# The Dynamics of Bullying Reality in the Movie "From The Ashes": Teun A.van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis

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**Abstract**

Bullying is a social problem that often occurs, especially in educational settings. Bullying can have an impact on the victim's psychological condition, mental, physical, and emotional control. This research was conducted to describe the text structure, social cognition, and social context using Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis model in the movie "From The Ashes". This research uses a qualitative descriptive method. The data sources are divided into primary data sources in the form of the movie "From the Ashes" and secondary data sources, in the form of supporting data from several literature sources, journals, and materials from the internet related to the topic of study. This research uses the techniques of watching, reading, and taking notes to collect data. The analysis techniques used are data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion. The results of this study are: (1) The text structure consists of macro-structure elements in the form of themes raised, namely the issue of bullying, superstructure in the form of the plot of this film, and micro-structure focusing on semantic aspects, namely setting, details, and intent. (2) Social cognition that shows the director's views regarding social discourse in the Arab educational environment related to the issue of bullying and discipline in schools. (3) Social context that brings people's views that bullying cases in the educational environment, especially among teenagers, still occur.

Keywords**:** *Bullying, Critical Discourse Analysis, From The Ashes.*

**Citation (APA)**:

Aqilah, N,N, Surur, M. (2024). The Dynamics of Bullying Reality in the Movie "From The Ashes": Teun A.van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis. *LINGUA: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Dan Pengajarannya*, *21*(2), 275-287. https://doi.org/10.30957/lingua.v21i2.1055.

**1. Introduction**

Bullying is a social phenomenon that involves physical violence or coercion, intimidation, and interference with other psychological aspects (Asnawi, 2019). Bullying cases do not only occur in schools but also in social environments, such as the workplace and social environments in general. Bullying today can continue on social media (cyberbullying) where the impact can worsen. Bullying can happen to anyone, including individuals and groups regardless of age, race, gender, or religion. Bullying of children in schools is a serious problem that has become a global concern. The adverse effects of bullying can make children's psychological and emotional conditions disturbed and cause poor social adjustment (Juwita & Kustanti, 2018).

Bullying in schools is still prevalent in many countries, including Saudi Arabia. The literature shows that some students are involved in bullying and victimization as much as 51.5%, while 41% of students are only victims, and 1.5% of students are intimidators. And only a small proportion, namely 6% of students are not involved in bullying or victimization (Alsaleem et al., 2021). According to J.E Sahetapy, victimization is a process that causes someone to become a victim of suffering either physically or psychologically (Rachmat, 2023). In general, the manifestations of bullying behavior can be categorized into three. First, is verbal bullying, which is often manifested by expressions of anger and malice shown to the victim. Second, non-verbal or physical bullying, which can be manifested by physical violence. Third, mental/psychological bullying, is manifested by damaging the mental health and psychological condition of the victim without involving physical violence and bad words to the victim (Juliana et al., 2022).

Along with the awareness of the adverse effects of bullying behavior, various forms of media including films have raised the theme of bullying as part of social and cultural criticism. Film is one of the media that has visual power, making it suitable as a medium for representing the phenomenon of bullying and shaping public discourse related to it. Films can reflect social reality, including the problem of bullying, which occurs in many areas through the representation of characters, dialog, and storylines. Many bullying-themed films feature power dynamics between perpetrators and victims through gestures, language, and visual symbols, which illustrate injustice and social hierarchy. Therefore, bullying-themed films can provide criticism to analyze the discourse of power and resistance of relationships between individuals (Qaiser et al., 2024).

The movie From the Ashes represents the social phenomenon of bullying in children that occurs in schools. Since the movie is set in Saudi Arabia, in Saudi Arabian culture there is gender separation between men and women in social spaces, such as in schools and other educational institutions. The Arab girls' school represented in the film shows how Arab schools operate in a highly structured environment with all female students, teachers, and staff. This all-girls school highlights how Arab women when outside wear dark clothing that is very covered and when inside the school are allowed to remove the hijab and outer clothing. The policy allows Arab women to feel freer in an environment that is completely closed off from the male gaze. However, even though all students are female, bullying behavior in all-girls schools is still found or even occurs frequently (Hanani & Piskin, 2020).

