

# Narrative and Ideology in the Novel Dream of the Red Chamber: A Critical Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

**Keywords:**

*Narrative, Ideology,  
Literary criticism,  
Feudalism,  
Patriarchy,  
Confucianism*

This study aims to examine the narrative and ideology contained in the classic Chinese novel Dream of the Red Chamber by Cao Xueqin through a critical analysis approach. This novel is a monumental literary work that not only presents the story of the life of an aristocratic family, but also reflects the social structure, cultural values, and ideology that developed during the Qing Dynasty. The research method used is descriptive qualitative with text analysis techniques. Data in the form of narrative excerpts containing ideological elements in the novel are analyzed using a literary criticism approach that focuses on the relationship between text, power, and social structure. The results show that the narrative in Dream of the Red Chamber contains various ideologies, such as feudalism, patriarchy, and Confucian values that dominate the lives of the characters. In addition, there is an implicit criticism of the rigid social system through the depiction of internal conflict, gender inequality, and the decline of aristocratic families. The narrative constructed not only functions as a storytelling medium, but also as a means to represent and simultaneously question the ideology that prevailed in Chinese society at that time. Thus, this study confirms that Dream of the Red Chamber is a literary work rich in ideological content and critical of social reality. This study is expected to contribute to the development of literary studies, particularly in understanding the relationship between narrative and ideology in classical Chinese literature.

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## INTRODUCTION

Literature, as a cultural product, functions not only as an aesthetic medium but also as a representation of social realities and ideologies developing in society. Literary works often contain values, norms, and belief systems that reflect the social and cultural conditions of their time. According to (Eagleton, 2011), literature is never value-free but is always bound by the underlying ideology. Therefore, analysis of literary works requires considering the ideological aspects contained within them.

One of the works of classical Chinese literature rich in ideological content is Cao Xueqin's novel "Dream of the Red Chamber." This novel is known as one of the four great works of classical Chinese literature, depicting the life of an aristocratic family during the Qing Dynasty. In addition to presenting a story of love and family life, the novel also represents the social structure, power relations, and dominant cultural values of the time. According to (Wang, 2012), "Dream of the Red Chamber" functions not only as a work of literature but also as a social document reflecting the complexities of life in traditional Chinese society.

In literary studies, the relationship between narrative and ideology is a crucial focus in understanding the deeper meaning of a text. Narrative functions not only as a storyline but also as a medium for conveying ideology. (Fairclough, 2013) states that language and narrative within a text play a role in shaping and reproducing certain ideologies. Therefore, analysing narratives in literary works can reveal how ideologies are constructed, maintained, or even criticized.

In addition to serving as social reflections, literary works also have an ideological function that plays a role in shaping readers' perspectives on reality. Ideology in literature is not always conveyed explicitly but is often implied through the narrative, characters, conflicts, and symbols constructed within the text. In this regard, (Althusser, 2014) asserts that ideology operates subtly through various cultural practices, including literature, which functions as a means of reproducing dominant values in society. Thus, literary works can serve as a means of legitimizing and critiquing prevailing social systems.

A critical analysis approach is used in this study to examine the relationship between narrative and ideology in the novel "Dream of the Red Chamber". Critical analysis, particularly one rooted in critical thinking and ideological theory, aims to uncover hidden power relations within the text. According to (Tyson, 2015), ideological literary criticism seeks to explore how literary works reflect and influence prevailing social structures and ideologies. In this context, the ideologies in question include value systems such as feudalism, patriarchy, and Confucianism, which were strong in traditional Chinese society.

Furthermore, Confucianism, as a central value system in Chinese culture, has a significant influence on character development and social relations in literary works. According to (Bell, 2010), Confucianism emphasizes social hierarchy, harmony, and the individual's moral obligation to family and society. These values are reflected in the relationships between the characters in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, particularly in family structure and gender relations. Furthermore, the novel also demonstrates a critique of this system through the conflicts and tragedies experienced by its characters.

