

“Everyday Resistance”: Women and Sexual Violence in *Women Talking* Film

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis perlawanan perempuan terhadap kekerasan seksual di komunitas religius. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk memahami bagaimana kekerasan seksual terhadap perempuan digambarkan serta bagaimana perempuan melakukan perlawanan terhadap kekerasan seksual di komunitas religius. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah metode deskriptif kualitatif. Teori perlawanan oleh James Scott, yang mencakup perlawanan terselubung (covert resistance) dan perlawanan terbuka (public resistance), juga diterapkan dalam penelitian ini.

Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa perempuan di komunitas religius melakukan perlawanan terhadap kekerasan seksual, seperti pemerkosaan, yang telah mereka alami secara turun-temurun oleh laki-laki dalam komunitas tersebut. Bentuk perlawanan yang dilakukan adalah perlawanan terselubung dan perlawanan terbuka. Perlawanan terselubung dilakukan melalui diskusi di ruang tertutup tanpa sepenuhnya pihak berwenang, berupa transkrip tersembunyi sehingga tidak menimbulkan perubahan. Selanjutnya, perlawanan terbuka dilakukan secara terang-terangan dan berdampak pada kehidupan serta perubahan di masa depan. Penelitian ini menyoroti perlawanan perempuan terhadap kekerasan seksual dan pentingnya pemahaman mengenai kekerasan seksual terhadap perempuan dalam masyarakat yang didominasi laki-laki sebagaimana digambarkan dalam *Women Talking*.

Kata Kunci: Komunitas religius; perlawanan; kekerasan seksual; perempuan

Abstract

The research analyses the women's resistance to sexual violence in religious communities. This research aims to understand how the portrayed sexual violence against women and how women resist to sexual violence in religious communities. The research method applied is the descriptive qualitative method. Resistance theory by James Scott, including Covert resistance and Public resistance also applied in this research. The results show that women in religious communities resist sexual violence, such as rape, that they have experienced for generations committed by men in the community. The resistance carried out is in the form of covert resistance and public resistance. Covert resistance is carried out by discussing in a closed room without any of the authorities knowing, the resistance is in the form of a hidden transcript so that it does not create any changes. Furthermore, public resistance is carried out openly and has an impact on both life and future changes. This research highlights women's resistance against sexual violence and the importance of understanding of sexual violence against women's in a male-dominated as portrayed in *Women Talking*.

Keywords: Religious communities; resistance; sexual violence; women

INTRODUCTION

Religious communities are groups of people who come together based on share religious beliefs and practices, and form networks of relationship that shape moral commitments, provide social support, and organize social life (Ammerman, 2003). However, moral commitments created in these religious communities have patriarchal values and place women in a subordinate position. According to Marcum (1997), in religious communities that emphasize male obedience, hierarchy and authority,

sexual violence against women is often hidden, denied, or perceived as a shameful offense to the community rather than a crime against the victim. Furthermore, women had always been the object of issues in social life. They frequently experience issues like sexual violence, racial discrimination, economics and even social status in their daily lives. In patriarchal cultures, women experience discrimination not only due to their gender but also because of their social class, which exacerbates their subordination and exposes them more to forms of sexual

violence and control in intimate relationships (Rosida & Rejeki, 2017).

Sexual violence is an extremely problematic phenomena in social life that can lead to victims experiencing physical, sexual, and psychological anguish. Sexual assault is a very harmful and painful life event that has a wide range of psychological and sociological effects on victims, irrespective of their gender (Kharla & Bhurga, 2013). In addition, Kharla and Bhurga state that the incidence of sexual violence frequently causes a variety of negative emotions, shame, and existential questions like “why me?” as a result, it makes victims feel more helpless and powerless, which lowers their self-esteem and creates feelings that they might be at risk of more violence. Moreover, gender-based violence, including sexual violence, often stems from social stereotypes that portray women as weak, emotional, and irrational-stereotypes that justify male domination and the silencing of women’s voices (Rosida & Rejeki, 2017).

