

Bullying, Power Relation, and the Struggle for Justice: A Narrative Analysis of the Korean Drama Perfect Marriage Revenge

Filosa Gita Sukmono^{1*} and Muh Al Azhar Gobel¹

¹University of Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Abstract. This study aims to explain how repeated acts of bullying shape the narrative flow in the Korean drama Perfect Marriage Revenge. The method used is qualitative descriptive with a narrative approach through scene and dialogue analysis. The analysis was conducted by mapping A.J. Greimas actantial and functional structures accompanied by a semiotic square to clarify the layers of meaning. Michel Foucault's five propositions of power relations were used to understand how power works in the drama. The results of the study show that repeated bullying is the main driver of the plot, changing the position of the actants and triggering character transformation. The semiotic square analysis reveals the conflict of values that builds conflict and diffuse power relations and gives rise to resistance. This study confirms that repeated bullying is not only the backdrop of the story, but also shapes the narrative structure and character development.

1 Introduction

Bullying is an act of using power with the intention of hurting or harming others, carried out verbally or physically, which causes the victim to feel fear and be at risk of trauma [1]. This act also involves systematic and repeated violence intended to harm or exert control over another individual who is perceived as inferior [2]. Bullying in South Korea is recorded as one of the highest in the world, making the country closely associated with the frequent occurrence of such cases. Korean scholars have examined the relationship between family conflict and aggressive behavior among Korean adolescents. Their studies show that adolescents who experience high levels of family conflict are more vulnerable to aggressive behavior [3].

The frequent occurrence of bullying in society has inspired drama producers to represent how bullying takes place within their series [4]. This research is also relevant to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, which emphasizes the reduction of violence and the promotion of inclusive societies. Bullying is a form of symbolic and psychological violence that emerges within social relationships and often operates through unequal power structures. In the Korean drama Perfect Marriage Revenge, recurring acts of intimidation illustrate how practices of domination and injustice can be reproduced within social institutions such as the family.

* Corresponding author: filosa@umy.ac.id

By examining how bullying functions as the main driving force of the narrative structure and as a manifestation of power relations, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how narratives in media can represent violence, injustice, and resistance. In doing so, this study not only explores narrative structures in popular media such as the Korean drama *Perfect Marriage Revenge*, but also highlights how cultural texts can reflect and critically engage with issues related to social justice and violence prevention key concerns of Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. The phenomenon of bullying is widely represented in Korean dramas. However, unlike popular dramas such as *True Beauty* or *The Glory*, which portray school bullying, the Korean drama *Perfect Marriage Revenge* places bullying within the family sphere in the form of manipulation, neglect, and psychological control. Thus, both in the realm of film and digital streaming, audience enthusiasm is driven by socio-political contexts and opens opportunities to discover entertainment that is considered relevant [5]. Drama series also serve as learning tools that portray social realities and can influence and shape public perceptions of the messages and information presented within them [6].

Film as narration refers to a film that focuses on its elements to convey a sequence of stories [7]. Most popular Korean dramas that focus on the issue of bullying, such as *The Glory* and *True Beauty*, portray bullying within the school environment. What makes *Perfect Marriage Revenge* particularly interesting is its placement of the bullying issue within the family sphere, where the perpetrators are the main character's stepfamily. In this context, bullying plays a significant role in the transformation of the main character. Therefore, A.J. Greimas' narrative theory is used to explore more deeply how bullying is narrated through the relationships among actants.

Greimas focuses on narrative as a series of meaning structures [8]. The actantial structure is divided into six narrative functions known as the subject, object, sender, receiver, helper, and opponent. Actants refer to persons or entities that participate in an action [9]. Eriyanto (2018) further categorizes these roles as having structural relationships, namely: the relationship between subject and object, the relationship between sender and receiver, and the relationship between helper and opponent. [10]. In Greimas narrative structure theory, there is also a functional structure. The functional structure explains the role taken by the subject in carrying out the task assigned by the sender. This structure is divided into three parts: the initial situation, the transformation, and the final situation. The transformation stage consists of three phases: the competence stage, the performance stage, and the glorification stage [11].