In the context of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the narrative not only depicts the life of an aristocratic family but also demonstrates the complex dynamics of power and social inequality. The hierarchical feudal family structure serves as the primary space for power relations between men and women, young and old, and nobles and servants. According to (Liu, 2013), the novel implicitly demonstrates how China's feudal system experienced decadence through internal family conflict and the breakdown of traditional values.

Furthermore, analysis of narratives in literary works can be conducted through a critical discourse approach that positions language as a social practice. (Fairclough, 2013) explains that texts do not stand alone but are connected to broader social practices and power structures. In the novel "*Dream of the Red Chamber*," the narrative language used by the author can be understood as a medium that both represents and constructs social reality. Therefore, narrative analysis focuses not only on the story structure but also on how ideological meaning is produced through language.

On the other hand, gender issues also play a crucial role in ideological readings of this novel. The female characters in "*Dream of the Red Chamber*" are often placed in subordinate positions within a patriarchal social structure. However, the author also provides space for female characters to express resistance, both directly and symbolically. According to (Tong, 2014), feminist studies in literature can reveal how texts represent gender inequality and open up the possibility of critical interpretations of patriarchal domination.

Furthermore, an ideological approach to literature cannot be separated from the historical context. The Qing Dynasty, the social setting in this novel, was a period marked by the strength of the feudal system and Confucian values. In this regard, history plays a crucial role in influencing the narrative construction within the text. (Greenblatt, 2013), using a new historicism approach, emphasizes that literary works are part of a network of historical discourses that interact with social, political, and cultural forces. Therefore, understanding the historical context is crucial in uncovering the ideology contained within literary works.

Several previous studies have examined "*Dream of the Red Chamber*" from various perspectives, such as structural, feminist, and sociological studies. However, studies specifically examining the relationship between narrative and ideology through a critical analysis approach are still relatively limited. Therefore, this research is crucial to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how ideology is represented in classical Chinese literary narratives.

The urgency of this research lies in its effort to critically uncover how the narrative in "*Dream of the Red Chamber*" not only represents social reality but also contains ideology that functions as a tool for reflection and criticism. In the context of modern literary studies, ideological analysis is increasingly important because it can open up broader scope for interpreting literary texts. Furthermore, this research also contributes to enriching the relatively limited field of Chinese literary studies in Indonesia, particularly from a critical analysis perspective.

Thus, this research focuses not only on the narrative aspect as a story structure, but also on its ideological practice that represents power relations in society. Through a critical analysis approach, this research is expected to uncover layers of meaning hidden

within the text and provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between literature, ideology, and social reality.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyse the narrative form and uncover the ideology contained in Cao Xueqin's novel "Dream of the Red Chamber." By using a critical analysis approach, this research is expected to contribute to the development of literary studies, particularly in understanding the relationship between literary texts, ideology, and sociocultural structures.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical method to examine the narrative and ideology in Cao Xueqin's novel "Dream of the Red Chamber." A qualitative approach was chosen because this research focuses on interpreting the meaning contained in literary texts, particularly those related to narrative structure and ideological content. According to (Moleong, 2017), qualitative research aims to understand phenomena in depth through the analysis of descriptive data. The data in this study consist of text excerpts containing elements of narrative and ideology, such as dialogue, character descriptions, and events reflecting power relations in the novel.

The primary data source for this research is Cao Xueqin's novel "Dream of the Red Chamber" in relevant Indonesian and English translations. Data collection techniques were conducted through literature review, involving intensive reading, note-taking, and classification of sections of the text containing ideological elements. Furthermore, the data were analysed using content analysis techniques to identify narrative patterns related to ideologies such as feudalism, patriarchy, and Confucian values.

A critical analysis approach was used to uncover the relationship between narrative and ideology in the text. This analysis refers to (Fairclough's, 2013) view that texts are part of social practices inextricably linked to power structures and ideology. Therefore, the analysis is conducted by interpreting how the narrative in the novel shapes, represents, and critiques the ideology that developed in Chinese society during the Qing Dynasty. Furthermore, the theory of ideology in literature, as proposed by (Tyson, 2015), is used to identify the forms of ideology implied in the text.