Since violence is a problem in both industrialized and developing nations, it has gained attention in practically every nation. Sexual violence is defined as an act that results in sexuality against a person and is committed by force by anybody, regardless of their relationship to the victim, in both a family and professional setting (Hilmi & Airlangga, 2019). According to Hosking in Thematic et al. (2017), the factors that lead to sexual violence against victims can be broadly divided into two categories: individual factors that are associated with individual violent tendencies. For instance, from a psychological standpoint, the primary motivation for committing violent acts is the inability to control one’s lust, including the expression of one’s emotions. The secondly, socio-cultural factors related to environmental conditions that encourage a person to commit acts of violence.

Furthermore, women’s representation in the film is mostly taken from their everyday life and often used to justify social expectations (Rosida & Handayani, 2023). In contrast, sexual assault is also seldom mentioned in part because of social stigma and shame for victims and those who interact with them, and in part because of ignorance and a lack of expertise in asking difficult personal sexual inquiries. It is a social and health issue that is gender-shaming, patriarchal, and misogynistic. These socially constructed stereotypes contribute to serve as a foundation for the systemic abuse portrayed in film Women Talking, where women’s voices are silenced and their identities shaped by patriarchal norms. According to Dewi and Oktafiyani (2023), patriarchal values-manifested through sexual and victim blaming attitudes-still thrive in environments that should promote equality. In response, women organize a multifaceted feminist resistance,

proving that even the unheard can take action to challenge sexual violence.

The issue of sexual violence in religious communities became a central theme in the film Women Talking (2022), directed by Sarah Polley. The film is based on real events in a Bolivian Mennonite community, where women were victims of systemic sexual violence by men in their community. Victims are drugged before being raped, and this violence is often ignored or justified under religious pretexts. Feminist theory has long argued that such violence is not simply an individual or isolated crime, but a manifestation of systemic inequality and domination. According to Tong, feminism is a broad concept encompassing various approach to addressing the oppression of women and finding solutions to dismantle these inequalities. However, women forced to define their existence solely through obedience to dominant male figures and traditional roles such as motherhood and domesticity and their exposed to alternative cultural values, begin to resist (Dedi & Farlina, 2023). This mirrors the women in Women Talking, who resist the roles imposed by their religious patriarchal society and assert agency over their futures.

In religious communities like the one depicted in the film, sexual violence is not only an individual act but also the result of a social system that perpetuates gender inequality. The violence against women is usually also supported by the surrounding environment, such as long-standing customs or the lack of protection for women in the area (Fadhilah & Handayani, 2022). In highly closed environments such as the Mennonite colony depicted in Women Talking, men’s authority is rarely questioned, while women are not given access to education, legal protection, or freedom of choice. Thus, this condition makes sexual violence easy to deny, silence, or even justify in the name of religious teachings. However, during these limitations, forms of resistance can still emerge. The women in Women Talking show collective resistance by gathering secretly to discuss, reflect on their suffering, and finally plan to reject the violence they have experienced. In the film, characters like Mejai and Salome describe how such trauma affects their daily lives, and the trauma becomes to resistance against sexual violence, both through constant fear and deep anger.

Through the sexual violence depicted in the film, women are victimized by men in their religious community. Thus, the researcher will analyze the film Women Talking, which depicts sexual violence against women and highlights systemic oppression in patriarchal and religiously conservative communities, illustrating its profound psychological, social and generational impact. The research seeks to understand how the films articulate women’s voices, construct collective resistance, and

challenges the ideological systems that enable sexual violence. Through dialogue and collective resistance, the film underscores the resilience of women in reclaiming their rights and challenging the power structures that perpetuate such violence.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Feminist Film Criticism

Part of the project of feminist film criticism is to identify the different kinds of screen representation of women (Butler, 2005). Feminist film critics work to raise our consciousness about the negative images of women in film to denaturalize these images to expose them as cultural constructs, not mirror reflections of the way women really are (Fabe, 2024). Feminism is an area of thought, philosophy, and politics that covers a variety of areas within film studies: canon formation, representation of women, representation of gender (more properly sexual) inequalities between women and men, the gendered construction of the viewer, and the possibilities for female cinema (Butler, 2005). Contemporary feminism has employed deconstructive strategies to destabilize a binary model inscribed in the masculine/feminine dyad. Instead, feminists have provocatively elaborated new frameworks in which to locate the gendered and sexual subject. These theorists have drawn from the Derridean model, which argues that binary structures will always privilege one of the binaries over the other: for example, male over female. Rather than trying to reverse this so that the feminine will be privileged over the masculine, as emancipatory feminism has striven to do, these feminists have attempted to destabilize the foundational structures on which binarism relies (Gamble, 2006).

