



REPRESENTING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH KEY VISUAL ELEMENTS IN WICKED (2024): A BARTHESIAN SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Films do more than entertain; they also shape public understanding of social issues, including gender equality and women's empowerment. As a contemporary fantasy musical, *Wicked* (2024) offers a compelling portrayal of two female protagonists whose contrasting experiences of discrimination, identity, and friendship gradually evolve into a shared journey of empowerment. This study aims to explore how women's empowerment is represented through the film's key visual elements and narrative development. Using a qualitative descriptive design with a semiotic approach, the study examines selected scenes, dialogues, songs, and cinematic techniques through the concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth. The findings indicate that women's empowerment is portrayed not as an immediate achievement but as a continuous process shaped by marginalization, self-acceptance, resistance to social prejudice, and mutual support. Cinematic elements, including costume, lighting, camera angles, movement, and visual symbolism, reinforce the transformation of the protagonists from social exclusion to confidence and agency. The study concludes that *Wicked* reconstructs the meaning of women's empowerment by presenting resilience, authentic identity, and female solidarity as forces that challenge conventional expectations of femininity and authority. These findings demonstrate how semiotic analysis can uncover the ideological meanings embedded in contemporary cinematic representations of women while contributing to broader discussions in film, media, and cultural studies.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment; Semiotic Analysis; Cinematic Representation; Female Solidarity, *Wicked* Film (or *Wicked* 2024)

Abstrak

Film tidak hanya sekadar menghibur; film juga membentuk pemahaman publik tentang isu-isu sosial, termasuk kesetaraan gender dan pemberdayaan perempuan. Sebagai film musikal fantasi kontemporer, *Wicked* (2024) menawarkan penggambaran yang memikat tentang dua protagonis perempuan dengan pengalaman yang kontras terkait diskriminasi, identitas, dan persahabatan, yang secara bertahap berkembang menjadi perjalanan pemberdayaan bersama. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana pemberdayaan perempuan direpresentasikan melalui elemen-elemen visual utama dan perkembangan naratif film tersebut. Menggunakan desain kualitatif deskriptif dengan pendekatan semiotika, penelitian ini mengkaji adegan, dialog, lagu, dan teknik sinematik terpilih melalui konsep denotasi, konotasi, dan mitos. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pemberdayaan perempuan digambarkan bukan sebagai pencapaian instan, melainkan sebagai proses berkelanjutan yang dibentuk oleh marginalisasi, penerimaan diri, perlawanan terhadap prasangka sosial, dan dukungan timbal balik. Elemen-elemen sinematik, termasuk kostum, pencahayaan, sudut kamera, pergerakan, dan simbolisme visual, memperkuat transformasi para protagonis dari eksklusi sosial menuju kepercayaan diri dan kemandirian bertindak (*agency*). Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa *Wicked* merekonstruksi makna pemberdayaan perempuan dengan menyajikan ketangguhan, identitas autentik, dan solidaritas perempuan sebagai kekuatan yang menantang ekspektasi konvensional mengenai femininitas dan otoritas. Temuan-temuan ini menunjukkan bagaimana analisis semiotika dapat mengungkap makna ideologis yang tertanam dalam representasi sinematik kontemporer tentang perempuan, sekaligus memberikan kontribusi pada diskusi yang lebih luas dalam kajian film, media, dan budaya.

Kata Kunci: Pemberdayaan Perempuan; Analisis Semiotika; Representasi Sinematik; Solidaritas Perempuan, Film *Wicked*



INTRODUCTION

Films have long functioned as more than a form of entertainment; they also serve as cultural texts that reflect, negotiate, and shape social values. Through the interaction of visual, narrative, and symbolic elements, films influence how audiences understand issues related to identity, power, and social relationships. As a form of popular culture, cinema not only mirrors existing realities but also participates in constructing meanings that may reinforce or challenge dominant ideologies. One of the issues that continues to receive scholarly attention is the representation of women, particularly the ways films portray women's roles, identities, and agency within society. While female characters have traditionally been associated with conventional expectations of beauty, obedience, and emotional dependence, contemporary cinema increasingly presents women as active individuals capable of resisting these limitations and redefining their own identities. This shift reflects broader discussions on gender equality and women's empowerment, where empowerment is understood not as a fixed achievement but as a dynamic process of negotiating identity, autonomy, and social recognition (Butler, 2004; Hall, 1997; Mohanty, 2003).