The phenomenon of bullying that occurs in an all-girls school in the movie From the Ashes provides an interesting picture of the social dynamics of bullying that occurs in an all-girls school. The representation of bullying in this movie not only reveals the daily reality, but also illustrates the interplay between power, ideology, and social structures that influence their behavior. Power, ideology, and social structures that influence their behavior. In this context, discourse analysis is a suitable approach to identify the implied meanings contained in dialog and social practices. Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis approach which focuses

on the relationship between text and context offers a comprehensive analytical framework to examine how analytical framework to examine how the issue of bullying is raised in this movie (Sarasati, 2020).

The critical discourse analysis approach (AWK) according to Teun Van Dijk can be used as an analytical lens in understanding how bullying is represented in the film. According to Van Dijk, the assumptions/characteristics of discourse are discourse as social interaction, discourse as power and domination, discourse as communication, discourse as contextual situation, discourse as social semiotics, discourse as pure language, discourse as shaper and complexity. This assumption is a fundamental assumption in conducting critical discourse analysis (Ratnaningsih, 2019). In critical discourse analysis, language is not only analyzed in terms of linguistics or linguistic aspects but language is also analyzed by connecting to context. The context in this study is that the language is used for certain purposes or practices such as what (Silaswati, 2019). Teun Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis does not only focus on the text because the text is the result of a text production so it is not only the text that needs to be observed, but the practice of text production also needs to be observed. The distinctive feature of Van Dijk's analytical approach lies in social cognition which is a process to explain the structure and process of text formation (Jufanny & Girsang, 2020). Van Dijk's discourse analysis model is described in three main dimensions, namely text, context, and social cognition, which are combined in one unit of analysis.

Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis can represent the relationship between language, power, and ideology. Through the critical discourse analysis approach, researchers can capture ideology and power over and within social reality. The language used in the movie does not only focus on the speech but also focuses on how language is used to shape and reflect certain power and ideology. Analysis of dialog, narrative, and visual elements, in the film can reveal the power structure in the context of bullying.

Previous research related to Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis has been conducted, especially in news media, speeches, and several other media texts. First, research that describes the text dimensions, social cognition, and social context of Toxic Masculinity in the Patriarchal system is based on Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis in the film "Posesif" (Jufanny & Girsang, 2020). Second, research that analyzes the text dimension only, including the macrostructure, superstructure, and microstructure in Joko Widodo's speech at the opening of the XXIII PGRI congress in 2024 based on Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis (Sulistiawan et al., 2024). Third, research that describes discourse on text structure, social cognition, and social context in online news media of bullying and sexual harassment cases at KPI is based on Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis (Hafizah et al., 2022). Fourth, research that reviews the discourse of Indonesia's independent music scene in the video clip commentary of the song "Runtuh" by Feby Putri ft Fiersa Besari with Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis approach (Rizki et al., 2024). Fifth, a study that describes the text structure in the form of macrostructure, superstructure, and microstructure in the lyrics of the song Irgaa Tani is based on Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis (Imam, 2012).

Critical discourse analysis studies on Arabic film media with the theme of bullying in the school environment are still relatively limited. Critical discourse analysis is mostly applied to news or speeches. In contrast, critical discourse analysis on movies has not been done much, especially in Middle Eastern culture and Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to describe the text, social cognition, and context with Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis approach to the discourse contained in the movie "From the Ashes".

