

## Stereotypical Representation of Women in the Film *Polite Society*

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose** – This study aims to analyze the stereotypical representation of women in the film *Polite Society* through Roland Barthes' semiotic approach by examining eight scenes that demonstrate gender construction through denotative, connotative, and mythical signs.

**Method** – This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach. Descriptive analysis aims to systematically and comprehensively present data, facts, and phenomena. The analysis specifically focuses on scenes that depict stereotypes of women. The data consist of screenshots from selected scenes as well as excerpts of dialogue, which are used to interpret the meanings conveyed in each scene.

**Findings** – The results of the study show that the film represents various stereotypes that limit women, such as the assumption that they are not suitable for working in risky fields, are considered emotional, must obey the family structure, and make marriage the main achievement. Through language, gestures, social relationships, and family dynamics, the film shows how patriarchal values work subtly and are normalized. These findings confirm that *Polite Society* not only provides entertainment, but also builds a critical discourse about the limitations of women in popular culture.

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### INTRODUCTION

In various social contexts, women continue to be associated with detrimental stereotypes, often being perceived as second-class citizens in relation to men, as weak, overly emotional, and lacking competence in decision-making or in performing roles within the public sphere. Such stereotypes shape societal perceptions of women and contribute to the perpetuation of subordination and the restriction of women's roles across social life, education, and the workforce.

These biased perspectives are not only manifested in everyday social interactions but are also reproduced and normalized through mass media, including film. As a cultural agent, media plays a significant role in constructing social reality by presenting particular representations that are subsequently internalized and accepted as normative by audiences (Amida et al., 2024). Therefore, film constitutes a critical site of analysis, as it both reflects and disseminates social constructions of women, either reinforcing or challenging prevailing gender stereotypes.

The assumption that women must fulfill particular social responsibilities and conform to prescribed normative behaviors remains deeply embedded within societal culture (Thelma & Ngulube, 2024). Women are frequently expected to be obedient, uphold family honor, and prioritize collective or social interests over personal aspirations. Such entrenched stereotypes are often framed negatively, positioning women in subordinate roles to men and reinforcing unequal power relations within social life.

This condition is closely linked to the persistence of gender discrimination, which arises from social structures and systems that differentiate individuals based on sex in order to assign specific positions, roles, and social values (Bhandari, 2023). Gender discrimination is characterized by unjust treatment that disadvantages women and constrains the fulfillment of their fundamental human rights. These disparities in treatment are often rooted in gender, but are also shaped by intersecting factors such as religion, social class, and race (Muyassaroh et al., 2022). Within societies still dominated by patriarchal values, women frequently encounter restrictions on their freedom of expression, decision-making autonomy, and access to employment in the public sphere. Consequently, women's activities are often confined to domestic responsibilities, while men are positioned as dominant and authoritative actors.

Gender discrimination can be classified into several forms. First, marginalization refers to processes of exclusion that result in limited access to economic opportunities and employment for a particular gender. Second, subordination denotes the assumption that one gender occupies an inferior position relative to another. Third, stereotypes involve negative labeling that is detrimental and restricts women's freedom of movement. Fourth, violence—both physical and non-physical—can lead to physical and psychological harm. Fifth, the double burden describes a condition in which women bear a disproportionate workload due to unequal gender role distribution within society (Stepanikova et al., 2020).

Film serves as a medium that facilitates audiences' understanding and acceptance of conveyed messages. It has also contributed to transformations in various aspects of human life, influencing individuals in distinctive ways. The development of media has provided a platform for accessing diverse sources of information and disseminating content such as news, messages, promotions, education, and entertainment, all of which hold particular appeal for the public (Ramadhani & Suratnoaji, 2021). In contemporary society, there is a strong demand for communication that is both informative and entertaining; film fulfills this need as a medium capable of reaching broad social segments while maintaining a powerful appeal.

As both a cultural product and medium, film plays a significant role in the construction of meaning. Cinema is embedded within culture, establishing a dynamic and interconnected relationship between film, culture, ideology, and audiences. To convey ideas and meanings within

its narrative structure, film relies on three primary elements: visual imagery, storytelling, and sound. Consequently, film serves as an engaging form of entertainment for audiences across different age groups, as it represents aspects of real life. Many films depict personal experiences, community dynamics, and broader social realities. At the same time, film constitutes a form of creative expression shaped by the filmmaker's imagination, both in terms of technological execution and narrative construction, and is often produced within a commercial framework (Alforova et al., 2021).

