

Redefining Femininity in The Ugly Stepsister (2025) : A Critical Discourse Analysis of Beauty Standards and Power Relations

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines the discourse of femininity and beauty standards in the film *The Ugly Stepsister* using Sara Mills' Critical Discourse Analysis. The research is based on the persistence of patriarchal beauty standards reproduced through popular narratives, particularly the Cinderella story. The film portrays Elvira as a woman who experiences social pressure to conform to ideal femininity in order to gain validation and acceptance. This study aims to analyze how femininity, body control, and power relations are represented through verbal, visual, and narrative aspects in the film. The research employs a descriptive qualitative method with Sara Mills' approach focusing on subject-object positions and writer-reader positions. The findings reveal that the female body is constructed as an object of social discipline shaped by patriarchal values and beauty standards. Although Elvira is positioned as an active subject within the narrative, she simultaneously becomes the object of objectification and social pressure. The study also shows that beauty standards are reproduced not only by male characters but also through relationships among women. This research implies that film functions as a medium that both reproduces and reconstructs discourses surrounding femininity in popular culture.

INTRODUCTION

Film has become one of the most influential forms of mass media in shaping public perception through visual representation, narrative construction, and cultural symbolism. Beyond functioning as entertainment, contemporary films increasingly portray social realities and reflect issues occurring within society. Through cinematography, characterization, dialogue, and visual style, films are capable of delivering specific perspectives that may influence audience interpretation and emotional engagement (Alfathoni, 2020). As stated by Alex Sobur, films do not merely present reality objectively, but rather reconstruct social reality into cultural representation that can shape audience understanding of particular issues. Therefore, films hold significant power in reproducing social discourse, including discourse related to gender and femininity.

One of the narrative forms most frequently adapted within the film industry is fairy tales. Fairy tales are cultural narratives that have survived for generations and continue to be reproduced through various media formats. Traditionally, fairy tales contain imaginative stories filled with fantasy and extraordinary events beyond human logic (Maghfiroh, 2024). However, despite their fictional nature, fairy tales contribute significantly to children's socialization processes because they introduce moral values, gender roles, and cultural expectations from an early age. Kuykendal argues that “the cultural norms represented in fairy tales play a large part in the socialization processes of the child who reads them” (Hafiza, 2022). This indicates that fairy tales participate in constructing public understanding regarding masculinity, femininity, morality, and ideal social behavior.

Nevertheless, repeated patriarchal patterns within fairy tales may influence the way children understand

gender identity and female representation. According to Sturm (in Hafiza, 2022), classical narratives often normalize patriarchal ideology by positioning women according to beauty, obedience, and passivity. Female characters are commonly divided into binary oppositions between “good” and “bad” women. Women who fulfill ideal beauty standards are frequently represented as morally virtuous, while those who fail to conform are portrayed negatively or punished within the narrative. Such representations contribute to the formation of social discourse that associates physical beauty with moral goodness.

In many classical fairy tales, women are often limited to only two possible identities: passive and obedient heroines like Cinderella, or unattractive antagonistic women who fail to meet patriarchal standards (Moi in Yeni & Rizano, 2022). According to Marcia Lieberman, fairy tales repeatedly portray women as passive figures waiting to be chosen, while marriage functions as a reward and form of social validation. Such narratives reinforce patriarchal assumptions that women’s happiness and worth depend upon beauty, obedience, and male approval. Consequently, femininity becomes associated with physical attractiveness and submissive behavior, while women outside these expectations are perceived negatively.