## 3. Methods

This research uses a qualitative descriptive method. This research method is used because the research data is in the form of a dialog between characters in the film. There are

two data sources in this research, namely primary data sources and secondary data sources. The primary data source in this research is the movie ″From the Ashes″ directed by Khaled Fahed in 2024. The secondary data or supporting data comes from literature sources, journals, and sources from the internet related to the topic of study. The data collection technique uses listening and note-taking techniques. Using the listening technique, the researcher observes the film carefully and then records the data collected and grouped systematically. The collected data was then analyzed by: (1) data reduction, the researcher summarizes the data collected in the film ″From The Ashes″ which aims to simplify the data obtained and ensure the correctness of the data; (2) data presentation, the researcher classifies and presents the data obtained; (3) conclusion or verification, the researcher concludes of the data obtained then verifies again to ensure that all the data obtained is correct.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

The findings are in the form of critical discourse analysis, bullying representation in the movie From the Ashes, namely (1) text structure which contains macrostructure, superstructure, and microstructure (2) social cognition (3) context in the movie From the Ashes. From the Ashes is a Saudi Arabian drama thriller released on Netflix on January 18, 2024. The movie was produced by Ideation Studios and directed by Khaled Fahed. From the Ashes is inspired by the true story of a fire incident at an all-girls school whose cause remains unknown.

This movie tells the story of a model student named Amera who always excels every month. As a model student who is always relied on by teachers, she is often the target of bullying by her three friends Heba, Mona, and Mashael. Her three friends are students who frequently violate school rules and ignore teacher orders. Despite repeated warnings from the teachers, they remain unchanged. Every day Amera has to face their taunts and rudeness. Repeatedly Amera and other friends who were victims of bullying by the three female students complained to the teachers and principal, but they did not pay attention and considered it a normal thing. At the peak of the incident, Amera was locked up by someone in the warehouse while retrieving her lost change book. At that time Amera was locked up and suddenly a school fire broke out, making it difficult for Amera to save herself and ended up dying in the warehouse due to the fire.

The results of the analysis and discussion in this study describe how the discourse on the issue of bullying is represented in the movie From the Ashes. The analysis is based on Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis approach which includes text structure, social cognition, and social context.

### 4.1 Text structure

1.      Macrostructure

Macrostructure refers to the global meaning in a text or discourse from the topic or theme raised. The interrelated elements in the macrostructure can form a good understanding of the discourse. The element contained in the macrostructure is thematic, the theme/topic that is prioritized in a discourse. The topic will be supported by several sub-topics that support the formation of a general topic (Eriyanto, 2018). In this macrostructure, the general theme of the movie From the Ashes is the bullying case. This topic is supported by visualizations of physical and psychological bullying as well as the role of families and schools in overcoming bullying. Each of these sub-topics strengthens and supports the formation of the main topic.  The sub-topics include:

a.      Physical and psychological bullying

In the movie "From the Ashes" there are several scenes that show physical and psychological bullying. Heba and her two friends often pour out their malice on Amera by bullying her physically and psychologically. The impact of bullying on Amera is clearly illustrated in the film, that Amera feels uncomfortable, depressed, and less socialized with other students.

Scene physical and psychological bullying



**Figure 1.** Physical bullying      **Figure 2.** Psychological bullying

In the first picture, after a long queue at the canteen, Amera finally got the bread she bought. But when Amera walked back, Heba suddenly pushed her down. Although Heba apologized on the grounds that it was unintentional but the action was deliberate. Feeling upset, Amera immediately got up to defend herself. Heba and Mona not only pushed but also took the bread that Amera had bought.

In the second picture, during a blank period, the class becomes boisterous. Heba, Mona, and Mashael, who often bully Amera, deliberately draw Amera's crying face on the blackboard by adding exaggerated characteristics to mock her. They also sang a mocking song while clapping their hands and hitting the table, making the class atmosphere even more rowdy. Amera, who felt humiliated, cried until finally calmed down by Rana.