The data analysis technique is carried out through several stages: (1) data reduction by selecting relevant quotations, (2) presenting the data in the form of analytical descriptions, and (3) drawing conclusions based on the ideological patterns found in the text. To maintain data validity, this study utilizes theoretical triangulation by comparing various concepts from relevant experts. With this method, the research is expected to produce a systematic, in-depth, and scientifically sound analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of Cao Xueqin's novel "Dream of the Red Chamber," it was found that the narrative contains various forms of ideology represented through the story structure, characterization, and the conflicts that develop. These ideologies not only serve as a social setting but also as a force that shapes the narrative direction and character development. The dominant ideologies found include feudalism, patriarchy, and Confucian values.

### **Feudal Ideology in the Narrative**

The feudal ideology in this novel is reflected through the hierarchical social structure within the Jia family. The noble family is depicted as wielding great power, while the servants and lower classes are held in subordinate positions. The narrative shows how this power is exercised through generations and becomes a system that is difficult to change.

For example, in one part of the story, it is depicted how family decisions rest entirely with the character with the highest social status. This indicates that social relations in the novel are based on a rigid hierarchical system. According to (Tyson, 2015), the ideology of feudalism in literature is often depicted through the dominance of the upper class over the lower class, legitimized by tradition and culture. However, the novel also demonstrates a critique of this system through the decline and destruction of the noble family, which indicates the fragility of the feudal structure.

### **Patriarchal Ideology and Gender Relations**

Patriarchal ideology is one of the most prominent aspects of the novel “*Dream of the Red Chamber*.” Women in the story are generally placed in a subordinate position to men, both within the family and in society. They are expected to submit to family rules and fulfill domestic roles.

However, the narrative in this novel does not fully support patriarchal dominance. Some female characters are depicted as possessing more complex intelligence, sensitivity, and emotional strength than male characters. This demonstrates the ambivalence within the narrative, where on the one hand, patriarchy is represented as a dominant system, but on the other, it is also criticized through the experiences of the female characters.

According to (Tong, 2014), literary works often provide a space for exposing gender inequality while simultaneously opening up opportunities for resistance to patriarchal domination. In this context, *Dream of the Red Chamber* can be understood as a text that not only reproduces patriarchal ideology but also provides a space for critique.

### **Confucian Values in the Narrative**

Confucian values form a strong ideological foundation in this novel, particularly regarding family relationships, morality, and social obligations. Principles such as loyalty, respect for parents, and maintaining family harmony serve as primary guidelines in the characters' lives.

The narrative demonstrates that every character's actions are often influenced by Confucian norms. For example, young characters are expected to obey their parents' decisions and uphold the family's reputation. According to (Bell, 2010), Confucianism emphasizes the importance of social hierarchy and individual moral responsibility in maintaining societal stability.

However, the novel also depicts the conflict between individual desires and social demands. Characters who attempt to defy norms often face tragic consequences. This demonstrates the tension between individual freedom and ideological pressures within society.

### Narrative as a Medium for Ideological Critique

Besides representing ideology, the narrative in Dream of the Red Chamber also serves as a medium for criticizing the prevailing social system. The destruction of the Jia family symbolizes the collapse of the feudal system and the irrelevance of traditional values.

The author uses conflict, tragedy, and character development to demonstrate the weaknesses of this social system. In this regard, the narrative is not only descriptive but also reflective and critical. (Fairclough, 2013) states that texts can become arenas for ideological struggle, where various values and interests interact.

Thus, Dream of the Red Chamber not only depicts social reality but also offers a critique of it. The narrative in this novel opens up space for readers to understand the complexity of the relationship between individuals, society, and ideology.

