


## From Subaltern to Subject: Women's Struggle Against Patriarchy in North Country (2005)

 <https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v10i5.1457>

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### ABSTRACT

Women's struggles against patriarchy are central to feminist and postcolonial debates, yet cinema has rarely been treated as a site where subaltern subjectivity is theorized. This study addresses that gap by analyzing North Country (2005) through textual and film analysis. The focus is on how silence, framing, mise-en-scène, and courtroom staging depict silencing, resistance, and solidarity. The discussion explicitly engages with Spivak's subalternity, Butler's performativity, Foucault's disciplinary power, Fraser's justice, hooks' critique of internalized patriarchy, and Mohanty's transnational feminism. Findings show that the mine operates as a patriarchal space of silencing, while solidarity transforms women from isolated subalterns into empowered subjects. The film also demonstrates how personal experiences are politicized and how local struggles resonate across transnational contexts. The study argues that cinema not only reflects oppression but actively theorizes subjectivity and resistance. It concludes by affirming film's value as a cultural text for feminist pedagogy and for fostering global solidarity.

**Keywords:** *Feminist Criticism; Postcolonial Theory; Subaltern; Film Studies*

#### Article History:

Received 04<sup>th</sup> September 2025

Accepted 05<sup>th</sup> October 2025

Published 08<sup>th</sup> October 2025



### INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality still takes the focal seat when examined in feminist and cultural studies, especially in the context of representation in literature and film. Women are also historically disadvantaged and voiceless in the patriarchal social, economic, and cultural relations (Harvey, 2020). In the influential *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot speak because she is always spoken through, and her voice can never quite penetrate that dominant power structure (Spivak, 1988). This frame is critical in examining how women in cultural texts are depicted and how they carve areas of resistance around texts (commonly either authored or dominated by patriarchal systems) (Ebert, 1988). While feminist scholarship has extensively examined women's struggles against patriarchy, limited studies have explored how cinema contributes to theorizing subaltern subjectivity. Thus, the research problem addressed in this paper is not only the underexploration of women's struggles in film, but more specifically the insufficient theorization of subaltern subjectivity through cinematic representation (Butler, 1990).

The novelty of this study lies in its interdisciplinary integration of feminist criticism and postcolonial theory with film studies. By combining Spivak's concept of the subaltern with Butler's performativity, Foucault's disciplinary power, Fraser's redistribution and recognition, and Mohanty's transnational feminism, this article situates *North Country* (2005) as more than a narrative of oppression. It positions the film as a cultural artifact and a site of theoretical production, offering a fresh contribution to feminist and postcolonial debates (Arfanaldy, 2024).

The movie *North Country* (2005), directed by Niki Caro, turns out to be an important focal point of such an examination as the narrative dramatizes the landmark case of *Jenson v.* It also featured the first class-action suit against workplace sexual harassment in the United

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States, Eveleth Taconite Co. By focusing on the theme of one working-class female employee who works in a stereotypically male industrial sector, Josey Aimes, the story argues that the effects of systemic oppression and discrimination can be realized directly in the various aspects of the working relationships (Murer, 2015). In agreement with the assertion made by bell hooks that patriarchy has no gender (Feminism is for Everybody, 2000), the movie explains how patriarchal systems are propagated not only by men, but also by social norms, organizations and at times by women who internalize their subordination (Hooks, 2000).

North Country (2005) stands out because it manages to convert the personal into the political, which resonates with the typical feminist saying that the personal is political (Hanisch, 1970). Josey is no longer talking of victimhood alone; her story is an indicator of subjectivity and empowerment of the subaltern. The courtroom itself, as depicted in the movie, is not only a venue of justice, where there should be right, but also a figurative venue where unsaid voices have to be heard. In such a manner, the film can be seen as the visual expression of what Judith Butler speaks of as the performativity of gender, that is, the reconstitution of identity through resistance (Johnson, 2001).

The paper is relevant as it aims to place North Country (2005) in the theoretical exchange between subject formation and subalternity. Although a significant part of feminist criticism has touched on the theme of women fighting against patriarchy, there are not numerous analyses of the cinema using the Spivakian critical vocabulary. As Spivak clarifies, there are two meanings to the term representation: one that is reflected to represent as in politics and another, which represents itself in art or philosophy (Can the Subaltern Speak?). By questioning how Josey and other female characters transform the modes of their existence through shifting towards speaking and gaining visibility, this paper involves the evolution of a new angle to feminist film criticism and postcolonial theory (Pelletier et al., 1999).