Greimas' narrative theory states that the actantial structure and the functional structure are interconnected in building a narrative and forming the structure of a story. In this drama, acts of bullying are not viewed as incidental disturbances but rather as elements that connect the actants to one another. Therefore, the researcher argues that A.J. Greimas' narrative theory is highly suitable for this study, supported by the use of the semiotic square as an extended analytical framework derived from Greimas. Additionally, to understand how power operates through the relationships among actants, Michel Foucault's theory of power relations is also required.

To clarify the position of this study, several previous studies discussing bullying and narrative were examined to identify research gaps that have not been widely explored. A study conducted by Giani Saputri (2023) titled *narasi cyberbullying pada film budi pekerti 2023*, This study analyzes the narrative of cyberbullying by describing the types of cyberbullying using Tzvetan Todorov's analytical framework. Another study by Wannur et al. (2024) titled *dari layer ke hati: efektivitas nonton bareng dalam mengubah persepsi terhadap bullying dan narkoba di kalangan remaja*, focuses on adolescents' perceptions of bullying and how external influences from media content can shape or alter viewers' perceptions. The last study, conducted by Eka Sari and Jacky (2025), *bullying sebagai alat*

kekuasaan: studi pada drama Korea Pyramid Game dalam media sosial tiktok, which examines how digital spaces construct social narratives about power and domination in everyday life.

Through these three studies, the researcher finds that many previous works still position bullying as an independent social issue, focusing on its impacts or moral representations rather than on how bullying functions as a narrative-forming element, as a connector between actants, and as a trigger for power dynamics within a story. Therefore, this study offers novelty by using A.J. Greimas' narrative theory and Michel Foucault's theory of power relations as a new analytical perspective. The integration of these two theories views bullying not merely as an act of violence, but as a practice of power that shapes the narrative within a story.

This study aims to understand how repeated acts of bullying shape the narrative structure of the Korean drama *Perfect Marriage Revenge* through A.J. Greimas' actantial and functional analysis. This research is important because previous studies have mostly highlighted the psychological impact or visual representation of bullying, while its role as a narrative-driving force has rarely been examined. This study is expected to enrich narrative research in the field of communication, provide insight into how bullying narratives are constructed and sustained, and assist media practitioners in shaping representations of symbolic violence.

2 Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method with a narrative approach. The narrative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to explain how repeated acts of bullying shape the progression of the story, shift actantial positions, and drive character transformation. This approach is relevant for examining narrative processes that involve not only events but also the dynamics of meaning and power relations within the story. Data were collected through documentation techniques by gathering scenes, dialogues, and relevant sequences of events, as well as supporting literature. The data were analyzed using A.J. Greimas' narrative theory, which consists of the actantial structure, functional structure, and the semiotic square to uncover deeper layers of meaning. In addition, Michel Foucault's power relations were used to examine how power operates through five propositions in shaping positions of victimhood, domination, and resistance within the narrative.

Theoretical triangulation was conducted by examining the data through more than one theoretical perspective, namely A.J. Greimas' narrative theory consisting of the actantial structure, functional structure, and semiotic square and Michel Foucault's theory of power relations. By integrating these two theoretical frameworks, the analysis does not merely focus on the narrative structure, but also reveals how power relations operate within the narrative. The use of these two theoretical perspectives enables a more comprehensive and in-depth interpretation of the data. Data source triangulation was carried out by comparing various forms of data within the drama, such as dialogues, scenes, sequences of events, and relevant social contexts. The data were not drawn from a single scene alone rather; they were analyzed repeatedly across several episodes to ensure consistency in the patterns of bullying and character transformation.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Results

These results describe the research findings based on the analyses that have been conducted. All findings are presented in accordance with the analytical steps outlined in the method section. The findings show how repeated acts of bullying shape the development of the plot and the relationships among actants in the Korean drama Perfect Marriage Revenge.