**Table 1. Analysis of Narrative and Ideology in the Novel 红楼梦 (Dream of the Red Chamber)**

No	Chinese Quotes	Indonesian translation	Ideology	Ideological Meaning	Critical Analysis
1	贾府是一个显赫的大家族	Jia's family is big respected	Feudalism	Hierarchy social	Domination nobleman
2	家族等级十分严格	Structure very strict family	Feudalism	Stratification social	System class rigid
3	下人必须听从主人的命令	Waiter must obey the master	Feudalism	Subordination	Inequality power
4	女子应当守规矩	Women must guard rule	Patriarchy	Gender control	Restrictions Woman
5	子女必须孝顺父母	Children are required devoted to parents	Confucianism	Filial piety	Traditional morals
6	家族荣誉高于一切	Honor the family above everything	Confucianism	Collectivity	Pressing individual
7	女性聪慧而敏感	Smart and sensitive woman	Patriarchy (resistance)	Women's Potential	Criticism of patriarchy
8	身份差异导致冲突	Status differences trigger conflict	Feudalism	Stratification	Impact social
9	家族逐渐走向衰落	Family start experience decline	Feudalism	Decadence	System criticism

10	人物内心充满矛盾	Figure experience conflict inner	Confucianism	Moral pressure	Conflict individual
11	女性缺乏选择权	Women don't own choice	Patriarchy	Injustice	Domination man
12	为家庭牺牲个人幸福	Sacrifice happiness for the family	Confucianism	Social harmony	Pressure social
13	人物质疑传统制度	Figure questioning tradition	Ideology critical	Awareness social	Form resistance
14	贵族生活充满限制	Life nobleman full limitation	Feudalism	Control social	System closed
15	悲剧源于社会压力	Tragedy originates from pressure social	Ideology social	Impact ideology	Structural criticism

Based on the table above, it is clear that the narrative in the novel 红楼梦 (Dream of the Red Chamber) clearly represents various ideologies that developed in traditional Chinese society. Feudal ideology appears dominant through a strict family hierarchy and power relations between nobles and servants. Meanwhile, patriarchal ideology is reflected in the restrictions on women's roles, although there are indications of resistance through intelligent and critical female characters.

Confucian values also play a significant role in shaping the social structure and behaviour of the characters, particularly regarding moral obligation, family honour, and obedience. However, the pressure of this value system gives rise to deep inner conflict, ultimately leading to tragedy. This demonstrates the tension between the individual and the prevailing social system.

Interestingly, however, there is ambivalence in the text, where the dominant ideology is not only reproduced but also criticized. This demonstrates that literary works have the ability not only to reflect social reality but also to question and transform it.

These findings reinforce the view that literature is a dialectical space between power and resistance. Using a critical analysis approach, this study successfully reveals that "Dream of the Red Chamber" is a work rich in ideological meaning and highly relevant to modern literary studies.

Overall, the narrative in this novel functions not only as a means of ideological representation but also as a means of critique of a rigid and unjust social system. Thus, "Dream of the Red Chamber" can be understood as a literary work containing a critical reflection on the social and ideological realities of its time.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of Cao Xueqin's novel "*Dream of the Red Chamber*," it can be concluded that the narrative strongly represents various ideologies that developed in traditional Chinese society, particularly feudalism, patriarchy, and Confucianism. Feudalism is dominant through its hierarchical social structure and power relations, which place the nobility as the superior group, while the lower classes are subordinate.

Furthermore, patriarchal ideology is reflected in the restrictions on the roles and freedom of women, who often lack the freedom to make their own choices. However, the novel also presents a form of resistance to patriarchy through intelligent, sensitive, and critically aware female characters. Meanwhile, Confucian values, such as filial piety, family honor, and social harmony, serve as the moral foundation that governs the characters' lives, although in practice they often lead to inner conflict and psychological distress.

Thus, "*Dream of the Red Chamber*" is a literary work that possesses not only aesthetic value but also critical and reflective value regarding the socio-cultural conditions of its time. This study shows that the narrative and ideological analysis approach is able to reveal deep meanings in literary texts, as well as their relevance in understanding social and cultural dynamics more broadly.

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