Film is widely regarded as an effective medium of mass communication for delivering messages to target audiences, owing to its audiovisual nature and its capacity to communicate complex ideas within a relatively short duration (Astri, 2020). As a form of mass communication, film has the potential to influence audiences, enabling them to transcend spatial and temporal boundaries while engaging with narratives of human experience. Moreover, film can be understood as a representation of reality that is reinterpreted and packaged into a sequence of scenes, each containing moral messages conveyed either implicitly or explicitly. These messages may be delivered through both verbal and nonverbal means by filmmakers to their audiences (Wardaniningsih & Kasih, 2022). In recent years, the global film industry has experienced a significant increase in audience interest, making it an economically attractive sector while also shaping audience perceptions. Consequently, production houses increasingly compete to produce high-quality works. Films encompass a wide range of themes, including romance, tragedy, crime, peace, and others.

One of the most prominent and frequently explored themes in film is the issue of perspective, particularly stereotypes. Stereotypes are shaped by long-standing cultural norms and entrenched social doctrines, with the stereotyping of women emerging as a central theme in many films. Women are often portrayed as weak, powerless, and emotionally unstable, whereas men are typically depicted as dominant, strong, and rational (Putri, 2021). These inherited stereotypes, which have been perpetuated across generations, are widely accepted as truths, thereby constraining women's agency and social mobility. As a result, women may experience feelings of shame or fear when their behavior deviates from these socially constructed expectations (Tsaniya & Prihandini, 2023). Films within the drama genre that focus on women often draw from realistic, everyday experiences. One such example is *Polite Society*, directed by Nida Manzoor and released in 2023, which received the Best Debut Screenwriter award at the British Independent Film Awards (BIFA) 2023.

The 104-minute film *Polite Society* narrates the story of two sisters: Ria Khan, an ambitious young woman determined to become a stunt performer despite facing pressure from her family and peers, and her older sister Lena, who abruptly decides to abandon her aspirations as an artist in favor of marriage. The central conflict arises when Lena accepts a proposal from Salim Shah, a wealthy and seemingly ideal man from a religious family. However, Ria becomes suspicious of Salim and his family, believing that Lena is being manipulated into an unhealthy marriage. Motivated by these concerns, Ria devises a plan with her friends to rescue her sister and prevent the wedding.

Numerous studies have examined the representation of women in media using various

subjects and analytical approaches. Azahro et al. (2024), for instance, analyzed consumer behavior representation through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework in the short film *Jagoku untuk Mbak Mentik*, finding that women are portrayed as impulsive and consumptive, thereby reinforcing negative stereotypes in economic and lifestyle contexts. Similarly, Riwu and Pujiati (2018) examined the film *3 Dara* using Barthesian semiotics and identified unequal gender representations, with women positioned as subordinate objects under male control, reflecting the normalization of patriarchal values. Saputra F and Hayqal Wibisono (2024) investigated the representation of female consumer stereotypes in Shopee Live advertisements, concluding that women are depicted as irrational in purchasing decisions, reinforcing the stigma of women as emotional and financially incompetent consumers. Putri (2021), in her study of women's stereotypes on social media, found that women are frequently represented as objects of evaluation, both in terms of appearance and behavior, thereby perpetuating expectations that women must conform to particular social standards. Furthermore, Wardaningsih and Kasih (2022) analyzed female identity in the animated film *Encanto* (2019), revealing that women are portrayed within the constraints of familial and cultural expectations that limit individual autonomy, despite being framed within a seemingly positive narrative.

Based on these previous studies, it can be concluded that media representations of women tend to position them disadvantageously through mechanisms of stereotyping, subordination, and social control. However, this study differs in its focus and approach. It examines the film *Polite Society* as its primary object, which foregrounds the South Asian cultural context and highlights stereotypes that demean women, such as the perception of women as weak, emotional, and incapable of making autonomous life choices. In addition, this study not only employs Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis to interpret signs but also integrates Stuart Hall's theory of representation to examine how meanings about women are constructed and normalized through cinematic language.

Semiotics is a field of study concerned with meaning and signs, and films are rich with signs that audiences interpret in various ways. Signs can represent cultural meanings, social life, everyday realities, and ideological constructs. Semiotics may also be understood as a form of logical reasoning through signs, as signs are not limited to physical objects but also encompass social discourse as a linguistic phenomenon (Chandler, 2022). Based on the foregoing discussion, the research question of this study is: how are stereotypes of women represented in the film *Polite Society*? The objective of this study is to contribute meaningful insights and provide empirical evidence through the analysis of signs and meanings associated with the representation of female stereotypes using a semiotic approach.