3.1.1 Actantial structure

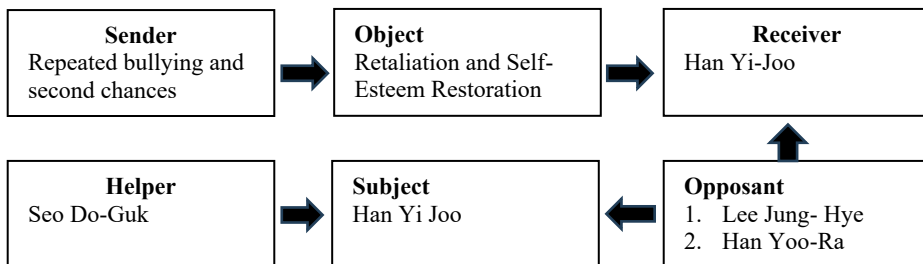


Fig. 1. Actantial schema in the Korean drama perfect marriage revenge

The analysis of the actantial structure (**Fig.1**) shows that the bullying experienced by Han Yi-Joo from the beginning of the episodes serves as the main driving force of the plot. In the initial stage, Yi-Joo occupies a passive position as the object of exclusion, manipulation, and neglect. This is evident in several dialogues from her stepfamily:

“You should know better when managing a gallery. This is very outdated. No one wants to hang paintings like this these days.” Episode 1, minute 21:96 - Lee Jung-Hye (Perfect Marriage Revenge, 2023).

“My older sister is not mentally stable. I’m not sure if I should say this, but she has a victim mentality.” Episode 3, minute 17:22 -Han Yoo-Ra (Perfect Marriage Revenge, 2023).

Through the dialogues and conditions described above, it is evident that Han Yi-Joo occupies the position of the oppressed, while her stepfamily functions as the opponents who strive to maintain their dominance. Yi-Joo’s position begins to shift when she becomes aware of her family’s betrayal and receives a second chance after her coma. At this point, the repeated bullying and the second chance act as the sender that triggers Yi-Joo’s transformation into an active subject. The object she pursues is revenge and the restoration of her dignity. Seo Do-Guk emerges as the helper who strengthens Yi-Joo’s strategies, as shown in the following dialogue:

“Tell me, what is the real reason you married me? Was it to take revenge on Han Yoo-Ra and Lee Jung-Hye?” Episode 2, minute 71:66 - Seo Do-Guk (Perfect Marriage Revenge, 2023).

3.1.2 Functional Structure

In A.J. Greimas’ narrative theory, the functional structure is also part of his overall narrative framework. According to Jaborahim, the functional structure explains the role taken by the subject in carrying out the task assigned by the sender [12]. The functional model is divided into three parts: the initial situation, the transformation, and the final situation. The

transformation stage consists of three phases: the competence stage, the main stage, and the glorification stage. [13].

- a. Initial Situation. At the beginning of the episodes, Han Yi-Joo lives in a family that appears harmonious but actually places her in a demeaned position. This environment positions her as the object of bullying, without her fully realizing that she is being mistreated.
- b. Transformation. The transformation begins when Han Yi-Joo discovers the betrayal of her family and fiancé. Her decision to enter a contract marriage becomes a significant step in shifting her position. At this stage, the helper and the opponents become increasingly clear. The helper (Do-Guk) provides Yi-Joo with space to develop her strategies, while the opponents continue to attack through manipulation and distortion of facts. The conflict intensifies as Yi-Joo exposes the theft of artwork, forgery, and long-concealed lies committed by her family. The family's retaliation through social media and negative narratives further illustrates the opponents' efforts to maintain their dominance. However, public support ultimately strengthens Han Yi-Joo's position. At this point, Lee Jung-Hye and the other opposing figures have lost their power. Yi-Joo emerges as a fully realized subject capable of defeating her adversaries.
- c. Final Situation. Han Yi-Joo succeeds in dismantling the family power structure that had long oppressed her. Lee Jung-Hye and Han Yoo-Ra have lost their authority. Yi-Joo and Do-Guk gain a new life filled with peace. Moreover, their relationship is no longer based on a contract but transforms into a harmonious and loving partnership.

3.1.3 Semiotic square



Fig. 2. Semiotic square justice vs injustice in Korean drama perfect marriage revenge

S1 (Justice): The main character, Han Yi-Joo, seeks to obtain her rights, fight for the truth, and restore the dignity she lost because of her family. S2 (Injustice): Han Yi-Joo is trapped in oppression, family manipulation, major deceit, and betrayal. –S1 (False Injustice): This refers to how Han Yi-Joo's family appears harmonious and caring toward her in public, while in reality they hide major lies, art theft, and various forms of manipulation and oppression. –S2 (Non-Injustice): This refers to the sense of protection Han Yi-Joo feels through Seo Do-Guk's presence, which makes her no longer feel oppressed. However, complete justice has not yet been achieved, as the perpetrators have not been punished. The Semiotic square justice vs injustice in Korean drama perfect marriage revenge presented in **Fig. 2**.