As public awareness regarding gender representation continues to develop, contemporary media increasingly attempt to reinterpret classical narratives from alternative perspectives. One of these reinterpretations appears in *The Ugly Stepsister*, directed by Emilie Blichfeldt. Released globally in 2025, the film reconstructs the Cinderella narrative through the perspective of Elvira, the stepsister character traditionally portrayed as antagonistic. Unlike conventional adaptations, the film humanizes Elvira and presents her emotional struggles under patriarchal beauty standards. Through body transformation, emotional suffering, and social pressure, the film reveals how femininity discourse shapes women’s identities and self-worth. Through Elvira’s perspective, the film reconstructs the traditional binary opposition between “good” and “evil” women. Elvira is no longer represented simply as a jealous antagonist, but as a woman shaped by emotional trauma, social pressure, and patriarchal expectations. The film demonstrates that her actions emerge from continuous judgment regarding physical appearance and femininity standards imposed by society and other female characters around her. Therefore, the narrative challenges dominant assumptions embedded within classical fairy tales regarding beauty, morality, and female identity.

Although previous studies have widely examined Cinderella adaptations and representations of beauty standards in fairy tales, most have focused on

identifying gender stereotypes or patriarchal ideology within traditional narratives. Limited attention has been given to how contemporary retellings reconstruct femininity discourse by repositioning marginalized female characters through both verbal and visual representations. This gap motivates the present study to examine how femininity discourse is reconstructed in *The Ugly Stepsister* using Sara Mills’ Critical Discourse Analysis. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the positioning of subjects and objects in the film’s discourse, examine how patriarchal beauty standards are reproduced through narrative and visual elements, and explain how these representations reconstruct femininity in a contemporary Cinderella adaptation.

To analyze these representations, this study employs Sara Mills’ Critical Discourse Analysis, focusing on subject-object positioning and writer-reader positioning. According to Sara Mills, women within discourse are frequently positioned as objects observed and evaluated through dominant perspectives, particularly patriarchal perspectives (Masitoh, 2020). Unlike previous studies that primarily examine character representation or beauty ideology, this research specifically investigates how femininity discourse is reconstructed through subject-object positioning and reader positioning in a contemporary Cinderella adaptation. Sara Mills’ Critical Discourse Analysis is considered the most appropriate framework for this study because it specifically emphasizes the representation and positioning of women within discourse, enabling a more comprehensive analysis of how female characters are constructed, evaluated, and invited to be interpreted by audiences. Compared with other Critical Discourse Analysis approaches that primarily emphasize broader power relations or linguistic structures, Sara Mills’ model provides a more focused perspective for examining gender representation and femininity within narrative texts.

Using this framework, the study examines how femininity discourse is constructed through verbal, visual, and narrative aspects within the film. The research focuses on how Elvira is positioned as both subject and object within the narrative, as well as how female characters participate in reproducing patriarchal beauty standards. This study is important because fairy tales are not merely fictional stories for children, but cultural narratives that shape public discourse regarding femininity, morality, beauty, and women’s identities. By critically analyzing *The Ugly Stepsister*, this research seeks to provide a broader understanding that female representation in classical narratives is socially constructed and therefore open to reinterpretation and reconstruction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Femininity and Beauty Standards

Femininity discourse refers to social constructions regarding how women are expected to look, behave, and present themselves within society. Beauty standards often position women according to physical appearance, such as slim bodies, fair skin, youthfulness, and attractive facial features (Triani & Tjahjono, 2023). According to Naomi Wolf, beauty myths function as mechanisms that control women through unrealistic standards and social expectations (Felayati & Sulisty, 2023).

Women who fail to fulfill dominant beauty standards are frequently perceived as less valuable or socially undesirable. This condition can lead to body dissatisfaction, insecurity, anxiety, and self-objectification (Afif, 2025). Within patriarchal culture, women's bodies are often treated as aesthetic objects that must continuously conform to social expectations and male gaze perspectives (Pambayun, 2025). As a result, beauty standards become forms of symbolic control that influence women psychologically and socially.

Media and film play significant roles in reproducing femininity discourse. Through visual representation, narratives, costume, and characterization, films continuously circulate ideals regarding the "perfect woman." Consequently, audiences may internalize these standards and perceive them as natural social truths rather than cultural constructions.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an approach used to examine meaning, ideology, and power relations within social phenomena and communication practices (Rosita et al., 2025). CDA does not merely analyze language as a neutral structure, but also investigates how discourse is connected to social contexts, ideology, and unequal power relations in society. According to Marzuki (2023), language functions as a social practice that both reflects and constructs social reality. Therefore, discourse can influence the way society understands gender, identity, and cultural values.