The term semiotics is derived from the Greek word *semeion*, meaning "sign." Terminologically, semiotics refers to the study of signs. It serves as a methodological framework for analyzing and interpreting signs within filmic elements such as narrative, imagery, and scenes that convey meaning (Mudjiono, 2011). While the meanings within films are often perceived holistically by audiences, deeper analysis reveals layers of denotative and connotative meanings (Riwu & Pujiati, 2018). Film is highly relevant to semiotic analysis because it is constructed through a complex system of signs; thus, semiotic methods enable a comprehensive understanding of the

subject under study (Jamasbi & Ghazvineh, 2025).

Semiotics was introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). To understand his theoretical framework, it is essential to consider the concepts of *signifier* and *signified*, as well as *langue* and *parole*. According to Saussure, a sign consists of two components: the signifier, which refers to the physical form used to convey meaning—such as sounds, images, or written symbols—and the signified, which refers to the concept or meaning represented by the signifier (Tanti & Khaerunnisa, 2022).

Roland Barthes further developed semiotic theory based on Saussure’s linguistic model, conceptualizing language as a system of signs. Barthes introduced the notion of the “order of signification,” in which denotation refers to the primary, literal meaning of a sign, text, or expression—generally accepted as common sense—while connotation refers to the secondary meaning shaped by emotional associations and cultural values, resulting in more varied and interpretive meanings (Wicaksono & Diyah Fitriyani, 2022). For example, the phrase “scapegoat” denotes, at the literal level, a goat; however, at the connotative level, it refers to a person who is unjustly blamed for the actions of others (Junaedi, 2019).

According to Barthes, myth operates as a second-order system of signification. He conceptualizes myth as a form of language; thus, myth functions as a system of communication and conveys particular messages (Barker, 2004).

Stereotypes refer to overly simplified beliefs or generalizations about a group or individual based on specific characteristics such as gender, race, or social status. Stereotypes develop in several ways: they influence emotions and memory regarding the actions of others; they oversimplify perceptions of social groups; they can lead to scapegoating; and although they may occasionally contain elements of truth, they are often misleading (Beeghly, 2021). Stereotypes can also be understood as a set of ideas regarding the traits, attributes, and behaviors associated with particular social groups, forming cognitive representations of those groups and their members (Wu et al., 2018).

Gender stereotypes, in particular, involve the assignment of specific labels or expectations to men and women (Putri, 2021). Statements such as “this job is for men” or “that activity is feminine” exemplify gender stereotyping. These expectations often prescribe how individuals “should” behave according to social norms. Such stereotypes have significant implications, especially for women, influencing both societal perceptions and self-perception. Men are typically characterized as strong, rational, and authoritative decision-makers, whereas women are portrayed as weak, emotional, and subordinate, expected to comply with decisions made by men.

The emergence of stereotypes is closely linked to the persistence of patriarchal cultural systems. Wood conceptualizes stereotypes as a process of generalizing a phenomenon to an entire group based on limited knowledge about its members (Saputra F & Hayqal Wibisono, 2024). Stereotypes of women are frequently represented in mass media, including advertisements, news, films, and other media platforms. Women are often depicted as confined to domestic spaces, responsible for household duties, childrearing, and dependent on men. As a result, media not only reflects social reality but also reinforces it, thereby producing and sustaining deep-seated biases in societal perceptions of women.

The emergence of feminist movements in the nineteenth century enabled some women to express their aspirations more freely; however, discrimination has not been entirely eradicated, and many women continue to experience various forms of inequality (Yustisio, 2021). In social contexts, women's positions remain unequal to those of men, largely due to culturally constructed norms that underpin such disparities. Discrimination is often evident even within the family sphere, where domestic responsibilities are still widely perceived as the primary duty of women. Similarly, gender-based discrimination persists in the workplace. Globally, women experience lower employment rates compared to men and are often paid less for performing the same work. These conditions render women more vulnerable to economic instability and poverty (Stepanikova et al., 2020).

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach. Descriptive analysis aims to systematically present data, facts, and phenomena in a comprehensive manner, with the objective of explaining the experiences of the research subject, including their understanding, motivations, efforts, and attitudes. Accordingly, this study analyzes categories related to stereotypes as represented through symbols embedded in selected scenes of the film *Polite Society*, without altering the original data. The analysis focuses specifically on scenes that depict stereotypes of women. The data consist of screenshots from selected scenes and excerpts of dialogue, which are used to interpret the meanings conveyed in each scene.