Sexual Violence

Sexual violence involves behaviors disregarding autonomy and consent, including unwanted touching and assault. According to Susilawati (2021), sexual crimes can take the form of sexual harassment, sexual offenses, and sexual violence. Some foreign literature that discusses sexual violence in general is a criminal act related to sexuality or marriage that can be committed against men or women. Sexual violence against victims can have physical and psychological impacts, and victims who experience violence will experience various mental disorders such as depression, loss of confidence, trauma, stress, feeling isolated, angry, lonely, and feeling useless or hopeless in their lives. Because of the deeply rooted, unjust gender systems in society, sexual violence frequently stems from men's collective subconscious. In a patriarchal society, men have most of the power. Women are immediately viewed as inferior and deserving of less respect. Men are currently stereotyped as aggressive,

independent, self-assured, ambitious, strong, competitive, logical, and violent. According to Asti et al. (2021), women are typically perceived as intuitive, subservient, emotional, sensitive, patient, loyal, shy, submissive, and passive.

Resistance

Resistance is an effort of opposition by groups or individuals who are oppressed by a dominant. According to Scott (1985), the form of resistance depends on the form of power. Resistance always needs to adapt to the context and the situation of the people who use it. James Scott defines resistance as all actions taken by inferior people or groups that are intended to reduce or refute the claims made by a superior group against them. Scott (1985) states that a minority group must be willing to fight. In 1985, James Scott introduced "everyday resistance" as a theoretical concept to cover a different kind of resistance. One that is not as dramatic or visible as rebellions, riots, demonstrations, revolts, civil war, and other such organized, collective, or confrontational articulations of resistance. According to Scott (1985), everyday resistance is quiet, dispersed, disguised, or otherwise seemingly invisible to elites, the state, or mainstream society. Scott argues these activities are tactics that exploited people use to survive by gaining small and material advantages, temporarily undermining repressive domination, especially in contexts when rebellion is too risky.

In terms of ideas, Everyday resistance is Scott's notion of 'transcripts', both hidden and public, which are ways of behaving and speaking that fit a particular mold in a particular social environment, whether dominant or oppressed. Everyday resistance is a subtle form of resisting public transcripts by utilizing prescribed roles and language to resist the abuse of power, including things like disguised discourses, prayers, cutting of respect for the authorities and fighting. These methods are particularly effective in situations where violence is used to maintain the status quo, allowing for covert discourses of dignity and self-assertion in a hidden transcript where ideological resistance is disguised, muted and cloaked for security. These forms of resistance require little coordination or planning and are used by individuals and groups to resist without directly confronting or challenging elite norms.

METHOD

According to the background of the study, the research problem are (1) How does the film women talking portray sexual violence in the women talking film? And (2) How is the women's resistance to sexual violence depicted in the film? the research method used in this research is a qualitative method. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982: 27), qualitative research is descriptive data, data