Among recent films that engage with these issues, *Wicked* (2024) provides a compelling example of how women's empowerment can be represented through cinematic storytelling. Adapted from the acclaimed Broadway musical, the film reimagines the familiar narrative of *The Wizard of Oz* by placing two female protagonists, Elphaba and Glinda, at the center of the story. Rather than portraying them as simple opposites, the film explores how their contrasting experiences gradually shape their understanding of themselves and each other. Elphaba experiences exclusion because of her physical appearance and refusal to conform to social expectations, whereas Glinda benefits from privilege associated with beauty, popularity, and social acceptance. Instead of allowing these differences to create a permanent division, *Wicked* develops their relationship into one characterized by empathy, mutual respect, and collective growth. Through this progression, the film presents women's empowerment not as the result of individual achievement alone but as a process that emerges through discrimination, self-discovery, resilience, and solidarity. Consequently, the film offers an opportunity to examine how cinematic representation communicates broader cultural meanings concerning femininity, identity, and power.

Although *Wicked* has attracted increasing scholarly and public interest, previous research has primarily emphasized its literary adaptation, musical performance, characterization, and feminist themes. These studies have contributed valuable insights into the narrative and ideological dimensions of the film, yet relatively limited attention has been given to the role of cinematic language in constructing the meaning of women's empowerment. Visual elements such as costume, lighting, framing, color composition, camera movement, body positioning, and facial expression are often discussed as supporting components of the narrative, even though they function as meaningful signs that actively shape audience

interpretation. This limitation highlights an important research gap. Examining the film solely through its narrative may explain what happens to the characters, but it does not fully reveal how visual representation contributes to the production of meaning. Therefore, a semiotic perspective becomes essential because it enables the analysis of both explicit and implicit meanings embedded within cinematic signs. Roland Barthes' concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth provide an appropriate analytical framework for explaining how visual elements extend beyond their literal functions and communicate broader ideological values related to gender and women's empowerment (Barthes, 1972).



Figure 1. *Wicked* movie poster

Based on this context, the present study addresses the following research question: How is women's empowerment represented through the key visual elements in *Wicked* (2024)? To answer this question, the study aims to analyze and interpret the representation of women's empowerment by examining selected scenes through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. The analysis focuses on key cinematic elements, including mise-en-scène, cinematography, character movement, dialogue, and visual symbolism, to identify how these elements interact in producing cultural meanings. Rather than treating cinematic techniques as purely aesthetic features, this study considers them as interconnected signs that communicate ideas about identity, power, resistance, and female agency throughout the narrative.

This study contributes to the fields of English Literature, Media Studies, and Cultural Studies by expanding current discussions on women's representation in contemporary cinema through a semiotic perspective. Unlike earlier studies that primarily concentrate on narrative structure or feminist interpretation, this research demonstrates how visual language actively participates in constructing ideological meanings and shaping audience understanding of women's empowerment. By integrating Barthes' semiotic theory with cinematic analysis, the study illustrates that meaning is produced not only through dialogue or plot but also through the interaction of visual signs that reflect and question dominant cultural assumptions. Furthermore, the findings are expected to enrich academic discussions on the relationship between film, representation, and gender while demonstrating the relevance of semiotic analysis in examining contemporary popular culture. In doing so, this study offers a broader



understanding of how films such as *Wicked* simultaneously reflect existing social values and encourage audiences to reconsider established perspectives on femininity, identity, and power.