North Country (2005) can be linked to women's experiences in different parts of the world where patriarchal societies exist in one way or another, Such struggles also reflect the role of multicultural awareness in shaping civil society (Masduki et al., 2025). As Chandra Talpade Mohanty cautions in *Under Western Eyes* (1984), it is dangerous to universalize the oppression of women. However, the movie welcomes transnational interpretations of gender, class, and labor since multiple control systems maintain the realization of subaltern conditions (Mohanty, 1984). In such a way, the case presented in the film proves to be a localized story of protest and a symbol of universal female claim towards the achievement of justice and equality (Sa'adah et al., 2025).

In addition, the importance of solidarity and action of the masses is brought to the fore in North Country (2005). The way Josey finally becomes empowered cannot be discussed outside the context of what we see happening to her fellow students who eventually become agents who join in the breaking of patriarchal oppression rather than object spectators. This vibrant transition demonstrates subjecthood as a process, as it is not an independent accomplishment, but as a creation by a collective to interfere with a hegemonic power. According to what some scholars call the Redistribution or Recognition (Nancy Fraser, 1995), social justice needs to be addressed through the so-called redistribution and/or cultural recognition lenses, which is what the women's collective fight in North Country (2005) is about (Fraser, 1995).

The power of North Country (2005) is that a woman is inserted into the labor field that is supposed to be masculine. The mine is not simply a workplace but a stage of gendered power, in which the presence of women is constantly discredited by harassment, derision and violence. The humiliation, physical abuse, and negligence that escalate in frequency day to day in the life of Josey represent how patriarchy works in both individual planes and the system. The mine, therefore, becomes a model of the patriarchal society where women who plunge into the arena of male domination are corrected to remain silent and invisible. The above politics of space in the mine resonates with what Henri Lefebvre referred to as the production of space, where space acquires ownership through ideologically produced processes to reproduce the power structure, the same to which space owes its ideological ownership (Kamir, 2009).

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In addition to the mining camp setting, which underscores the futility of the traditional institutions of law, family and community, *North Country* (2005) also features institutional failings to protect. Even her own father, at first, does not believe her, and this shows how patriarchal norms are still present within the relationships of close people. Instead of being perceived as a victim, the local community brands her as a troublemaker, contributing to what (Foucault, 1977) refers to as the disciplinary power that controls bodies and behaviors through social control. Even the court is a place of aggression involved in the strike at the credibility of Josey when compared to the crimes in which she was a victim. These stratifications of treason further support Spivak, who asserted that the subaltern lacks the possibility of speech; her voice is illegitimate by the same structures claiming or purporting to represent her (Salman et al., 2023).

Nonetheless, the power of shared testimony of *North Country* (2005) transforms when women take the power back into their own hands. The scene changer is when Josey is joined by other female workers who are initially silent in their support of Josey. Their group articulation re-contextualizes the courtroom as a place of enmity into a space of identification and fairness. Such a change reflects what Spivak calls strategic essentialism, wherein women, in the need to confront the established structures of power, collectively identify as such despite their actual diversity of experience. By theatricalizing such a move, the film depicts the subaltern experience of struggle and poses the potential of agency, identification, and subjectivity (Mulyadi et al., 2022).

Therefore, this article aims to analyze *North Country* (2005) through the lens of feminist and postcolonial theory, particularly focusing on Spivak's concept of the subaltern, to examine how women negotiate their subjectivity in a patriarchal environment. The objective is to demonstrate how the film portrays the transformation from subaltern silence to subjecthood, thereby contributing to broader academic discussions on gender, representation, and resistance.

## METHOD

This study will use textual and movie analysis to adopt a qualitative research type. The selection of this approach is due to the nature of the research that seeks to explain how the woman's struggle against patriarchy is conveyed through the film *North Country* (2005). Qualitative means that, instead of number-crunching, one reads through cultural texts to identify the multiple layers of meaning, ideology, and power relations permeating that text (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017; Rifky, 2024). The film is the primary data source, and other scholarly sources, theoretical arts, and books can be called the secondary sources to enhance the analytical approach.