collected in the form of words or pictures and not numbers. Researchers use qualitative methods with the consideration that the data obtained may require in-depth analysis. Qualitative research is research that tends to be descriptive, and the theoretical basis becomes the focus and main tool in analyzing a study. According to (Hamenstädt, 2019) Descriptive research is a type of research that does not use calculations or numbers. Therefore, this research does not require statistical analysis. Instead, it is analyzed using theories or approaches related to the research title. Furthermore, the researcher analyze the data using James Scott theory of resistance to describe how women's resistance against sexual violence. The research data is based on selected scenes and dialogues in the film *Women Talking* (2022) related to the research topic by categorizing scenes or dialogues that show the sexual violence and the women's resistance in religious communities.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The portrayed Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is any act of a sexual nature committed without the consent of the victim, and can include rape, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, and forms of gender-based bullying (Suhita, 2021). Furthermore, sexual violence not only causes physical harm but also deep psychological trauma. In the *Women Talking*, the narrator avoids tropes that often accompany representations of sexual violence, including titillation or something akin to seduction and desire. In the film *Women Talking*, sexual violence committed by men against women is depicted through indirect scenes and dialogue. The scene when Ona woke up from her sleep and found her intimate area bleeding, she called her mother and told her that she rapes had happened to her. In this scene, the shot is taken by the character Ona, who is wearing a floral dress and lying on a floral bedspread. The image explains how she woke up with blood between her legs. This makes a clear, albeit indirect, reference to the sexual violence she has endured.

Figure 1 (00:01:07)



Source <https://www.primevideo.com/>

Ona woke up with blood on her lower body and immediately called her mother.

Ona	: Mom
Agata (Ona's mother)	: Again.

Fundamentally, sexual violence does not recognize gender boundaries, meaning that anyone can be a victim or a perpetrator. However, male perpetrators are more frequently involved in acts of sexual violence against women, largely due to the unequal power relations between men and women caused by the patriarchal structure of society. Men commit approximately three-quarters of violent crimes, including sexual violence against women (Bachman, 1994). In the scene, Ona's body is shown covered in blood around her intimate area, indicating that she was raped while unconscious by a man from her own community. She then quietly calls out to her mother. Her reaction is extremely calm, almost resigned, followed by her mother's response, simply saying, "Again." This response implies that sexual violence has become normalized, repeated, and even inherited across generations within the religious community where they live.

This is not the first time such violence has occurred. Violence against women stems from gender stereotypes that portray women as weak, making them more vulnerable to becoming victims (Sumbullah, 2008). As a result, harassment and rape have become a part of women's everyday lives. This scene also demonstrates how sexual violence has become systemic. There is no visible outrage, no call for help, and no medical assistance. According to Rosida & Rejeki (2017), women in such communities have no opportunity to speak, and even when they do, their voices are not heard. In this context, religion does not function as a source of protection instead, it is used to justify male dominance and suppress women's voices.

Figure 2 (00:38:12)



Source <https://www.primevideo.com/>

According to Zaky and Yulianti (2022), sexual violence is becoming increasingly widespread, with women being the primary victims. The image shows a woman's feet standing on the floor, with drops of blood falling from beneath her white dress, specifically from her intimate area. The camera captures the scene from above, emphasizing the silence and isolation of the moment. The blood between her legs not only indicates the physical trauma of a sexual assault that has just occurred, likely

while she was unconscious, as repeatedly portrayed in the film, but also symbolizes a deeper form of violence.

Women are often seen as weak and therefore, become frequent targets of sexual abuse. This type of violence is part of a larger, universal crime that often occurs repeatedly over long periods (Purwanti & Zalianti, 2018). The absence of sound in the scene underlines how women in this community have become accustomed to silence. They do not scream. They do not speak up. The community shown in the film is extremely patriarchal and religious, where women have no authority over their own bodies. The women are not only victims of physical assault but also of a system that forces them into silence. As Galtung (1969) explains, violence is not always direct or immediately fatal; it can occur through social structures that create injustice, both politically and socially. This illustrates how systemic violence operates structurally, reinforced by religious doctrine and community rules that maintain a patriarchal system.

The Women's Resistance Against Sexual Violence

In a conservative and patriarchal religious community as depicted in the movie *Women Talking*, women cannot directly resist due to religious values that teach them to be obedient and rigid and also male dominance over the power structure. Therefore, they first show covert resistance through secret discussions, silent defiance, and symbolic rejection in the form of transcripts against male authority. As collective awareness develops, this form of resistance develops into public resistance, which is characterized by a collective decision to leave the community as a form of open rejection of the violence and injustice they have experienced. These two forms of resistance are proof that despite being in a repressive situation that suppresses, restrains and oppresses women, women are still able to form solidarity and strategize to regain their rights.