This research specifically applies Sara Mills' feminist discourse analysis approach. Sara Mills emphasizes how women are frequently positioned as objects within discourse, while men are more often presented as active subjects who control narration and perspective (Masitoh, 2020). Her approach focuses on

subject-object positioning and writer-reader positioning to examine how texts construct gender representation and influence audience interpretation. Through this perspective, representation is understood as a product of discourse and social power relations rather than an objective reality.

Sara Mills' model also analyzes discourse through verbal, visual, and narrative-discursive levels. Verbal analysis examines dialogues, narration, and language choices used to describe characters. Visual analysis focuses on cinematography, costume, camera framing, lighting, and body representation. Meanwhile, narrative-discursive analysis explores story structure, character roles, and how audiences are directed to sympathize with particular perspectives (Marzuki, 2023). These analytical levels are relevant for examining how femininity and beauty standards are represented in film narratives.

Gender and Feminism Theory

Gender refers not only to biological differences between men and women, but also to socially and culturally constructed roles, expectations, and identities (Aniqurrohman, 2023). Gender is shaped through social interaction and cultural values, causing men and women to experience different positions and expectations within society. According to Ratna Megawangi, femininity and masculinity are social constructions formed through cultural processes and socialization (Wibowo et al., 2022).

In patriarchal societies, women are often associated with domestic roles, passivity, emotional dependence, and physical appearance. These stereotypes contribute to gender inequality and limit women's participation within public spaces (Novianti et al., 2022). Feminism emerged as a movement resisting discrimination, subordination, and unequal treatment toward women in social, political, and cultural spheres. Feminist theory argues that women should have equal rights, opportunities, and autonomy in determining their identities and life choices (Wibowo et al., 2022).

Within media studies, feminist perspectives are commonly used to examine how women are represented in films and popular culture. Feminist criticism highlights how women are often objectified, marginalized, or valued based on beauty and male approval. Therefore, feminist analysis becomes important in understanding how patriarchal ideology

is reproduced through media narratives and visual representations.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore the representation of femininity and beauty standards in *The Ugly Stepsister*. Qualitative research aims to produce an in-depth understanding of social phenomena through detailed interpretation and contextual analysis (Chumairo, 2023). This approach was selected because the research focuses on discourse, representation, and meaning construction within film narratives rather than numerical measurement.

The study applied a critical paradigm using Sara Mills' Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA views language, visuals, and narrative structures as forms of social practice that are closely related to ideology and power relations (Liyanti & Ekowati, 2022). Through this approach, the research examined how femininity, body control, and patriarchal values are constructed through female characters in the film. Sara Mills' framework was chosen because it emphasizes the positioning of subject-object relations and reader-viewer positions, particularly regarding the representation of women in media texts.

The primary data source of this research was the film *The Ugly Stepsister*, directed by Emilie Blichfeldt. The analysis focused on selected scenes that contained verbal, visual, and narrative representations related to femininity, beauty standards, and gendered power relations. Supporting data were obtained from books, journal articles, previous studies, and scholarly references discussing feminist discourse, representation theory, fairy tales, and critical discourse analysis.

Data Collection

Data collection techniques in this study consisted of documentation and literature study. Documentation was conducted by observing, recording, and classifying scenes, dialogues, costumes, camera framing, character interactions, and narrative elements that reflected the construction of femininity in the film. Meanwhile, literature study was used to strengthen the theoretical framework and contextualize the discussion regarding feminist discourse and the reconstruction of female characters in contemporary fairy-tale adaptations.

The data were analyzed using Sara Mills' CDA model through several analytical levels: verbal analysis, visual analysis, narrative-discursive analysis, and subject-object positioning. The verbal level examined dialogues and linguistic expressions related to gender discourse. The visual level analyzed cinematography, costume, mise-en-scène, and body representation. The narrative-discursive level explored character roles, plot structures, and dominant perspectives within the story. Lastly, the subject-object analysis identified which characters functioned as narrators, observers, or objects of representation in the discourse.