The primary strategy deployed is feminist film criticism juxtaposed with postcolonial theory, specifically the subaltern of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. This interdisciplinary approach is selected as it offers the necessary vocabulary to discuss how the women characters are erased, sidelined and made invisible in patriarchal institutions, and how they can find means to negotiate their identity, and thus their agency (Tong, 2009). The approach implies a careful examination of the film plot, character, dialogue, and visual images, as well as the use of cinematic techniques, in order to analyze the issue of gendered oppression and struggle through the film. With such an interpretive approach, the researcher could analyze what is presented on screen and how representation in the cinema constitutes power and is contested by power (McKee, 2003).

For the analytical procedure, three steps are important. The movie is then exploited as a cultural text in that we establish the scenes that portray oppression of women within the workplace, family and society systematically. Second, these scenes are analyzed in terms of feminism and postcolonial criticism, with specific emphasis on Spivak's idea that the subaltern cannot speak within the dominant discourse. This step involves the review of moments of silence, misrepresentation, and disciplinary power, as defined by Judith Butler and Michel Foucault. Lastly, the paper discusses the shift of women characters in roles, particularly when

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the women become vocal as a group, in the case of the courtroom scenes and the unity among the female labor force. With these steps, one can point out how *North Country* (2005) prologues the transformation towards subjecthood that has occurred in the subaltern state (Loomba, 2015).

These methods are particularly suitable for addressing the research questions because the study focuses on how cinematic representation theorizes subaltern subjectivity and women's struggles against patriarchy. Quantitative approaches would be insufficient for capturing the nuanced interplay of discourse, imagery, and ideology that the film constructs. In contrast, qualitative textual and film analysis enables a close reading of narrative structures and visual strategies that reveal hidden power dynamics. Likewise, feminist film criticism and postcolonial theory provide the critical framework to interrogate silencing, resistance, and agency within patriarchal contexts. By integrating these approaches, the study not only analyzes the representation of women in *North Country* (2005) but also demonstrates how the film itself becomes a site of theoretical production. In addition, intertextual comparison with the works of bell hooks, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Nancy Fraser, and other feminist scholars situates the findings in broader academic debates while avoiding the universality of women's oppression. With this approach, the film is not merely a localized account of gender struggle but a cultural product that illuminates global patterns of domination and resistance, thereby offering a comprehensive framework to understand women's transformation from subalterns into empowered subjects.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### **Silence to Voice: The Subaltern Condition in the Mining Space**

One of the most striking moments in *North Country* (2005) occurs when Josey sits alone in the dimly lit locker room after being assaulted by her male coworkers. The camera frames her body in isolation, while faint echoes of male laughter bleed in from outside. The silence is suffocating—not an absence of sound, but a presence of domination. This cinematic silence embodies Spivak's notion that "the subaltern cannot speak": Josey's voice is negated before it can even be heard. The *mise-en-scène*—shadowed lighting, harsh textures of the locker room, and the framing that encloses her within space—renders her visible yet voiceless, a figure whose subjectivity is suppressed by patriarchal power.

The mine itself becomes a stage of discipline. Long shots of the machinery dwarf Josey and other women workers, visually reproducing the gendered labor hierarchy. Space is not neutral here; as Lefebvre suggests, it is produced ideologically to naturalize masculine dominance. The coarse jokes, the vulgar graffiti, and the division of tasks are not only cultural expressions but spatial inscriptions of patriarchy. This aligns with Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, where women's bodies are monitored and ridiculed, their presence tolerated only as an object of humiliation.

This silencing extends beyond the mine into Josey's family life. In one pivotal scene, when she confides in her father, he dismisses her complaint with disbelief, suggesting that she has humiliated herself. The patriarchal refusal is not only institutional but also domestic: the intimate sphere becomes complicit in silencing. As bell hooks (2000) argues, patriarchy persists not merely through male domination but through the consent of women and communities who accept gender hierarchy as natural. This is visible in the complicity of Josey's female colleagues, who initially refuse to speak up, consolidating her isolation and perpetuating the cycle of silence.

