Representations of Feminism in Linda Howard's *Cry No More*: A Sara Mills Feminist Stylistics Analysis

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Abstract. This study examines the representation of feminism in Linda Howard's novel *Cry No More* using Sara Mills' Feminist Stylistics model. Situated within the romance thriller genre, the novel offers a productive site to explore how female agency is negotiated between empowerment and vulnerability. The data consist of selected narrative units featuring the protagonist, Milla Edge, which are analyzed through lexical and syntactic categorization focusing on Subject–Object positioning and reader positioning. The analysis reveals three dominant patterns: Milla is constructed as an active Subject through high-transitivity verbs and agentic nominalizations in her role as leader of the "Finders" organization; she is simultaneously rendered an Object via passive structures and a lexicon of suffering; and key resolutions of the plot often depend on male protectors. These findings demonstrate that Milla's agency functions as "negotiated empowerment," thereby contributing to feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of popular fiction by showing how patriarchal norms are both challenged and reproduced at the level of linguistic choice.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis; subject-object position; feminism representation; sara mills, cry no more.

Abstrak. Penelitian ini menganalisis representasi feminisme dalam novel Linda Howard, *Cry No More*, menggunakan model Stilitika Feminis karya Sara Mills. Berlatar belakang genre thriller romantis, novel ini menyediakan ruang yang produktif untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana agen perempuan dinegosiasikan antara pemberdayaan dan kerentanan. Data terdiri dari unit naratif terpilih yang menampilkan protagonis, Milla Edge, yang dianalisis melalui kategorisasi leksikal dan sintaksis dengan fokus pada posisi Subjek–Objek dan posisi pembaca. Analisis mengungkapkan tiga pola dominan: Milla dibangun sebagai Subjek aktif melalui kata kerja transitif tinggi dan nominalisasi agen dalam perannya sebagai pemimpin organisasi "Finders"; ia sekaligus digambarkan sebagai Objek melalui struktur pasif dan leksikon penderitaan; dan penyelesaian kunci alur cerita sering bergantung pada pelindung laki-laki. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa agen Milla berfungsi sebagai "empowerment yang dinegosiasikan," sehingga berkontribusi pada Analisis Wacana Kritis Feminis fiksi populer dengan menunjukkan bagaimana norma patriarkal baik ditantang maupun direproduksi pada tingkat pilihan linguistik.

Kata Kunci: analisis wacana krisis; posisi subjek-objek; representasi perempuan; sara mills, cry no more.

INTRODUCTION

Literary works, particularly popular fiction, do not merely entertain; they function as sites of ideological struggle where gender roles are constructed and contested (Wellek

& Warren, 1956). Linda Howard's Cry No More (2003) is a significant case for analysis because it sits at the intersection of the romance and thriller genres. This "genre duality" creates an inherent tension: while the thriller element necessitates female agency and strength, the romance element traditionally relies on narratives of emotional vulnerability and male protection (Radway, 1984). The protagonist, Milla Edge, embodies this tension perfectly. Her transformation from a traumatized mother into the founder of "Finders"— an organization dedicated to locating missing persons—presents a compelling arc of "agentic feminism" (Hooks, 2000), However, whether this transformation is linguistically supported or subtly undermined by patriarchal tropes remains a critical question.

The analytical challenge in Cry No More lies in how these shifting power dynamics are encoded in the text. While general representation theories establish that language shapes our perception of reality (Burton, 2005; Hall, 2009), they often lack the specialized tools to deconstruct gendered power imbalances at the sentence level. This study, therefore, adopts Sara Mills' Feminist Stylistics model as the primary analytical framework. Unlike broader Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approaches, Mills' model is specifically designed to expose how gender ideologies are embedded in linguistic structures, such as the positioning of characters as either "Subjects" (agents) or "Objects" (recipients of action).

By applying Mills' parameters—specifically lexical and syntactic categorization—this research moves beyond a thematic summary of Milla Edge's character. Instead, it offers a systematic investigation into how the novel's discourse oscillates between empowering Milla as a self-determined agent and objectifying her through a "lexicon of suffering." This study is necessary to reveal the "negotiated feminism" prevalent in the romance thriller genre, where female empowerment is often granted only within the confines of traditional patriarchal structures.

Several relevant studies have employed Sara Mills' Feminist Stylistics to examine female representation, primarily focusing on narratives of overt patriarchal oppression. (Lutfiana et al., 2018) analyzed the protagonist Firdaus in Perempuan Di Titik Nol, focusing on how linguistic structures discursively construct gender marginalization and powerlessness. Similarly, (Karina Savitri & Suyanto, 2024) investigated the "catch marriage" tradition in Perempuan Yang Menangis Kepada Bulan Hitam, using Mills' three linguistic levels to expose the subordinate position of women within specific cultural violences. Further, (Sariasih et al., 2023) utilized the model to demonstrate how domestic spheres in short stories function to silence and objectify female characters through the Subject-Object lens.