Both data illustrate the physical and psychological bullying experienced by Amera. In the first picture, Heba's actions, by intentionally pushing and taking Amera's bread, are an example of physical bullying. Physical bullying is defined as acts of violence such as hitting and kicking and taking other people's things by force (Erina et al., 2023). In the second picture, the actions of Heba, Mona, and Mashael, namely drawing Amera's face accompanied by a mocking song are examples of verbal and psychological bullying. Verbal bullying is defined by the practice of taunting, name-calling, teasing, and insulting (Erina et al., 2023). In addition, psychological bullying involves actions that are publicly humiliating, degrading and often done through words or symbolic actions.

b.      The role of family and school in overcoming bullying
The role of families and schools is very important in overcoming and preventing bullying cases. However, in this movie, families and schools play a lesser role in these cases. The school, which should be a safe place and the frontline in dealing with cases like this, seems to ignore it. The school, especially the principal's mother, considers the taunts, insults, and harsh attitudes experienced by Amera because of her friend to be normal and natural. As for the role of the family, there are no scenes depicting Amera talking or asking for family support about what the three friends who bullied her had done. The family only realized after Amera's death, that Amera was the victim of her friend's bullying. This highlights the importance of the role of schools and families in creating a supportive and protective environment in cases of bullying.

**Figure 3:** The role of the school     **Figure 4:** The role of the family

Apart from Amera, the three students who often bullied Amera also bullied other friends including Jameela. Feeling unable to stand it, Jameela reported to the teacher and even the principal, in the hope that there would be firm action against the three children. However, the principal only listened without any follow-up, even responding that they would always be nosy like that. Not only Jameela has reported the bullying that happened at school, but Amera has also reported the bullying she experienced but also received a similar response. Several other teachers have also warned the principal that bullying cases at school should be dealt with immediately so that they do not continue to occur, but the principal seems to be ignorant and has never heeded these warnings.

After the school fire, the principal's mother came to Amera's house to express her condolences for Amera's death. Amera's mother was devastated and angry questioning the principal where her responsibility lay, if from the beginning the bullying case had been followed up, of course, her smart daughter would not have been a victim of locking in the warehouse, which eventually caused her to be trapped during the school fire. This incident illustrates the negligence and indifference towards a problem that is considered minor, leading to fatal consequences.

Both data emphasize the importance of the role of schools and families in dealing with bullying cases. The principal as the main leader of the school, plays an important role in overcoming bullying such as providing anti-bullying policies and assertiveness such as prevention, reporting procedures, and consequences for bullying perpetrators (Selian et al., 2024). Likewise, families have an important role, parental support plays a role in overcoming the negative effects of bullying. This can strengthen children's emotional resilience and increase self-confidence in difficult circumstances (Syawitri, 2024).

2.      Superstructure

In Van Dijk's view, the superstructure of the text is identified as a coherent whole (Nurlaily, 2019). The superstructure element, the scheme in the movie is briefly defined as the plot. The plot in text discourse is a sequence or series that forms the text as a whole from beginning to end which forms a meaning related to how a text compiler structures his writing. Starting with the introduction of conflict, it reaches its peak at the climax and ending. The director's schematic strategy in From the Ashes, to pack the plot of the movie using a mixed plot. The schematic of this movie is packed with several stages as follows:

**Figure 5.**          **Figure 6.**          **Figure 7.**

The series of data begins by telling the story of Amera as an outstanding student who always gets an award every month. Being an outstanding student at school is not always a pleasant thing for her. Not a few of her friends feel jealous and spiteful so every day she gets bullying behavior from her 3 friends namely Heba, Mona, and Mashael. Bullying on Amera continues every day, the climax is located in Figure 6 when Amera takes a book in the warehouse suddenly someone locks it on purpose and at that time there is also a fire that devours the entire school. Because the warehouse door was locked, Amera could not save herself and ended up dying in the warehouse. The tragedy of the fire was a lesson for all teachers, students, and school staff. In Figure 7, the principal tries to investigate the student who locked Amera in the warehouse. Three students who previously bullied Amera became the most suspected students by the principal so when interrogated, they always experienced a flashback to their past what they had done to Amera.

3.      Microstructure

In this movie, there are several elements of microstructure in discourse seen from semantic aspects such as setting, details, and intent.

a.  Background

The setting of the events contained in this movie will determine the direction in which the audience's view will be taken. The Saudi Arabian movie with the theme of bullying is based on a true story of bullying cases that are rampant, especially among teenagers. Most of the victims of bullying are smart model students. Although bullying is often considered a trivial problem, the fact is that bullying is a serious problem that can have a big impact, even no matter how small the actions taken by the perpetrator.