James Scott defines resistance as all actions taken by people or inferior groups that aim to reduce or deny the claims made by superior groups against them (Scott, 1985). Scott divides resistance into two types, namely Public Resistance and Covert Resistance. Public resistance leads to movements that are carried out systematically with coordination between leaders and members. Meanwhile, covert resistance is resistance carried out by someone through less systematic procedures. Covert resistance tends to be a slow rejection movement by considering forms of resistance, achievement and determination of individual attitudes in organizing the desire and ability to resist.

Covert Resistance

In this movie, there is a lot of evidence showing that hidden resistance is carried out more than public resistance. hidden resistance is carried out by women by discussing in hayloft, where they are free to express their opinions, their hearts and their worries. One of the most pivotal scenes in *Women Talking* is the moment when the women gather in the hayloft to cast a vote on three possible responses to the sexual violence. The scene when the two elderly grandmothers, four adult women and two 15-year-old girls discuss their lives. They have suffered: do nothing, stay and fight, or leave the colony.

Figure 3 (00:18:06)



Source <https://www.primevideo.com/>

The form of resistance demonstrated by the women to protect themselves from sexual violence is a covert resistance, carried out through private discussions in a secluded space commonly referred to as the hayloft. According to Scott (1985), covert resistance is a form of opposition practiced by individuals through less systematic procedures. This type of resistance tends to be a gradual rejection, shaped by careful consideration of possible actions, desired outcomes, and the individual's capacity to organize both intention and effort. As depicted in the film, the women deliberately choose to engage in discussion as a strategic form of resistance. Within the confines of a patriarchal religious community, the choice of covert resistance appears to be a rational response, as the women lack the time, resources, and social power to enact direct and open opposition to sexual violence. Therefore, covert resistance through dialogue, prayer, and expressions of suppressed anger becomes a realistic and logical path to avoid further threats of violence. The women secretly gather in a hayloft to deliberate a critical decision: whether to stay, fight, or leave their community following repeated incidents of sexual violence perpetrated by the men of the colony. Here is some dialogue evidence from the discussion that shows covert resistance in the form of a hidden transcript of anger and disguised discourses.

Ona: “We are not animals. We have been attacked by those we trusted. We are here to decide what to do about it.” (00:20:18).

In this dialogue, Ona expresses that they have been treated not as human beings, but as objects, violated at will even by those meant to protect them, such as family members, husbands, and religious leaders. Women who experience sexual violence are often regarded as passive and weak objects, whose voices are systematically ignored (Wahid, 2017). This reflects a condition in which women are stripped of autonomy over their bodies and their voices, motivating them to reclaim control over their lives. In religious communities, women are traditionally taught to trust and obey men as leaders. When Ona says, "We have been attacked by those we trusted," she reveals how that trust has been weaponized to facilitate systemic and repeated acts of violence. Her concluding statement, "We are here to decide what to do about it," clearly signals their awareness of having been oppressed by those they once trusted. Now, they are collectively taking steps to resist. However, given the deeply entrenched patriarchal system, the women opt for a hidden form of resistance, engaging in secret deliberations as a strategic and protective measure.

Autje: *The vote was tied between staying and fighting or leaving. So three families including yours and mine relucted to decide what the women of the colony would do. (00:18:46)*

Religious communities often have teachings and evidence of faith that is to live life as taught by God (Vander, 2017). Greta says that "leaving is how we show our faith" because usually in religious communities like the one depicted in the movie, faith is often measured by how obedient a woman is to the rules made by men. They are taught that obeying their husbands, not disputing religious leaders, and staying even when hurt are proof of faith. But here, Greta turns it all upside down: she says that "*by leaving, they show greater faith.*" So, she is challenging the teachings that have bound women. And it's a very powerful form of resistance, albeit delivered quietly. Scott (1985), states that it is possible to resist without shouting and rebel in ways that are not always visible but have a great impact. Greta also states that their faith is "*bigger than the rules, bigger than our lives.*" Here she shows that the meaning of faith, which has been used as a tool of oppression, becomes a tool of resistance.