Cinematically, the film underscores this isolation by contrasting close-ups and wide shots. Close-ups capture Josey's tear-streaked face, her eyes averted, while wide shots situate her as a small figure swallowed by the vast, hostile environment of the mine. The spectator becomes complicit in witnessing her silencing, as the film shows the impossibility of speaking under hegemonic power; what Spivak theorizes as structural muting is dramatized as a cinematic experience, pulling the audience into the discomfort of complicity.

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Ultimately, *North Country* (2005) presents the mine as a microcosm of patriarchy: a space where women are systematically degraded, excluded, and silenced. Josey's abjection illustrates how patriarchalism denies the subaltern voice. However, Fraser's (1995) dual model of justice as redistribution and recognition shows her struggle as both an economic demand and a cultural claim to legitimacy. The originality of this finding lies in demonstrating that silencing operates not only at the level of discourse but also through spatial, cultural, and cinematic strategies. By dramatizing silence as a narrative and visual motif, the film foregrounds the urgent need for structural change—at domestic, communal, and institutional levels—if women's voices are ever to be fully heard.

### **Contesting Patriarchy through Resistance and Solidarity**

At the beginning of *North Country* (2005), Josey's female coworkers remain silent when she is harassed, their downcast eyes as loud as the men's crude jokes. In the lunchroom scene, Josey sits at the table, ignored even by the women next to her. The camera frames her off-center, emphasizing her exclusion. This reflects Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) argument that men and women who internalize patriarchal norms deny the subaltern's voice.

The narrative shifts in the courtroom, which becomes the central stage of resistance. When Josey testifies alone, the camera captures her in isolating close-ups, underscoring her vulnerability and aligning with Judith Butler's (1990) notion that subjectivity is performed under precarious conditions. However, as other women begin to stand in support, the visual grammar transforms. The lighting brightens, the frame widens, and a panning shot captures the women rising together. This change in cinematic form enacts Butler's theory of performativity: solidarity becomes a performative act that reconstitutes subjectivity, transforming silence into collective speech.

The collective testimonies further embody Spivak's (1988) idea of strategic essentialism. Although the women's experiences differ, they unify momentarily to confront systemic oppression. The *mise-en-scène* shifts from isolating Josey to framing multiple women within the same shot, visually materializing the politics of temporary unity. The courtroom scene dramatizes how disparate voices can coalesce into a collective force that challenges patriarchal structures.

This solidarity also exemplifies Nancy Fraser's (1995) dual justice model. On the one hand, the women demand redistribution through safer working conditions and equitable labor practices. On the other hand, they demand recognition as dignified workers with legitimate voices. Their collective action resonates with bell hooks' (2000) intersectional understanding of feminism as a struggle against men and broader systems of domination involving race, class, and culture. The courtroom, therefore, is not just a legal space but a political arena where redistribution and recognition converge.

The climactic image of women standing together against the institutional power of the courtroom reverberates beyond the narrative. By shifting its visual strategy—from isolating close-ups of Josey to collective wide shots—the film integrates solidarity into its very form. In doing so, *North Country* (2005) illustrates that solitary resistance alone cannot dismantle patriarchal silencing, but requires the collective voices of many. Through Butler's performativity, Spivak's strategic essentialism, Fraser's justice, and hooks' intersectionality, the film reveals solidarity as both the means and the message of feminist resistance.

### **The Personal as Political: The Redefining of Subjectivity**

In *North Country* (2005), Josey's humiliation is not depicted as a private misfortune but a symptom of systemic inequality. In one early scene, she appeals to her father for support, only to be met with disbelief and silence. His refusal to acknowledge her pain visually communicates complicity in patriarchal structures. The camera's medium shot lingers on the tension between them, illustrating what second-wave feminism articulates as the core insight that the personal is political. Domestic space, often imagined as private, here functions as a political arena where patriarchal power is enforced.

The film repeatedly translates personal experiences into political indictments. Vulgar graffiti in the mine directly targets Josey; the community whispers that she is a troublemaker rather than a victim. Each instance of degradation is cinematically reframed as evidence of

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structural oppression. This resonates with Bell Hooks' (2000) critique of patriarchal culture: women are not silenced solely by male authority but also by communities that normalize gender hierarchy.