3.1.4 Power relation

The five propositions of power relations are used to identify how power operates within the drama. Power relations refer to patterns of interaction formed by various human relationships that involve specific interests in power [14]. Power is dispersed everywhere and can be found in every form of social interaction. It operates subtly, often without being consciously recognized by society [15].

First, power is seen to be dispersed across S2 and –S1. The injustice experienced by Han Yi-Joo is not carried out by a single individual but is distributed among her stepmother, stepsister, father, and the broader family structure that enables repeated bullying. The pressure she faces emerges from social relations rather than one central source. Second, S2 represents Yi-Joo's condition before she begins to resist. The family's dominance operates subtly and repeatedly to keep her in a weakened position. Power relations are not hierarchical; instead, they arise from a network of family members who reinforce one another's exercise of power. Third, power is not binary. In –S1, injustice is concealed beneath a façade of fairness. The family presents an image of harmony and care in public, yet behind this façade lie deception and oppression. Justice and injustice coexist and overlap. Fourth, intentional and non-subjective forms of power appear in –S2. Seo Do-Guk's protection is not merely a personal act; it functions as part of a broader strategy that provides Yi-Joo with space to formulate resistance. His role operates as that of a helper. Fifth, Yi-Joo's transition from S2 to –S2 and eventually to S1 illustrates Foucault's idea that where there is power, there is resistance. Repeated bullying triggers Yi-Joo's resistance, prompting her to expose her family's lies and dismantle the oppressive power structure that has constrained her.

Overall, the analysis using the actantial and functional structures, the semiotic square, and the five propositions of power relations demonstrates that the Korean drama *Perfect Marriage Revenge* not only highlights the representation of bullying but also reveals how repeated acts of bullying shape the protagonist's journey, shifting Han Yi-Joo's position from a victim to a subject who actively resists. This study also affirms that power within the drama operates through dispersed and layered relations that continuously give rise to resistance.

3.2 Discussion

The findings of this study affirm that the repeated acts of bullying in *Perfect Marriage Revenge* are not merely a background conflict, but function as a structural force that drives the entire narrative. Through A.J. Greimas' actantial model, bullying can be identified as the sender that initiates the movement of the story. The continuous oppression experienced by Han Yi-Joo systematically shifts her position from an object of domination to a subject who actively pursues an object, namely revenge and the restoration of her self-esteem. These findings reinforce Greimas' argument that narrative meaning is constructed through relational dynamics and shifts in actantial positions. In this drama, bullying serves as the primary mechanism that activates such transformations.

Within Greimas' functional structure, the transformation phase becomes the most crucial part of the narrative. The competence stage is marked by Yi-Joo's awareness of her family's betrayal and her decision to establish a strategic alliance with Seo Do-Guk. The performance stage is reflected in her efforts to expose the manipulation and deception carried out by her family. Meanwhile, the glorification stage appears when the truth is publicly revealed and the antagonists lose their social legitimacy. This progression demonstrates that the repetition of bullying is narratively necessary to build a level of conflict intensity capable of generating character transformation. Without such repetition, the impulse toward resistance would not reach a sufficient level to restructure the actantial configuration.

When examined through Michel Foucault's theory of power relations, bullying in this drama operates as a dispersed and productive form of power. Power is not possessed solely by a single individual such as Lee Jung-Hye or Han Yoo-Ra rather, it circulates within the family network, sustaining domination through everyday practices such as verbal humiliation, manipulation of facts, and the construction of social image. This aligns with Foucault's proposition that power is not centralized but embedded within social relations and operates in subtle ways. The representation of bullying in this drama reflects real-life

phenomena in which oppression often occurs subtly within intimate institutions such as the family, rather than solely through explicit physical violence.