RESEARCH METHODE

This study employed a qualitative research design using a semiotic approach to investigate how women's empowerment is represented in *Wicked* (2024). Rather than examining audience perceptions or relying on quantitative measurements, the study focused on interpreting the meanings embedded in the film's visual and narrative elements. The research was conducted through textual and visual analysis, treating the film as a cultural text that communicates ideological meanings through cinematic representation. By adopting this approach, the study sought to understand not only what is portrayed in the film but also how those representations construct broader ideas about gender, identity, and women's empowerment.

The primary object of this research was *Wicked* (2024), directed by Jon M. Chu, while the units of analysis consisted of selected scenes involving the two main female characters, Elphaba and Glinda. These scenes were purposively selected because they directly reflected the research focus, particularly moments illustrating discrimination, identity formation, resistance, self-acceptance, friendship, and female solidarity. Instead of analyzing every scene in the film, the study concentrated on sequences that contained significant visual and narrative signs related to the construction of women's empowerment. This purposive selection allowed the analysis to remain focused on scenes that most effectively represented the development of the two protagonists throughout the narrative.

The data comprised both visual and verbal materials obtained directly from the film. Visual data included screenshots, costume design, makeup, lighting, color composition, camera angles, framing, character positioning, facial expressions, gestures, and movement. Verbal data consisted of dialogues, song lyrics, and narrative interactions that supported the visual interpretation. Data collection was carried out by repeatedly watching the film to gain a comprehensive understanding of its narrative structure and visual language. During this process, scenes relevant to the research objectives were identified, documented, and categorized according to recurring themes related to women's empowerment. Each selected scene was then organized systematically to facilitate a more in-depth interpretation of the relationship between visual signs and narrative context.

The collected data were analyzed using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, which examines meaning through the interconnected stages of denotation, connotation, and myth. The analysis began by identifying the literal meanings of visual and verbal signs appearing in each selected scene. These signs were subsequently interpreted to explore the cultural and symbolic meanings conveyed through cinematic elements such as costume, lighting, framing, movement, and dialogue. Finally, the analysis examined how these recurring signs contribute to the construction of broader ideological meanings concerning women's empowerment. Rather than treating cinematic techniques as purely aesthetic components, this study interpreted them as meaningful representations that communicate cultural values and social expectations. Through this analytical process, the research demonstrates that *Wicked* portrays women's empowerment as an evolving journey shaped by marginalization, identity negotiation, resilience, and female solidarity, rather than as an individual achievement detached from social and cultural contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Marginalization as the Starting Point of Women's Empowerment

The findings reveal that *Wicked* (2024) constructs women's empowerment as a gradual and evolving process rather than an achievement that occurs instantly. Instead of portraying empowerment as a reward granted to exceptional individuals, the film presents it as something that develops through personal struggles, social exclusion, and emotional growth. This representation is primarily conveyed through the contrasting experiences of Elphaba and Glinda, whose different social positions shape the ways they understand themselves and respond to the expectations imposed upon them. While Elphaba is consistently marginalized because of her green skin and unconventional appearance, Glinda enjoys admiration and acceptance for embodying the dominant ideals of beauty, elegance, and femininity. Their contrasting experiences establish the narrative foundation upon which the film explores different pathways toward empowerment.

From a semiotic perspective, Elphaba's green skin initially functions as a denotative sign that distinguishes her from others. However, its meaning extends beyond physical appearance as the narrative progresses. At the connotative level, her appearance symbolizes exclusion, prejudice, and the social rejection experienced by individuals who fail to meet dominant cultural expectations. As the story unfolds, these meanings gradually shift, transforming her difference into a representation of authenticity, resilience, and moral integrity. The myth constructed through this transformation challenges the cultural assumption that women must conform to socially accepted standards of beauty to gain recognition or authority. Instead of presenting physical difference as a weakness, the film redefines it as a source of personal strength and ethical leadership.