The study adopts a critical paradigm, which seeks to analyze and uncover underlying illusions within various social conditions. The primary aim of this paradigm is to raise awareness, challenge social injustices, and address forms of oppression (Azwar, 2022). The use of a critical paradigm in this study is intended to explore how women are represented in *Polite Society*, particularly in ways that may reflect distorted or unequal portrayals shaped by dominance and systemic inequality.

The object of this study is the film *Polite Society* in its entirety; therefore, statistical sampling techniques are not employed. Instead, the analysis focuses on specific scenes that are relevant to the research objectives, particularly those that represent stereotypes of women. Scene selection is based on their relevance to the research focus, namely the presence of verbal and nonverbal interactions that illustrate forms of stereotyping, subordination, and the limitation of women's roles.

Data collection involves both primary and secondary sources. Primary data are obtained through film documentation by repeatedly viewing *Polite Society* and capturing screenshots of scenes that depict representations of female stereotypes. These data include dialogue, character expressions, body language, and other visual elements that contribute to meaning-making. Secondary data are derived from books, scholarly journals, and other relevant sources related to representation theory, semiotics, and gender stereotypes.

The focus of this study is the film *Polite Society*, with data comprising both visual (images) and audio (sound) elements. The data analysis process is conducted by closely examining selected scenes and analyzing them using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, particularly the concepts

of denotation, connotation, and myth. Data validity is ensured through source triangulation, which involves the use of multiple methods and information sources to enhance the accuracy and credibility of the findings. Through triangulation, the researcher is able to compare data across different sources and confirm its consistency (Donkoh, 2023). This technique is particularly valuable for establishing empirical validity and enriching the analysis of female stereotypes represented in the film *Polite Society*.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

*Polite Society* presents various representations of gender stereotypes through a series of scenes that illustrate how women's aspirations, physical capabilities, emotional expressions, social positions, and familial roles are constrained by patriarchal cultural structures. Each scene reveals both visual and verbal signs that position women as weak, irrational, obedient, and bound to conform to societal norms and expectations.

Through the application of Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, the findings indicate that the film consistently constructs meaning through signs embedded in dialogue, bodily gestures, and social interactions. Dialogues frequently undermine women's choices, while physical actions reflect control over women's bodies. In addition, social responses within the narrative often diminish women's voices and perspectives. The depiction of women within domestic spaces is repeatedly emphasized as the most appropriate and naturalized role for them.

These representations operate not only at the denotative level but also at the connotative and mythological levels, reinforcing the belief that women are unsuitable for roles requiring strength, courage, and autonomous decision-making. At the level of myth, the film reflects deeply embedded cultural narratives that normalize gender inequality and position women within restrictive social boundaries.

Consequently, the film constructs a social reality in which women continue to be evaluated and limited according to inherited norms sustained by cultural traditions, family structures, and other social institutions that hold authority in defining women's roles.



**Figure 1. The situation where w teacher consider Ria not serious about her dream of becoming a *Stuntwoman* (00:05:33 – 00:06:50)**

At the **denotative level**, the scene takes place in a classroom where Ria enthusiastically expresses her aspiration to become a stunt performer. The teacher responds with a dismissive question, asking whether becoming a stuntwoman constitutes a “real” career. This response is followed by laughter from her classmates, creating an atmosphere in which Ria’s ambition is implicitly rejected and ridiculed.

At the **connotative level**, the scene reflects the underlying assumption that women are not expected to pursue careers that require physical strength, bravery, and risk-taking. Ria’s aspiration is immediately delegitimized, not based on its feasibility, but because it contradicts socially constructed expectations of what is considered an appropriate profession for women. The teacher’s response, combined with peer reactions, reinforces the notion that women’s ambitions must align with socially acceptable gender roles.

At the level of **myth**, this scene reinforces a deeply embedded gender ideology that positions physically demanding and high-risk professions as inherently masculine domains. Women, in contrast, are constructed as irrational, physically weak, and unsuitable for such roles. By questioning whether being a stuntwoman is a “real” career, the teacher not only undermines the legitimacy of the profession but also dismisses the possibility that women can possess ambitious, unconventional aspirations. This myth operates subtly through institutional authority (the teacher), collective social reactions (peer laughter), and dominant cultural definitions of “serious” careers. As a result, women’s aspirations that challenge traditional boundaries are framed as unrealistic or even absurd.