While these studies provide a foundational understanding of Mills' framework, a significant analytical gap remains. Existing scholarship predominantly focuses on "high-literature" or social-realist texts where the female character's status as a victim is the central, explicit theme. There is a lack of critical discourse research concerning commercial romance thrillers, a genre characterized by a paradoxical "dual-discourse." In these texts, the heroine is often marketed as "strong" and "empowered," yet she remains entangled in the genre's requirements for romantic rescue and emotional vulnerability.

This study fills that gap by shifting the focus from overt marginalization to negotiated agency. Unlike the protagonists in the aforementioned studies who are clearly positioned as victims of systemic oppression, Milla Edge in Cry No More presents a hybrid position. This research specifically investigates how Howard's narrative uses lexical and syntactic choices to oscillate between an "Agentic Subject" (the CEO of Finders) and a "Traumatized Object" (the victim of kidnapping). By applying Mills'

model to this genre-specific tension, this study moves beyond the "victimhood" narrative explored in previous research to uncover the linguistic complexity of modern "strong female lead" tropes in popular fiction.

To explore the representation of feminism in depth, analytical tools sensitive to underlying language and ideology are essential. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an approach designed to uncover the relationships between power, discourse, and ideology hidden within social practices (Fairclough, 1995). This research specifically utilizes the Feminist Stylistics model developed by Sara Mills (1995).

The feminist perspective is one of the analytical models that focuses on the representation of women in media. The primary focus is how women are displayed and positioned across various forms of texts, including literary works and visual media. Essentially, this perspective seeks to expose the social and ideological constructions that underpin the representation of women in media discourse (Eriyanto, 2008, p.199).

Within the framework of CDA, discourse is not understood merely as a study of language; while CDA uses language in texts as an object of analysis, it differs from traditional linguistic studies. Language is not viewed solely from its structural aspect but is associated with the social context behind its use, including the goals, practices, and power relations embedded in the production and dissemination of the discourse (Eriyanto, 2008), p.7.

In alignment with this, van Dijk (in Purbani, 2009, p.1) explains that CDA focuses on how social power can be abused, dominated, or lead to inequality. This analysis examines how the practice of power is reproduced and maintained through texts, linking it to broader social and political contexts. Thus, CDA not only highlights linguistic structure but also reveals the ideological dimensions and power relations hidden behind the text.

Sara Mills is a pivotal figure in CDA studies who pays specific attention to the discourse of feminism. Her model, the feminist perspective, examines how women are presented in texts, highlighting the tendency for women to be misrepresented, marginalized, and unfairly positioned compared to men. Injustice and negative portrayals of women are central issues in Mills' analysis (Eriyanto, 2008, p.199).

Furthermore, Mills emphasizes the importance of analyzing the position of the actor in the text, particularly concerning who is placed as a Subject and who is positioned as an Object. This positioning has direct implications for the text's structure and overall meaning. Mills also examines the positioning of the reader, as the narrative style and placement of social actors can legitimize one party while marginalizing (Eriyanto, 2008, p.200). For Mills, representation is the most fundamental aspect in discourse analysis, as it dictates how individuals, groups, or events are presented, which subsequently affects the meaning received by the audience (Eriyanto, 2008, p.200).

The Mills model is particularly relevant for this study because it focuses on two main mechanisms:

1. Subject and Object Position: This mechanism reveals who is given an active, defining role (Subject) and who is positioned as a passive, defined, or observed party (Object) in the narrative. This analysis will determine whether Milla is truly an independent Subject or if she remains an Object defined by the male narrative (Mills, 1995).

2. Position of the Author and the Reader: This analyzes how the author ideologically positions the reader, and whether the text implicitly leads the reader to accept a patriarchal view of gender or, conversely, challenges it (Mills, 1995).

Although Milla Edge is presented as a strong and professional female figure, it is questionable whether this strength is authentically feminist or whether she ultimately relies on a male character, James Diaz, to achieve the story's resolution. Sara Mills' framework allows this research to critically address this ambiguity, leading to the central research question of how Milla Edge is discursively constructed as both Subject and Object in Cry No More, and how this dual positioning frames readers' interpretation of feminist agency. Specifically, this study aims to: (1) identify the lexical and syntactic patterns that index shifts in Milla's agency; (2) analyze how these patterns contribute to her alternating subject–object positioning; and (3) examine how the narrative invites readers to align with or question patriarchal constructions of gendered power.

At a broader level, this article contributes to feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by demonstrating how a popular romance thriller negotiates feminist agency through recurrent shifts between subject and object positions in both lexis and syntax. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: the next section outlines the feminist stylistics framework and previous CDA research on women's representation, followed by a methodological section detailing data selection and analytical procedures. The subsequent sections present the findings on Milla's subject and object positioning and discuss their ideological implications before the article concludes with theoretical and practical implications for feminist readings of popular fiction.