The semiotic square analysis (Justice vs Injustice) further demonstrates that bullying is not only presented as direct injustice (S2), but also as concealed injustice (-S1), in which domination is wrapped in the image of familial harmony. This layer of meaning reflects the complexity of contemporary bullying phenomena, particularly psychological and relational forms that often remain invisible to the public. In many real-life cases, victims struggle to obtain validation because violence is normalized within social structures. Thus, the drama represents a broader social reality in which bullying persists as it is legitimized by unequal power relations.

Compared to previous studies that primarily emphasize the psychological impacts of bullying or audience reception, this research positions bullying as the primary driver of the narrative. While dramas such as *The Glory* or *True Beauty* predominantly portray bullying within the school setting, focusing on moral and emotional dimensions, *Perfect Marriage Revenge* relocates the issue to the domestic sphere and frames it as a structural element that shapes character transformation. This shift indicates a development in K-Drama storytelling, where bullying is not merely presented as a social issue intended to evoke empathy, but also functions as a narrative mechanism that structures the distribution of power and the transformation of character identity.

The correlation between the bullying phenomenon and this K-Drama can also be understood within the social context of South Korea, which is widely recognized for its relatively high rates of bullying cases and its strong hierarchical culture. The drama extends this phenomenon into the family sphere, implicitly suggesting that hierarchical structures and the demand to maintain social image can generate subtle forms of domination. In this regard, the drama not only reflects social reality but also dramatizes the process of resistance against systemic oppression.

Overall, this study demonstrates that the repeated acts of bullying in *Perfect Marriage Revenge* operate on three interrelated levels: (1) as a structural trigger within Greimas' narrative framework, (2) as a manifestation of dispersed power relations from a Foucauldian perspective, and (3) as a cultural representation of contemporary bullying phenomena. Han Yi-Joo's journey from the position of S2 (Injustice) to S1 (Justice) embodies Foucault's assertion that where there is power, there is always resistance. While the repetition of oppression reinforces domination, it simultaneously creates the conditions for the emergence of resistance.

These findings indicate that the representation of bullying in the Korean drama *Perfect Marriage Revenge* does not merely function as a narrative conflict, but also reflects the dynamics of power and injustice that often occur within social relationships. Therefore, the study of bullying narratives in drama can provide a broader understanding of practices of symbolic violence and relations of domination in society. This perspective is relevant to global efforts to reduce social violence, as emphasized in Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions.

Therefore, this study contributes theoretically by bridging structural narratology and power relations theory, and practically by offering a deeper understanding of how media construct bullying narratives not merely as emotional conflicts, but as structures of meaning that shape identity, power, and transformation.

4 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the repeated acts of bullying experienced by Han Yi-Joo form the core narrative structure of the Korean drama *Perfect Marriage Revenge*. Through the analysis of the actantial and functional structures, it is evident that Han Yi-Joo's journey

moves from the position of a victim to that of a subject capable of resistance with the help of Seo Do-Guk. The semiotic square clarifies the value tensions between justice and injustice that drive the character's transformation. Meanwhile, Foucault's five propositions of power relations reveal that power in the drama operates in a dispersed and non-hierarchical manner and consistently gives rise to resistance. Overall, this study provides an understanding that bullying in the narrative is not merely an incidental disturbance but a process that shapes the protagonist's struggle.

In addition, this research is also relevant to the global agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, which emphasizes the importance of reducing various forms of violence and injustice in society. The representation of bullying in the drama *Perfect Marriage Revenge* illustrates how unequal power relations can produce practices of domination that are often hidden within social interactions. Therefore, the study of bullying narratives in popular media such as Korean dramas can provide a broader understanding of the dynamics of power, injustice, and forms of resistance within society.

Acknowledgement - The author extends thanks to the Communication Science Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta for supporting this research through funding.