The sequence of analysis began with identifying scenes relevant to femininity and beauty standards, followed by classifying the collected data according to verbal, visual, and narrative elements. The classified data were then interpreted using Sara Mills' CDA framework to identify subject-object positioning and ideological meanings, before synthesizing the findings to draw conclusions regarding the representation of femininity and patriarchal beauty standards in the film. Through these stages, the research aimed to reveal how the film reconstructs femininity and critiques patriarchal beauty standards within contemporary popular culture.

To ensure the credibility of the findings, interpretation was validated through theoretical triangulation by comparing the analytical results with Sara Mills' Critical Discourse Analysis framework and relevant literature on feminist discourse, representation, and beauty standards. In addition, the consistency between verbal, visual, and narrative evidence within each selected scene was examined to ensure that interpretations were supported by multiple forms of textual evidence rather than a single indicator.

RESULT

This study analyzes *The Ugly Stepsister* using Sara Mills' Critical Discourse Analysis to examine how femininity, beauty standards, women's bodies, and power relations are represented through female characters in the film. The findings indicate that the film consistently constructs femininity through patriarchal standards that position women according to physical appearance, social acceptance, and their relationship with men.

The Discourse of Femininity and Beauty

Female characters are portrayed as needing to transform their bodies and appearances in order to gain validation, love, and social recognition. Elvira, as the main character, internalizes these standards and performs extreme bodily transformations to become “worthy” of being chosen by Prince Julian. In contrast, Agnes is consistently represented as naturally beautiful, feminine, graceful, and socially accepted, reinforcing the construction of the ideal woman within the narrative. The film repeatedly associates happiness and romantic success with women who fulfill conventional standards of femininity.

Figure 1. Rebecca’s statement about women and marriage



Through Rebecca’s dialogue in Scene 12, femininity is closely connected to women’s dependency on wealthy men. Rebecca states, *“Do you think it is easy to find a rich man who wants me? A widow with two children and sagging breasts.”* This statement constructs women’s physical appearance as the main determinant of their social worth. Aging and bodily changes are framed as signs of failure that reduce women’s value in the eyes of men. At the same time, marriage is represented not merely as a romantic relationship, but also as an economic strategy for women to achieve financial stability. The scene indicates that patriarchal discourse positions women’s success through their ability to secure male validation and economic protection.

Through close-up shots and fragmented visual representations of body parts, the film objectifies the female body and positions it as something constantly monitored, judged, and reconstructed. Elvira’s body becomes the central arena where patriarchal beauty standards operate through social pressure, surveillance, and bodily modification. The body horror elements in the film intensify the audience’s awareness of the pain and suffering caused by unrealistic beauty expectations.

From the writer-reader perspective, the director deliberately constructs emotional identification between the audience and Elvira through disturbing visual representations and body horror scenes. The audience is encouraged to sympathize with Elvira’s

suffering while simultaneously questioning the absurdity of patriarchal beauty standards. The tragic ending, where Elvira fails despite sacrificing her body, functions as a critique of the unrealistic expectations imposed on women. Therefore, the film can be interpreted as a satirical reflection on how patriarchal beauty standards continuously discipline, objectify, and harm women physically and emotionally.

Women’s Bodies Represented as Sites of Discipline and Social Control.

In terms of power relations, male characters possess symbolic authority despite receiving less screen time than female characters. Prince Julian and the noblemen function as figures of validation who determine women’s value through appearance and desirability. Female characters are portrayed competing for male attention and social legitimacy. Moreover, patriarchal values are not only reproduced by men, but also internalized and reinforced by female characters such as Rebecca, Madame Vanja, and Nona Sophie, who continuously pressure Elvira to conform to ideal femininity standards.