Consequently, this scene illustrates how patriarchal structures are maintained through everyday interactions, where women are implicitly taught to devalue their own ambitions if they do not conform to established social norms (Reza et al., 2024).



**Figure 2. Scene: Ria’s parents refuse to listen to her “nonsense” about becoming a Stuntwoman (00:13:15 – 00:15:20)**

At the **denotative level**, the scene takes place during a family meal where Ria once again shares her aspiration to become a stunt performer. Her parents interrupt her and firmly state that they “do not want to hear any more nonsense about becoming a stuntwoman.” Ria falls silent, visibly expressing disappointment and emotional distress.

At the **connotative level**, the scene reflects how women’s aspirations are often perceived as disruptive or unworthy of discussion when they do not align with familial expectations. Rather

than being supported, Ria's ambition is dismissed as trivial, indicating that women are expected to prioritize socially acceptable and "safe" life choices. The interruption itself signifies a lack of space for women's voices within family discourse, reinforcing the idea that their desires are secondary to collective expectations.

At the level of **myth**, this scene illustrates a broader social belief that women must conform to family norms and are not fully entitled to pursue independent ambitions that deviate from parental expectations. By labeling Ria's aspiration as "nonsense," her parents implicitly assert authority over her life choices, reinforcing the notion that women's aspirations are not purely individual rights but are subject to familial control. This myth operates by positioning women within safe, domestic, and low-risk roles, while simultaneously devaluing aspirations that involve creativity, physicality, or non-traditional career paths.

As a result, the suppression of women's ambitions becomes normalized, contributing to a cultural environment in which women are discouraged from taking risks or pursuing ambitious goals. This reinforces patriarchal structures by internalizing the belief that women's aspirations should conform to socially sanctioned norms (Chrisler, 2008).



**Figure 3. Ria is dismissed by her friends at the market (00:23:50 – 00:24:28)**

At the **denotative level**, the scene takes place in a crowded market setting where Ria expresses her serious concerns regarding Salim. While speaking, she appears thoughtful and uneasy, sipping a drink from a plastic cup. One of her friends responds casually, saying, "Relax, bro. It's normal." This response creates a contrast between Ria's concern and her friend's dismissive attitude.

At the **connotative level**, the scene suggests that women's concerns are often trivialized and not taken seriously. The casual tone of the response diminishes the legitimacy of Ria's apprehension, implying that her feelings are exaggerated or unnecessary. This interaction reflects a broader social tendency to undermine women's emotional expressions, framing them as overreactions rather than valid responses to a situation.

At the level of **myth**, this scene reinforces the widely held belief that women are overly emotional and prone to exaggeration, and therefore should not be taken seriously. By responding with "Relax, bro, it's normal," Ria's friends contribute to the reproduction of this myth, invalidating her intuition and critical judgment. This myth operates by normalizing the dismissal of women's concerns, positioning their awareness and sensitivity as irrational panic rather than

legitimate insight.

As a result, such representations encourage women to doubt their own perceptions, while men are more readily positioned as objective and rational actors. Over time, this dynamic becomes culturally embedded, reinforcing social structures that marginalize women's voices in serious discussions and decision-making processes (Deng, 2024).



**Figure 4. The moment Lena agrees to Marry due to social pressure (00:26:42 – 00:27:53)**

At the **denotative level**, after several encounters, Lena accepts Salim's proposal and agrees to move to Singapore with him. Their family responds with enthusiasm and approval, expressing happiness over the decision, while Ria reacts with visible shock and disappointment.

At the **connotative level**, the scene suggests that a woman's decision regarding marriage is often framed as a significant achievement rather than a personal choice. The family's immediate approval reflects a value system in which marriage is prioritized over individual aspirations, particularly careers in creative fields such as art. Lena's decision is therefore not only accepted but celebrated, reinforcing the idea that conforming to traditional expectations is desirable.

At the level of **myth**, this scene reflects a dominant cultural narrative that positions marriage as the ultimate goal for women, often considered more valuable than personal ambition or professional achievement. Women who prioritize careers—especially in artistic or non-conventional fields—are frequently perceived as unstable, immature, or incomplete. In contrast, marrying a successful man is constructed as the safest and most appropriate life path.

This myth is reinforced through familial approval, social validation, and the rapid progression of Lena's relationship, suggesting that women do not require extended time or autonomy to plan their futures independently. By situating women's value within romantic relationships rather than personal accomplishments, this representation sustains a social structure that compels women to fulfill familial and societal expectations (Council, 2021).