References

1. H. Mutiasari and L. Yarni, "Fenomena Bullying Dalam Kalangan Siswa di SMP Negeri 1 Tara," *Jurnal Kajian Penelitian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan (JKPPK)*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 72–86, Jan. 2023, doi: <https://doi.org/10.59031/jkppk.v1i1.62>.
2. U. Eka Sari and dan M. Jacky, "Bullying sebagai Alat Kekuasaan : Studi Pada Drama Korea Pyramid Game dalam Media Sosial Tiktok," *Journal of Sociological Studies: Paradigma*, vol. 14, pp. 81–90, Jul. 2025.
3. C. Keunwon, "The social-psychological aspect of bullying in South Korea," vol. 2, pp. 5–119, Sep. 2023.
4. A. Yudistira, A. Meifilina, and E. Siswati, "Semiotic Analysis of Bullying Representation in Korean Drama 'The Glory,'" *Translitera : Jurnal Kajian Komunikasi dan Studi Media*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 90–106, Mar. 2024, doi: [10.35457/translitera.v13i1.3665](https://doi.org/10.35457/translitera.v13i1.3665).
5. F. G. Sukmono, A. P. S. Kencana, D. Fadillah, and B. Long, "Empowering Digital Audiences: A Uses and Gratifications Theory Analysis of Streaming Platform Selection Among Youth in Indonesia and China," *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, vol. 41, no. 4, pp. 19–39, 2025.
6. S. S. Nurhayati and F. G. Sukmono, "Gender Advocacy, Social Media Campaign to Against Sexual Violence," In: *Stephanidis, C., Antona, M., Ntoa, S., Salvendy, G. (eds) HCI International 2022 – Late Breaking Posters. HCII 2022. Communications in Computer and Information Science*, vol. 1655, pp. 1–69, Nov. 2022, doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-19682-9_11.
7. T. Imanda, "Biar Dhanyang yang Bicara: Film Spiritual dan Pesan Substansial dalam Kolaborasi Produksi Film Tetangga," *Komunikator*, vol. 10, no. 2, Nov. 2018.
8. H. Yuniasti, "Analisis Struktur Naratif A.J. Greimas Dalam Novel Lelaki Harimau Karya Eka Kurniawan," *KEMBARA Journal of Scientific Language Literature and Teaching*, vol. 5, no. 2, p. 195, Nov. 2019, doi: [10.22219/kembara.vol5.no2.195-207](https://doi.org/10.22219/kembara.vol5.no2.195-207).

9. S. Supiastutik, D. P. WSWW, and O. P. C. Ramadani, "Gender Stereotypes in Boyd Smith's the Story of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith: A Greimas' Actantial Model," *Lingua Cultura*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 49–57, May 2023, doi: 10.21512/lc.v17i1.8574.
10. Kumalasari and M. Surur, "Struktur Aktansial dan Fungsional Novel Arwah Mut'abah Karya Asma' al-Huwayli: Perspektif Naratologi A. J. Greimas," *Al-Ma'rifah*, vol. 20, no. 1, Apr. 2023.
11. M. Asyura, E. Mulya Karlina, and dan Haries Pribady, "Implementasi Struktur Naratif Greimas Pada Cerita Ulat Entaduk (Sastra Lisan Melayu Mempawah) Implementation Of The Greimas Narrative Structure On Ulat Entaduk Story (Oral Literature Of Malay Mempawah)," *Kibas Cendrawasih*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 214–230, Oct. 2021.
12. Amelia. F and F. G. Sukmono, "Narasi Tunawisma Dalam Film Dream: Struktur Narasi A.J. Greimas," *Borobudur Communication Review*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 1–24, 2025.
13. A. A. Karim, S. Mujtaba, and D. Hartati, "Mbah Bongkok pahlawan mitologis masyarakat Tegalwaru: Analisis skema aktan dan fungsional cerita rakyat Karawang," *KEMBARA Journal of Scientific Language Literature and Teaching*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 40–55, Apr. 2023, doi: 10.22219/kembara.v9i1.22746.
14. U. S. Ahyar, "Relasi Kuasa Dalam Fenomena Bullying di Sekolah," *Prosiding Seminar Nasional Pengabdian Masyarakat | SENAMA*, vol. 1, pp. 2–6, Jul. 2024, doi: <https://doi.org/10.30656/senama.v1i.1>.
15. A. Syafiuddin, "Pengaruh Kekuasaan Atas Pengetahuan (Memahami Teori Relasi Kuasa Michel Foucault)," *Refleksi Jurnal Filsafat Dan Pemikiran Islam*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 141–155, Jul. 2018, doi: <https://doi.org/10.14421/ref.v18i2.1863>.