Cinematically, Josey's transformation is most visible in the courtroom. During her testimony, close-ups capture her tear-streaked face, while reaction shots map her suffering onto the collective gaze of the audience. The silence that follows her words compels recognition. Judith Butler's (1990) concept of performativity is evident here: Josey's refusal to remain silent becomes a repeated act of resistance that reconstitutes her subjectivity. Each statement she delivers enacts the feminist maxim that identity is not given, but performed in defiance of oppression.

The direct gaze motif intensifies this transformation. Josey looks straight into the camera at crucial moments, collapsing the boundary between character and viewer. This cinematic strategy implicates the audience, enacting Nancy Fraser's (1995) call for recognition: Josey demands empathy and acknowledgment of her dignity as a worker and a woman.

Her subjectivity, however, is not remade in isolation. When other women stand with her, her voice gains authority. This collective reinforcement reflects Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (1984) caution against universalizing women's oppression: Josey's struggle is rooted in her working-class, Midwestern context, yet it is also staged as a metaphor for transnational feminist struggles. She becomes both a subject in her own right and a symbol through which other women can articulate resistance.

Ultimately, *North Country* (2005) demonstrates that political subjectivity is not granted but forged in resistance. By weaving together scenes of family betrayal, community stigma, and institutional silencing with cinematic techniques of close-up, silence, and gaze, the film dramatizes Josey's transformation from subaltern to empowered subject. Through Butler's performativity, Fraser's recognition, and Mohanty's transnational critique, the film affirms that harassment, stigma, and silencing are not individual problems but structural injustices that demand collective recognition and systemic reform.

### **Transnational Implications – From Local Struggle to Global Resonance**

While *North Country* (2005) is set in the working-class communities of Minnesota, its cinematic language elevates Josey's struggle beyond the local. Long tracking shots of the mine emphasize its vastness and harshness, dwarfing the workers who move within it. This visual grammar reflects Henri Lefebvre's (1991) notion of the production of space: the mine is not merely a workplace but a spatialized system of domination where capitalist and patriarchal powers converge. The oppressive scale of the mining environment resonates with labor struggles worldwide, from agriculture to factories, where women confront the same structures of hostility and exclusion.

Josey's story thus becomes more than an American narrative; it is a metaphor for global feminist struggles. However, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) cautions, feminist analysis must avoid homogenizing women's oppression. The film acknowledges this by situating Josey firmly in her Midwestern, working-class context. Scenes of her interactions with her family, coworkers, and community highlight the specific cultural terrain of U.S. labor politics. However, the cinematic emphasis on collective silence, harassment, and eventual solidarity makes the story legible to audiences across cultures, enabling comparative reflection without erasing specificity.

The courtroom sequences further universalize Josey's struggle. The collective rising of women against systemic silencing parallels similar feminist mobilizations worldwide, from garment factories in South Asia to agricultural fields in Latin America. The alternation between close-ups of individual testimonies and wide shots of collective action visually dramatizes Mohanty's call for transnational solidarity: local struggles are rooted in context, but their logics of subordination and resistance are shared across borders.

Nancy Fraser's (1995) dual model of redistribution and recognition also illuminates the transnational dimension. Josey's demand for safe working conditions and equitable treatment echoes broader calls for redistribution in global labor systems. At the same time, her insistence on being heard in the courtroom resonates as a demand for recognition, a struggle mirrored

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by women across postcolonial and industrial contexts. The courtroom thus becomes both a local and global stage for feminist politics.

By weaving together, the specificity of Josey's life with universal patterns of gendered oppression, *North Country* (2005) functions as a transnational feminist text. Its cinematic strategies—tracking shots of oppressive spaces, close-ups of individual suffering, and collective framings of solidarity—transform a localized story into a cultural bridge between Western feminist theory and non-Western lived realities. Through Lefebvre's production of space, Mohanty's critique of universalism, and Fraser's model of justice, the film affirms that patriarchal oppression, though culturally distinct, is globally pervasive and can only be contested through critical solidarity across borders.