**Figure 5. The scene where Ria’s friends consider her suspicion baseless (00:40:52 – 00:42:52)**

At the **denotative level**, Ria is seen gathering with Clara and Alba after they successfully enter Salim’s room to inspect his laptop but fail to find any suspicious evidence. Ria appears visibly uneasy and continues to believe that something is wrong, while her friends begin to question her concerns. Although they do not explicitly dismiss her, they cautiously suggest that Ria’s suspicion may stem from jealousy, as Lena is about to get married and move on to a new phase of life without her.

At the **connotative level**, the scene reinforces the notion that when women display vigilance or strong intuition, their reactions are often interpreted through the lens of personal emotion rather than rational judgment. Ria’s concerns are reframed by her friends as a product of emotional insecurity—such as jealousy or fear of loss—rather than being acknowledged as a potentially valid interpretation of the situation. In this way, women’s perspectives are once again positioned as subjective and emotionally driven, rather than analytical or evidence-based.

At the level of **myth**, this scene perpetuates the belief that women primarily interpret significant situations through emotion, rendering their concerns less credible. Despite Ria’s active efforts—investigating, gathering information, and taking risks—her persistence is interpreted as emotional instability rather than critical reasoning. This myth functions by blurring the distinction between women’s intuition and emotional response, framing all forms of female awareness as psychologically driven rather than intellectually grounded.

As a result, women’s arguments are often dismissed as exaggerated or unreliable, reinforcing a cultural pattern in which they are perceived as overly assertive, irrational, or incapable of accurately assessing complex situations. This contributes to the marginalization of women’s voices in decision-making processes and sustains broader structures that privilege male rationality over female intuition (Oswald & Adams, 2023).



**Figure 6. The moment Lena responds to Salim’s mother’s question about “Ria being rebellious” (00:49:49 – 00:50:58)**

At the **denotative level**, the scene takes place in Salim’s living room, where his mother questions Lena about Ria, referring to her as a “rebellious girl.” In response, Lena attempts to ease the situation by explaining that Ria feels regret for her behavior.

At the **connotative level**, the scene suggests that women who express opinions or act assertively are often framed as problematic. The label “rebellious” functions as a form of social regulation, subtly pressuring women to conform to expectations of politeness, softness, and

obedience in order to maintain family reputation. As a result, assertiveness in women is not interpreted as confidence or autonomy, but rather as deviance from acceptable feminine behavior.

At the level of **myth**, this scene reinforces a dominant gender ideology that positions women as responsible for maintaining harmony, particularly within the context of marital and familial relationships. By characterizing Ria as “rebellious,” Salim’s mother invokes a cultural narrative that **disciplines** women who challenge social norms, framing them as threats to stability and cohesion. This myth operates not only through male authority but also through women who have internalized patriarchal values.

Lena’s response—asserting that Ria “regrets” her actions—illustrates how women may participate in reproducing these norms by mediating and softening conflict to align with expectations of femininity. In this way, social acceptance of women becomes contingent upon their ability to preserve harmony rather than uphold personal conviction or integrity. Consequently, women who are critical, independent, or outspoken are positioned as disruptive, reinforcing cultural expectations that privilege compliance over autonomy (Oswald & Adams, 2023).



**Figure 7. Situation where Salim’s mother feels disturbed by Ria (01:24:21 – 01:28:50)**

At the **denotative level**, this scene depicts Ria attempting to approach Lena prior to the wedding ceremony in order to warn her about a perceived risk. However, before Ria can fully articulate her concern, Salim’s mother intervenes abruptly, firmly instructing her not to interfere in their family matters. As a result, Ria is silenced and unable to continue, while Lena appears confused but remains quiet amidst the tense atmosphere.

At the **connotative level**, this moment reflects how women’s voices are often suppressed when they are perceived as disrupting established social order. Salim’s mother utilizes her position of authority within the family to regulate who is entitled to speak and whose voice is deemed inappropriate or irrelevant. By reprimanding Ria, she reinforces the notion that younger women lack the legitimacy to express opinions, particularly within hierarchical family structures.

At the level of **myth**, this scene reinforces a broader cultural belief that women must “know their place” within social hierarchies and avoid transgressing boundaries, especially when interacting with individuals of higher status or authority. This myth situates younger women in a subordinate position, where their perspectives are easily dismissed or framed as improper. The silencing of Ria is presented as a form of maintaining etiquette and social harmony, thereby masking the underlying power dynamics that restrict women’s agency.