Table 1. Role Levels

1. <i>signifier</i> (penanda)	2. <i>signified</i> (konotasi)
3. <i>denotative sign</i> (tanda denotatif)	
4. <i>CONNOTATIVE SIGNIFIER</i> (PENANDA KONOTATIF)	5. <i>CONNOTATIVE SIGNIFIED</i> (PETAJASA KONOTATIF)
6. <i>connotative sign</i> (tanda konotatif)	



Figure 2. Visual representation of Elphaba and Glinda

Glinda undergoes a different yet equally significant transformation. Her social privilege initially positions her as the embodiment of conventional femininity, where popularity and external approval appear to define success. As she becomes increasingly aware of the inequalities experienced by Elphaba, however, her understanding of identity and power begins to change. Rather than maintaining the unquestioned privileges associated with her social status, Glinda gradually recognizes the importance of empathy, responsibility, and moral courage. Her development suggests that empowerment is not solely achieved through resistance to discrimination but can also emerge from the willingness to question inherited beliefs and acknowledge structural injustice.

These findings demonstrate that *Wicked* moves beyond the familiar opposition between the "ideal woman" and the "outsider." Instead of preserving this binary, the film gradually blurs the boundaries between both identities, showing that neither privilege nor marginalization alone determines a woman's agency. Empowerment is represented as a continuous negotiation between individual identity and social expectations, allowing both protagonists to redefine themselves through their choices rather than through labels imposed by society. This interpretation contributes to broader discussions of women's representation by suggesting that empowerment is not defined by social acceptance but by the ability to transform lived experiences into personal agency. Consequently, the film presents marginalization not merely as a condition of exclusion but also as the starting point for resistance, self-determination, and meaningful social change.

4.2 Cinematic Representation of Women's Empowerment

The analysis further demonstrates that the representation of women's empowerment in *Wicked* is communicated not only through narrative development but also through the deliberate use of cinematic language. Visual elements including costume, lighting, framing, camera angles, movement, composition, and color function as interconnected signs that shape the audience's understanding of each character's emotional and ideological journey. Rather than serving as decorative features, these cinematic techniques actively construct meanings that reinforce the film's broader discourse on identity, gender, and power.

Throughout the film, Elphaba is repeatedly framed in darker visual environments characterized by low-key lighting, muted color palettes, and isolated compositions. These cinematic choices emphasize her social alienation while visually reinforcing the emotional burden created by discrimination. Her costumes, often dominated by darker tones, further distinguish her from the brightly dressed students around her, symbolizing both her separation from dominant social norms and her refusal to conceal her authentic identity. In contrast, Glinda is consistently associated with high-key lighting, pastel costumes, symmetrical framing, and graceful body movements that visually communicate confidence, privilege, and social acceptance. These opposing visual representations immediately establish contrasting identities while illustrating the unequal standards through which women are perceived and valued within society.



Figure 3. Elphaba and Glinda at the Ozdust Ballroom in the *Wicked* (2024) film

As the relationship between the two protagonists develops, the visual language of the film also undergoes a noticeable transformation. Shared framing, balanced compositions, and warmer lighting increasingly replace the earlier visual separation, reflecting the growing emotional connection between Elphaba and Glinda. Similarly, camera positioning gradually shifts to emphasize Elphaba's increasing confidence and authority. Low-angle shots, particularly during significant moments of resistance, no longer portray vulnerability but instead reinforce her determination and moral conviction. These visual transitions demonstrate that empowerment is communicated not only through character development but also through the evolving interaction of cinematic signs that guide the audience's interpretation.

From Barthes' semiotic perspective, these cinematic elements operate simultaneously at multiple levels of meaning. At the denotative level, they simply depict costumes, lighting, movement, and camera placement. At the connotative level, however, these elements communicate emotional states, social hierarchies, and ideological conflicts surrounding femininity and authority. Finally, the myth produced through these recurring visual patterns challenges conventional assumptions regarding who deserves visibility, recognition, and leadership. Rather than reinforcing dominant cultural ideals, the film reconstructs these values by demonstrating that courage, authenticity, and moral integrity are more significant than



physical appearance or social popularity. Consequently, *Wicked* illustrates how cinematic language itself becomes an essential medium for communicating women's empowerment, extending the discussion beyond narrative content toward the ideological functions of visual representation.