**Figure 8.**

سهام : البنات هدول مرة زودوها. كدا هنفتح على نفسنا أبواب إحنا في غنى عنها.

حياة : فخار يكسر بعضه.

سهام : والله إذا سكتنا عن هذا التنمر هيتحول لخطر. إنتي شايفه البنات كيف !

The dialogue at the beginning of the story leads the audience to realize the importance of following up on bullying cases. Bullying cases that are left unchecked can have serious repercussions. This has been reminded by Mrs. Seham as the vice principal, who tries to convey the importance of dealing with bullying cases immediately. However, the principal continued to downplay the warning and showed an ignorant response to the case because he considered it to be a process of disciplining female students. This is consistent with research conducted by (Alsehaimi, 2023) that bullying has been normalized in Saudi Arabian culture as an inseparable part of growing up, and most of its effects are not realized.

b. Details

Detail is the limitation of information that is used as the basis for developing a text. The limitation of the information is in the form of details, and the control of the information to be displayed (Ratnaningsih, 2019). The detail element in this movie is shown at the end of the scene which reveals how the chronology of the fire that caused Amera's death and the truth that the principal knew but did not reveal.



**Figure 9.**                    **Figure 10.**

رانا: أنا كنت با شوفك تتريقي و تتنمري على أميرة كل يوم.
كنت أخاف أتكلم و أسكت. و البنات كلهم زي خايفين و سكاتين على تتنمركم على أميرة.

في النهاية, أنا كمان اتجرأت وصرت زيكم. و كنت السبب في موتها.

At the end of the scene, Rana, the principal's daughter, finally admits her mistake, followed by the revelation of the chronology of the school fire. The fire started when Mona and Mashael were caught smoking by Mrs. Seham. After reprimanding them, Mrs. Seham actually took and smoked in the place. Then suddenly she heard the sound of Amera accidentally falling from the storeroom, then Mrs. Seham rushed away and threw away the cigarette while it was still lit, which eventually sparked a fire that spread throughout the school. In addition to revealing the details of Amera's death, the movie also highlights the mistakes of the three bullying students during their time at the school.

c. Intent

The intent element has little in common with the detail element. In the detail element, information favorable to the communicator will be conveyed in detailed detail while in the intent element information favorable to the communicator will be conveyed explicitly and

clearly but on the contrary, if the information is not favorable to the communicator, it will be conveyed implicitly, cryptically, and hidden (Eriyanto, 2012). The point in this movie is conveyed implicitly, it can be seen when Rana begins to admit that she is the one who caused Amera to die. She was the one who locked Amera up when there was a fire at school. Rana did this because she wanted to be the best when giving a speech in Mrs. Wedad's class and not be a failed student in her mother's eyes.



**Figure 11.**

رانا : أنا الّذى حبست أميرة يا ماما , أنا الّذى حبستها ما هبة.

ماما : انا عارفة

رانا : و انت سلمتها للشرطة و لبستها التهمة؟

ماما : تستاهل العقاب

رانا : و انت عارفة إنها مظلومة؟

ماما : من الذى مظلومة ؟ إنها بنت فاسدة و كريهة و مؤذية

Based on this dialogue, the director tries to lead the audience's opinion that the demands of parents on children greatly affect the behavior of children. Rana did this because she was jealous of Amera's intelligence as a student who always excelled. Finally, she took a bad action that accidentally resulted in Amera's death. The reason she locked Amera up was because she wanted to be the student chosen to represent the competition. Rana's obsession arises because every day her mother demands that she always be perfect, thus creating Rana's initiative to get rid of Amera. The continuous demand to be better as seen in Rana is one of the factors triggering psychological problems that can lead to actions that harm others in order to satisfy parents.