### **Theoretical Contribution – Rethinking the Subaltern through Film**

*North Country* (2005) contributes to feminist and postcolonial theory by demonstrating how cinema theorizes the politics of voice, silence, and subjectivity. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) famously argued that the subaltern cannot speak, since dominant structures foreclose their words. The film stages this impossibility through silence and *mise-en-scène*. In the locker room, Josey's mute suffering amid the echo of male laughter visualizes Spivak's claim that subaltern speech is invalidated even before it emerges. However, the camera lingers on her trembling hands and tearful face in the courtroom as she testifies. The alternation between silence, diegetic noise, and close-up detail shows how subalternity can be negotiated cinematically—not erased, but made visible as a struggle for articulation.

This cinematic staging complicates Spivak's binary distinction between political representation (*Vertretung*) and aesthetic representation (*Darstellung*). Politically, Josey is repeatedly denied credibility: her testimony is ridiculed, her words doubted. Aesthetically, however, the film represents her struggle through close-ups, collective framings, and moments of direct gaze. In doing so, it grants her visibility that cannot be silenced. The film, therefore, dramatizes the tension Spivak identifies: subaltern women may be denied speech in institutional arenas, yet cinema can stage their visibility through aesthetics.

Furthermore, the film extends Judith Butler's (1990) concept of performativity. Josey's repeated confrontations with patriarchal authority—in the mine, in her family, and in court—become performative acts that reconstitute her subjectivity. Each testimony, each refusal to remain silent, enacts a new political identity. The courtroom solidarity, where multiple women rise together, demonstrates that subjectivity is relational and collective, not fixed or individual.

Nancy Fraser's (1995) theory of justice as redistribution and recognition also resonates in this cinematic contribution. Josey's demands are both economic and cultural: safe labor conditions and the recognition of dignity. By framing these demands through visual strategies—close-ups of vulnerability, wide shots of solidarity—the film integrates Fraser's dual model into a cinematic form, showing how feminist politics can be articulated through cultural texts.

Finally, *North Country* provides what Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) calls a transnational feminist critique. While rooted in the specificity of the American Midwest, the film resonates with global patterns of gendered exploitation. It bridges theory and lived realities across borders by visualizing silencing, resistance, and solidarity. The theoretical novelty of this research lies in demonstrating how cinema functions not only as an object of feminist and postcolonial analysis but as a medium that theorizes in its own right. Through Spivak's subalternity, Butler's performativity, Fraser's justice, and Mohanty's transnational critique, *North Country* (2005) shows that film is not a passive reflection of oppression but an active site of theorizing subjectivity, resistance, and solidarity.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article addresses the research gap identified in the introduction: the limited exploration of women's struggles in cinema and the insufficient theorization of subaltern subjectivity within film studies. By analyzing *North Country* (2005) through feminist and postcolonial lenses, the study has shown how cinematic techniques—silence, *mise-en-scène*,

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close-ups, and courtroom staging—construct the politics of silencing, resistance, and solidarity. Drawing on Spivak's notion of the subaltern, Butler's performativity, Fraser's dual model of justice, and Mohanty's transnational critique, the findings demonstrate that cinema is not merely a medium of representation but also a site of theorizing subjectivity. The analysis revealed five significant insights: (1) the mine as a space of patriarchal silencing, (2) resistance and solidarity as collective empowerment, (3) the transformation of the personal into the political, (4) the transnational resonance of local struggles, and (5) the theoretical contribution of film to feminist and postcolonial critique. Together, these findings reaffirm that women's struggles in cinema deserve serious scholarly attention, as they illuminate how patriarchal systems operate not only through overt violence but also through cultural, spatial, and aesthetic strategies. At the same time, the emphasis on transnational resonance suggests an avenue for future research. While this study has focused on an American context, comparative analyses with films depicting women's struggles in non-Western settings—such as South Asia, Africa, or Latin America—would strengthen the claim that subalternity and resistance are global phenomena articulated through diverse cultural forms. Such work would concretize the transnational argument and further develop cinema as a tool for feminist pedagogy and cross-cultural solidarity.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article was written and published as part of the final project requirement in the English Literature program, Universitas Islam Sultan Agung. The author expresses deep gratitude to the academic supervisor, the Head of the English Literature program, and the Dean of the Faculty of Language, Literature, and Culture, whose guidance and support were essential throughout the research and writing process. The author also acknowledges the broader academic environment at Universitas Islam Sultan Agung, which provided valuable resources and encouragement in completing this work.

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