4.3 Female Solidarity as a New Meaning of Women's Empowerment

Perhaps the most significant finding of this study is that *Wicked* reconstructs the meaning of women's empowerment through female solidarity rather than individual competition. At the beginning of the narrative, Elphaba and Glinda appear to embody opposing identities, making conflict between them seem unavoidable. Their contrasting personalities, appearances, and social positions initially reinforce the familiar cultural expectation that women compete for acceptance, popularity, and recognition. As the narrative progresses, however, this relationship gradually shifts from misunderstanding to empathy, from rivalry to cooperation, and from social distance to emotional support.



Figure 4. Visual representation of female solidarity and mutual support

This transformation carries broader ideological significance than the development of friendship alone. Through shared experiences and mutual understanding, both characters begin to question the gender expectations that previously shaped their identities. Elphaba learns that accepting her differences provides greater strength than seeking external approval, while Glinda realizes that popularity without empathy offers limited personal fulfillment. Their friendship therefore becomes a process of reciprocal empowerment, in which each character's growth is made possible through the presence and support of the other. Rather than diminishing individual agency, solidarity strengthens their ability to challenge injustice and redefine their own identities.

From a semiotic perspective, this progression represents a transformation at the level of myth. Female friendship is no longer portrayed as secondary to romantic relationships or individual success but instead functions as the central force driving both personal and social transformation. The film challenges the cultural assumption that women naturally compete for beauty, power, or social recognition by presenting cooperation as a more meaningful source of empowerment. At the same time, *Wicked* avoids

replacing one stereotype with another. Glinda continues to represent conventional femininity, whereas Elphaba remains visibly different throughout the narrative. Instead of eliminating these differences, the film demonstrates that contrasting identities can coexist without preventing mutual respect and collaboration.

These findings contribute to ongoing discussions in English Literature, Media Studies, and Cultural Studies by illustrating that women's empowerment is not represented as a singular or universal experience. Rather, it emerges through the interaction between identity, social context, and interpersonal relationships. By integrating Barthes' semiotic framework with cinematic analysis, this study demonstrates that visual representation functions as an active producer of cultural meaning rather than a passive reflection of reality. Ultimately, *Wicked* suggests that empowerment is not measured by social recognition alone but by the capacity to embrace difference, challenge restrictive norms, and build solidarity that enables women to negotiate power on their own terms.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how women's empowerment is represented through the key visual elements in *Wicked* (2024) by applying Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. The findings reveal that the film constructs empowerment through the interconnected experiences of marginalization, identity formation, resistance, and female solidarity. Instead of presenting empowerment as a destination reached through individual success, *Wicked* portrays it as a continuous journey shaped by social challenges, personal growth, and supportive relationships. The analysis further demonstrates that cinematic elements including costume, lighting, framing, camera angles, movement, and visual symbolism do more than strengthen the narrative; they function as meaningful signs that communicate broader cultural ideas about femininity, beauty, and power. In doing so, the study answers the research question by showing that visual representation plays a significant role in shaping the meaning of women's empowerment. These findings also contribute to the fields of English Literature, Media Studies, and Cultural Studies by illustrating how semiotic analysis can uncover the ideological meanings embedded in contemporary cinema and deepen scholarly discussions on the representation of women in popular culture.

While this study provides a detailed interpretation of women's empowerment in *Wicked* (2024), its scope is limited to a single film and to the analysis of selected visual and narrative elements through Barthes' semiotic perspective. Therefore, the findings should be

understood within the context of this particular film rather than as a universal representation of women's empowerment in cinema. Future studies could broaden this discussion by examining films from different genres or cultural backgrounds, or by integrating semiotic analysis with audience reception, feminist criticism, or other interdisciplinary approaches. Such perspectives would offer a richer understanding of how cinematic representations of women both reflect existing social values and encourage



new ways of interpreting identity, agency, and gender in contemporary society.

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