Figure 2. Elvira’s extreme beauty procedures



The film intensifies this discourse through scenes depicting Elvira’s extreme body modification procedures. After facing humiliation in Madame Vanja’s class, Elvira becomes increasingly insecure and begins strict dieting practices. Later, she undergoes painful cosmetic procedures, including eyelash implantation and bodily reconstruction, in preparation for Prince Julian’s ball. These scenes visually construct beauty as something that requires pain, sacrifice, and bodily suffering. The repeated focus on specific body parts through close-up cinematography reinforces the idea that women’s bodies are fragmented into objects to be inspected and judged individually.

The film consistently fragments women’s bodies through cinematography that focuses on faces, breasts, eyes, feet, and other body parts. These visual strategies contribute to the objectification of female characters by separating the body from personal identity. Rather than being represented as complete individuals,

women are reduced to visual components evaluated through the male gaze. Male characters frequently comment on women's appearances and bodies in vulgar or sexualized ways, reinforcing unequal power relations between men and women.

Additionally, patriarchal control in the film is not only exercised by male characters but also reproduced by female characters such as Rebecca, Madame Vanja, and Madame Sophie. These women discipline Elvira's body through criticism, instructions, and beauty expectations, showing how patriarchal ideology becomes internalized within women themselves. The film demonstrates that patriarchal power does not always operate through direct force, but also through normalized social expectations that women eventually accept and reproduce.

The climax of bodily discipline appears when Elvira cuts off her toes so her feet can fit into the prince's shoe. This scene represents the most extreme form of patriarchal pressure imposed on women's bodies. Although Elvira appears to act voluntarily, her decision is heavily shaped by social expectations and the desire for male validation. Her body becomes a site where patriarchal control operates indirectly through internalized standards of femininity and beauty. The scene also symbolizes how women are pressured to destroy themselves physically and emotionally in pursuit of social acceptance.

Although she appears as an active subject who makes decisions regarding her body, she simultaneously becomes an object shaped by patriarchal discourse and beauty standards. Meanwhile Agnes as the representation of Cinderella on this movie, functions primarily as a symbolic representation of the "ideal woman" who naturally fulfills social expectations of femininity and beauty. The film ultimately positions women within a patriarchal framework where marriage and male validation remain central to achieving happiness and social acceptance.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that *The Ugly Stepsister* represents femininity and beauty as social constructions closely tied to patriarchal values. Women in the film are consistently evaluated based on physical appearance, attractiveness, and their ability to obtain male validation. These findings support Naomi Wolf's theory of the beauty myth, which explains that beauty standards function as a form of social control

over women by encouraging them to continuously modify and discipline their bodies in order to achieve social acceptance.

Through Sara Mills' Critical Discourse Analysis, the film positions female characters within unequal subject-object relations. Elvira appears as an active subject because she continuously performs actions to transform herself; however, she simultaneously becomes an object shaped by patriarchal expectations and social pressure. Her body is repeatedly reconstructed, observed, and judged through visual representations such as close-up shots and fragmented body imagery. This finding aligns with feminist perspectives regarding the male gaze, where women's bodies are treated as visual objects whose value is determined through external observation and male approval.

The study also reveals that patriarchal discourse is reproduced not only by male characters, but also by female characters themselves. Rebecca, Madame Vanja, and Nona Sophie actively pressure Elvira to conform to ideal standards of femininity and beauty. This finding indicates the internalization of patriarchal ideology, in which women unconsciously participate in maintaining systems that oppress other women. Similar patterns have been identified in previous studies on women's representation in media, where female characters often reinforce beauty standards and gender expectations through interpersonal interactions and social discipline.

