reception, comparative OTT productions, or cross-genre representations of poverty in Southeast Asian media contexts. By doing so, future research can deepen understanding of how digital storytelling continues to shape the discourse of structural inequality in contemporary society.

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