Furthermore, the scene illustrates how patriarchal norms are not only perpetuated by men but are also reproduced by women who have internalized these values. Through her intervention, Salim’s mother acts as a gatekeeper of social order, ensuring that dissenting female voices do not

challenge existing structures. Consequently, the suppression of women's perspectives becomes normalized, limiting their capacity to express concern, assert truth, or participate meaningfully in decision-making processes (Swastini et al., 2025).



**Figure 8.** The situation where Ria is considered unable to help Lena (01:31:12 – 01:34:24)

**Denotation:** In Raheela's residence, Ria tries to help Lena, but the guards and members of Salim's family refuse to pay attention to her and regard her as incapable of doing anything.

**Connotation:** Women are often perceived as lacking strength or heroic capability, even when it is evident that they possess both the intention and the skills.

**Myth:** This scene, in which Ria is seen as unable to rescue Lena, reinforces a deeply rooted myth that women do not function as saviors in any narrative and are automatically considered less powerful or less capable in emergency situations. By ignoring Ria, the guards and Salim's family uphold a cultural view that heroic roles are reserved for men, while women are expected to remain passive and wait for help. This myth operates by creating both physical and symbolic limitations, rendering women's courage invisible or seemingly insignificant. When women's heroic actions are framed as "unlikely to succeed," social structures cultivate doubt about women's abilities and continue to position men at the center of power, dominance, and problem-solving (Wynter & Nichols, 2024).

### **Stereotypes of Women in the Film *Polite Society***

*Polite Society* reveals how gender stereotypes operate not through direct violence or explicit prohibition, but through symbolic processes that position women to fulfill socially constructed expectations of what is considered appropriate for them. Through language, body movement, insincere concern, and moral judgment, the film illustrates how women's aspirations are often regarded as impossible, irrelevant, or threatening to social stability. Therefore, the central issue in the film is not merely a personal conflict between characters, but also a struggle between women and patriarchal values that restrict their freedom, as similarly discussed in the study by Sara et al. (2024) on representations of patriarchal families.

An analysis using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory shows that meaning in the film operates on three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. At the level of denotation, moments such as a teacher belittling Ria's aspirations, a family refusing to listen to her dreams, or her friends treating her emotional anxiety as something commonplace in society are presented. However, at the level of connotation, these moments suggest that women are expected to be obedient, uncritical, and sensitive—but only within limits that do not disrupt the social order. At the level of myth, the film demonstrates how patriarchal values are disguised as normal and accepted as universal truths, as Barthes explains that myth functions to conceal ideology behind seemingly trivial things (Al-Kadi & Alzoubi, 2023).

Gender-based stereotypes clearly emerge in the school environment, when a teacher questions whether being a stunt performer is a “real profession.” This question not only mocks the profession itself, but also disciplines women’s bodies to avoid fields considered risky and masculine. This phenomenon aligns with the research of Ryan & Morgenroth (2024), which states that women who aspire to enter physically demanding or dangerous fields are often viewed as unrealistic because such professions are perceived as male domains. Thus, education in the film is not portrayed as a space for liberating identity, but rather as a tool for reinforcing gender roles.

Family relationships depicted in *Polite Society* highlight the role of the family as a supporter of patriarchal ideology. When Ria’s parents consider her dreams “unrealistic,” the film shows how affection can be used to suppress women’s ambitions. This aligns with research by Sara et al. (2024), which reveals that the family is the most influential institution in maintaining traditional gender norms by placing women in safe, domestic, and controlled spaces. The restrictions imposed on women in the film do not appear as oppression, but rather as a form of care—and it is precisely here that patriarchal ideology operates most effectively.

Within friendships, the film portrays a more subtle form of constraint. When Ria’s anxiety is dismissed as “jealousy” or an “overreaction,” the film illustrates how women’s perspectives are often perceived as emotional rather than rational. This aligns with the Role Congruity Theory proposed by Alice Eagly and Steven Karau (2002), which explains that women who are assertive and analytical are seen as violating gender norms, ultimately weakening their voices in social contexts. *Polite Society* demonstrates how patriarchal systems are sustained not only by men but also by women who have internalized these stereotypes.