### 4.2 Social Cognition

Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis is closely related to social cognition which refers to the process of discourse formation from the beginning and several things that influence the author when making a discourse to produce a complete discourse product (Nur Ellya et al., 2023). There are several indicators that are the focus of social cognition, namely knowledge, culture, opinions, and attitudes (Fayruza et al., 2021). The social cognition contained in the movie From the Ashes reflects the

director's view of social discourse in the Arab educational environment related to the issue of bullying and discipline in schools. The movie shows how societal values, such as disciplinary norms and power hierarchies, shape the way people perceive and deal with bullying and its social consequences.

The director explicitly uses the story to highlight the lack of attention of the school principal who often ignores bullying behavior and considers such actions as normal or part of the social learning process. This problem is also exacerbated by schools that are concerned with the image of the school's good name rather than the safety and well-being of the students. In addition, the movie also implicitly highlights the role of the family when the pressure to excel triggers psychological disorders like Rana's, who ends up doing harm to others.

As part of social cognition, the film also raises social values underlying the discourse on bullying such as group hierarchy, social status, and academic recognition. The narrative in this movie leads the audience to think that ignoring bullying cases not only harms the victims but can also damage the social order in the educational environment. This is in line with the view that bullying discourse can be used to build public awareness regarding the importance of preventing bullying with the support of families and schools. Understandably, this movie not only reflects the act of bullying but also shapes public opinion about the urgency of addressing the problem of bullying seriously and making it an issue that also needs attention in the educational environment.

## 4.3 Social Context

Social context in Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis views how a text is connected to more complex social structures in society. In Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis, there are two important aspects of social context that must be understood, namely the hierarchy of power and access that influences discourse (accsess) (Nur Ellya et al., 2023). The hierarchy of power in this context refers to the control or ownership of access by certain individuals or groups. The movie From the Ashes shows the hierarchy of power in the field of education, especially in schools. Teachers and principals have the authority to enforce rules and control student behavior. The movie also often highlights the importance of all students obeying the rules. The students who violate the rules are seen as rebellious students or problematic students so there is a hierarchy of power structures that exist. In addition, the principal as the holder of the highest power hierarchy in the school uses his position to cover up the fact that his son is the main cause of Amera's death. The principal even looked for loopholes to blame troubled students as the perpetrators of the cause of death in order to immediately close the case.

In addition, the social context in this movie brings people's views on bullying cases in the educational environment, especially among teenagers, which still occurs a

lot. The dynamics of bullying that occur in educational settings are often better to maintain the reputation and good image of the institution by covering up the problems experienced by students rather than revealing cases that can reduce the reputation of the school. Teachers' lack of attention to bullying cases results in pressure for students to remain silent for fear of negative reactions from the community or family. As a result of teachers' lack of attention to bullying cases, school authorities point out that bullying cases are often seen as an individual problem rather than as a result of the hierarchical structure and power imbalances that exist in the educational environment.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the results of the analysis, the movie From the Ashes represents the discourse of bullying that occurs in Saudi Arabian girls' schools. Critical discourse analysis identifies text structure, social cognition, and social context. The text structure shows that From The Ashes is a movie that raises the issue of bullying. Bullying in this movie is physical, verbal, and psychological bullying. The movie highlights how these actions have a serious impact on the victim, as experienced by Amera. The macrostructure shows the main theme of bullying with related sub-topics such as the lack of role of schools and families in dealing with bullying issues.

The social cognition of the film shows the director's view of the social discourse in the Arab educational environment regarding the issue of bullying and school discipline. Explicitly, the director represents the lack of attention of the school principal who often ignores bullying cases. And implicitly the director represents parental pressure on children can trigger psychological disorders that can end in harmful actions for others.

In the social context, bullying in this movie is influenced by the hierarchy of power and social dynamics in schools. Principals, who have authority, often focus more on maintaining the school's reputation rather than taking the issue of bullying seriously. Bullying is also often perceived as an individual problem, rather than the result of hierarchical structures and power imbalances in schools.

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