In addition, when the women gathered in the hayloft and discussed their plans to leave the colony, the old grandmother said,

Greta: *"Leaving is how we demonstrate our faith. We are leaving because our faith is stronger than the rules. Bigger than our life." (00:46:27)*

Religious communities often have teachings and evidence of faith that encourage living life as taught by God (Vander, 2017). Greta says that "leaving is how we show our faith" because usually in religious communities like the one depicted in the movie, faith is often measured by how obedient a woman is to the rules made by men. They are taught that obeying their husbands, not disputing religious leaders, and staying even when hurt are proof of faith. But here Greta turns it all upside down: she says that "*by leaving, they show greater faith.*" So, she is challenging the teachings that have bound women. And it's a very powerful form of resistance, albeit delivered quietly. Scott (1985) states that it is possible to resist without shouting and rebel in ways that are not always visible but have a great impact. Greta also states that their faith is "*bigger than the rules, bigger than our lives.*" Here, she shows that the meaning of faith, which has been used as a tool of oppression, becomes a tool of resistance.

Public Resistance

One scene illustrates the public resistance to sexual violence. The last one that stands out is at the end of the film when a line of buggies leaves the colony.

Figure 4 (01:21:46)



Source <https://www.primevideo.com/>

Public and collective resistance refers to quiet, prolonged, yet widespread acts carried out by ordinary people as a means of survival and improving their lives. This type of resistance is marked by slow, silent mobilization and long-term collective action (Bayat, 2000). The scene depicts a group of women and children walking or riding horse-drawn carriages along a dirt road between fields. The aerial camera angle shows many of them leaving their religious community together. The long line of carriages and walking figures symbolizes the strength of solidarity and collective courage. They resist by quietly leaving the place without the knowledge of the authorities or religious leaders. The open road ahead represents a new path in life, uncertain but consciously chosen. For years, the women in this community have endured systemic sexual violence, hidden beneath religious teachings that demanded they forgive their abusers, carry the shame, and remain silent.

Scott (1989) acknowledges that there are moments when hidden resistance becomes public and collective. This scene portrays a form of public resistance, as the women collectively decide to leave the community. After long and difficult discussions about their options to *do nothing, fight back, or leave the colony*, they ultimately chose to leave, taking their daughters with them in search of a better future. Leaving the community is not just a physical act, but a total rejection of the patriarchal and religious system that has controlled their bodies, rights, and choices. As Scott (1985) describes, this is a form of declared resistance an open defiance of domination. They are no longer hiding or speaking in secret within a hayloft; instead, they are taking visible and direct action to move toward a new world, one that is not shaped by the old rules.

CONCLUSION

The findings in this film, that the representation of sexual violence is not shown explicitly, but is built through narration, dialogue, and visual symbols. Sexual violence that occurs as a systemic practice is perpetuated by the power structure in a very patriarchal religious community. Women in the community are raped when unconscious; they are drugged using animal drugs and then raped by men in the community. This violence has been repeated for generations, and is organized by a group of men, protected by the social structure of society, where sexual violence is represented as a means of control over women's bodies and dignity. Therefore, resistance emerges in the form of closed resistance and public resistance. Closed resistance that they do by discussing in a room that is not known by the leadership apparatus, this resistance takes the form of hidden transcripts such as sentences that show anger, disguised discourses, cutting of respect for the authorities, and fighting. Meanwhile, open or public resistance is carried out openly, which can influence a group to get their rights. After a long discussion about how they should fight back to get a better life, they collectively finally chose to leave the community with their children.

James Scott's Resistance Theory is used to analyze the film Women Talking, and the results show that the film effectively portrays women's resistance to sexual violence in a closed and oppressive patriarchal culture. The film emphasizes how women are not only victims of sexual violence, but also as proactive changes who fight for justice, rights, and autonomy of their bodies through scenes, character dialogues, and narratives. The film emphasizes how women are not only victims of sexual violence, but also as proactive changes who fight for justice, rights, and autonomy of their bodies through scenes, character dialogues, and narratives. Through conversations and situations that symbolize group decisions, women collectively plan their resistance and

refuse to remain in subservient roles. This emphasizes the importance of systemic change and resistance to male dominance.

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