Unlike traditional Cinderella narratives that portray transformation as empowering and romantic, the use of body horror elements strengthens the criticism toward unrealistic beauty standards by showing the physical and emotional suffering experienced by Elvira. The tragic ending, where Agnes ultimately becomes the woman chosen by Prince Julian, further reinforces the idea that patriarchal systems continue to privilege women who naturally fit dominant beauty standards. These findings are also relevant to contemporary social realities. In modern society, women remain exposed to constant pressure from media, beauty industries, and social expectations that idealize certain body types and feminine appearances. The film reflects how these standards can lead women to self-objectification, insecurity, and harmful bodily practices in pursuit of validation and acceptance. Therefore, *The Ugly Stepsister* can be interpreted not only as a reinterpretation of the Cinderella story, but also as a social critique of patriarchal beauty standards

that continue to shape women's identities and experiences.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, *The Ugly Stepsister* represents femininity, beauty, and women's bodies through patriarchal discourses that position women within unequal social structures. Using Sara Mills' critical discourse analysis, the study reveals that femininity in the film is closely associated with physical attractiveness, graceful behavior, and women's ability to obtain male validation, particularly through marriage. Female characters are repeatedly evaluated based on their appearance, while beauty is constructed as a requirement for women to gain love, recognition, and social acceptance.

The film also represents women's bodies as sites of discipline and social control. Through close-up shots, fragmented body imagery, and body horror elements, the narrative demonstrates how women internalize beauty standards and continuously modify their bodies in order to meet patriarchal expectations. Elvira's extreme bodily transformation reflects the psychological and physical pressures experienced by women within a society that values them primarily through appearance. At the same time, the film shows how patriarchal values are reproduced not only by male characters, but also by female characters who participate in disciplining and controlling other women.

Furthermore, the analysis of power relations and subject-object positions indicates that male characters remain the central source of validation despite having limited screen time. Women appear active within the narrative; however, their actions are still shaped by social expectations and patriarchal standards. Elvira occupies an ambivalent position as both subject and object: she actively makes decisions regarding her body, yet her choices are heavily influenced by external pressures and the desire for acceptance. Meanwhile, Agnes functions as the representation of ideal femininity, whose beauty and social acceptance ultimately lead her to achieve the "happy ending" within the narrative.

Through the position of the author and reader, the film directs audiences to sympathize with Elvira's suffering while simultaneously questioning the absurdity of unrealistic beauty standards. The grotesque and painful visual representations encourage viewers to recognize how patriarchal

beauty ideals can lead women toward self-destruction rather than happiness. Therefore, the film can be interpreted as a critique of patriarchal beauty discourse that objectifies women and measures their value through physical appearance and male approval.

The implications of this research are threefold. First, for the development of feminist media studies and critical discourse analysis, this study confirms that films function not only as entertainment media, but also as discursive spaces that reproduce and negotiate patriarchal values related to femininity, beauty standards, and women's bodies. Through Sara Mills' critical discourse analysis, the research demonstrates that visual elements, dialogue, and narrative structures play significant roles in constructing women's identities and positioning female characters within unequal gender relations.

Second, for filmmakers and media practitioners, the findings suggest that horror and fairy-tale reinterpretation genres can be utilized as effective mediums for criticizing unrealistic beauty standards and patriarchal ideology. Through grotesque body horror representations, *The Ugly Stepsister* successfully exposes the emotional and physical consequences experienced by women under social pressure to achieve ideal femininity. However, the effectiveness of such criticism also depends on audiences' ability to critically interpret visual symbolism and cinematic representation beyond surface-level entertainment.

Third, for educational institutions, this study highlights the importance of increasing public awareness regarding the harmful effects of beauty standards and the normalization of women's objectification in media representations. The findings reveal that patriarchal values are often internalized and reproduced not only by men, but also by women through everyday practices of surveillance, criticism, and bodily discipline. Therefore, media literacy and gender awareness are necessary to encourage more critical perspectives toward representations of women in popular culture.

This research also opens opportunities for future studies to examine audience reception toward body horror and feminist reinterpretations of fairy tales, compare representations of femininity in contemporary films across different cultures, or analyze how digital media platforms continue to reproduce beauty discourse and patriarchal standards in modern society. Through further research, a broader

understanding can be developed regarding the relationship between media representation, gender ideology, and women's lived experiences in contemporary culture.

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