Gender stereotypes are further reinforced in the marriage dynamics between Lena and Salim, where Salim’s family views Lena as an ideal woman not based on her identity or achievements, but on her obedience and readiness to follow rules set by male family members. This reflects the traditional myth that marriage is the ultimate achievement for a woman, consistent with findings by Christianson et al. (2021), which state that women are often evaluated based on how well they fulfill domestic and marital roles. Furthermore, the positive perception of Lena by Salim’s family reflects the notion of the “ideal woman,” as discussed by Jumiati et al. (2024), where women are considered most valuable when they are obedient, gentle, and non-confrontational.

The scene in which Ria is silenced by Salim’s mother demonstrates how gender structures and age hierarchies operate within patriarchal systems. Younger women are often seen as lacking the right to speak on important issues, while older women—having internalized patriarchal norms—serve as enforcers of power. This aligns with Eagly & Karau’s (2002) explanation that women who assume positions of authority are often perceived as violating gender norms, making the act of silencing them appear normal and socially acceptable. The film thus illustrates how women can unconsciously sustain patriarchy.

At its climax, the moment when Ria is perceived as incapable of rescuing Lena conveys the idea that women are not protectors, but rather those who need protection. This stereotype aligns with Sulistiani’s (2024) research, which states that women in mainstream media are rarely imagined as heroic agents, as they are considered less capable in dangerous situations. However, when Ria ultimately defeats the antagonist and saves her sister, the film not only delivers a moment of personal triumph but also dismantles the patriarchal myth that once constrained her body and identity.

Through the semiotic analysis of Roland Barthes, the film *Polite Society* demonstrates that restrictions on women do not always appear in the form of physical violence or explicit prohibitions, but rather operate through symbolic and normalized ideological mechanisms. At the denotative level, the film portrays everyday interactions within family, school, and social

environments that appear ordinary, such as comments on women's life choices, behavioral expectations, and judgments of women's abilities and emotions. However, at the connotative level, these interactions carry meanings that position women as subjects who must be guided, controlled, and directed by social authorities, whether family members, educators, or cultural institutions.

Furthermore, at the level of myth, these representations construct and reinforce patriarchal ideology by depicting gender inequality as something natural and unquestionable. Women are portrayed as less competent in decision-making, prone to error, and overly emotional, so that intervention by others is perceived as care rather than restriction. This mechanism illustrates how power operates subtly: control over women is not enforced through direct coercion, but through the construction of meaning that leads women to accept these limitations as normal.

The film also shows that social institutions such as family and education act as effective ideological agents in instilling gender stereotypes. The language used in dialogue, characters' non-verbal expressions, and the structure of relationships between characters function as signs that guide the audience to understand women within a particular framework. In this way, stereotypes function not only as reflections of social reality but also as symbolic tools that sustain an unequal social order.

The representation of female stereotypes in media is not limited to film but is also reproduced through digital media and other social institutions such as education. Putra's (2019) study on the discourse of branding female Islamic boarding school students on Instagram shows that women are often represented in normative and traditional ways, reinforcing the image of women as passive subjects who are less relevant to contemporary developments. Such representations demonstrate how media plays a role in constructing symbolic meanings about women, where female identity is shaped according to certain social standards that restrict their expression, aspirations, and capacity in the public sphere. These findings affirm that stereotypes of women operate across various media and institutions, both through film narratives and social media practices, both of which have the potential to normalize gender inequality.

Therefore, the representation of female stereotypes in *Polite Society* is not neutral. It functions as an ideological practice that continuously positions women in subordinate roles while normalizing gender inequality as part of everyday life. This process renders inequality invisible, stable, and repetitive, thereby potentially influencing how audiences understand the roles and positions of women in society.

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the film *Polite Society* reflects various types of gender stereotypes that remain deeply embedded in women's lives, whether in family, educational, or broader social contexts. Through a semiotic approach based on Roland Barthes, the eight analyzed moments demonstrate how denotation, connotation, and myth function to normalize limitations placed on women. Ria's aspiration to become a stuntwoman, her perspective on Lena's relationship, and her courage in crossing gender boundaries are often perceived as impractical, emotional, or even disruptive. These representations highlight that stereotypes of women are not only constructed through explicit actions but also operate subtly through language, body movements, family structures, and social expectations that shape societal views of women's roles.

With these findings, this study emphasizes that *Polite Society* is not merely entertainment but also serves as a critique of patriarchal culture that continues to influence women's freedom in the modern era. The film illustrates how gender myths are continuously inherited as if they were natural, when in fact they are socially constructed and should be questioned. Therefore, this

research is expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of women's representation in media and to open broader discussions on how film can serve as a medium to challenge gender stereotypes, amplify women's voices, and emphasize the importance of women's freedom in determining their own life choices.

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