METHODS

The present study adopts a qualitative research design within the broader field of Critical Discourse Analysis, drawing specifically on Sara Mills' Feminist Stylistics as its primary analytical framework. This model is particularly suited to uncovering how gendered power relations are encoded in linguistic choices at both the micro-textual and macro-discursive levels, which is central to the study's focus on negotiated feminist agency in popular fiction.

The primary data consist of 45 narrative units from the 2003 edition of Linda Howard's *Cry No More*. A narrative unit is defined as a coherent textual segment, ranging from a single descriptive paragraph to an extended dialogue sequence, in which Milla Edge is foregrounded as the key experiencer or agent of significant narrative events. These units were purposively selected to represent three pivotal phases in Milla's narrative trajectory: (1) her initial construction as a traumatized victim; (2) her intermediate phase of self-reconstruction; and (3) her later positioning as the leader of the "Finders" organization. This sampling strategy prioritizes segments with high semiotic density in terms of agency, vulnerability, and gendered power relations.

Data collection was conducted through multiple rounds of close reading, assisted by a Structured Analysis Guide developed for this study. The guide includes coding fields for: (a) textual excerpt; (b) syntactic role of Milla (Subject/Object); (c) process type of the verb (material, mental, verbal, relational); (d) salient lexical items (verbs, nouns, modifiers) indexing agency or fragility; and (e) narrative context (phase of the plot, conflict situation, involvement of male characters). This instrument enables a systematic mapping of shifts in Milla's positioning across the selected units.

The analysis proceeds in two interrelated stages derived from Mills' model. The first stage, Linguistic Mechanisms Analysis, operationalizes the notions of Subject and Object through lexico-syntactic scrutiny. At the syntactic level, the study identifies transitivity patterns by comparing high-transitivity clauses in which Milla functions as the grammatical agent (e.g., *organized, fought, searched*) with passive or low-transitivity

constructions that render her an affected participant (e.g., *was attacked, was pinned*). At the lexical level, the analysis contrasts agentic nominalizations and evaluative labels (such as "founder" or "executive director") with a recurring lexicon of suffering that foregrounds physical and emotional vulnerability. These patterns are then organized into analytical categories (leadership, physical resistance, cognitive persistence, and fragility) to trace the distribution of Subject–Object positioning across the three narrative phases.

The second stage, Ideological Interpretation, moves from linguistic description to the analysis of author and reader positioning. Here, the focus is on how narrative strategies, such as internal focalization, evaluative adjectives, and the allocation of agency in key resolution scenes, invite readers either to align with Milla's autonomous agency or to accept her dependence on male protectors as narratively legitimate. This stage links the micro-level lexico-syntactic findings to broader questions about how the text negotiates feminist agency within the constraints of the romance thriller genre, revealing the oscillation between subversion and reinforcement of patriarchal norms.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the lexico-syntactic patterns that construct Milla Edge as both Subject and Object, followed by an interpretation of how these patterns shape ideological negotiations of feminist agency in the novel.

Milla as Subject

The analysis of 45 narrative units shows that Milla predominantly occupies the grammatical Subject position in clauses associated with professional authority, physical resistance, and cognitive persistence. In narrative segments related to the "Finders" organization, she appears as the Subject in the vast majority of high-transitivity clauses, typically linked with dynamic material processes such as *organised, mobilised, founded,* and *directed*. Agentic nominalisations like "founder" and "executive director" further stabilise her status as a decision-maker whose actions shape the plot's investigative trajectory.

Table 1. Lexico-syntactic patterns of Milla's Subject positioning

Analytical Category	Lexical Patterns (Verbs/Nouns)	Syntactic Configuration	Sample Evidence
Leadership & Organization	*Organized, mobilized, devoted, founded, directed*	Active Voice (Subject + Active Verb + Object)	"She had organized Finders... mobilized [volunteers]" (p. 22)
Physical Resistance	*Fought, clawed, launched, resisted, struggled*	Material Processes (Intentional physical action)	"She clawed out the left eye of the man" (p. 7)
Cognitive Persistence	*Determined, refused, decided, searched, worked*	Modal Verbs of Necessity (*must, had to*)	"I have to find my son... I'll keep looking" (p. 24)

In addition, Milla's cognitive stance is encoded through modal verbs of necessity and determination (e.g., "I have to find my son", "I'll keep looking"), which reinforce an image of self-imposed mission rather than externally imposed obligation. These forms collectively construct Milla as an "agentic Subject", aligning with a discourse of professional competence and resilience that appears to challenge conventional romance-heroine passivity.

Milla as Traumatised Object

In the early stages of the novel, Milla is depicted as a profound object of violence and control: she is physically attacked, her infant son is kidnapped, and she endures immediate physical and emotional trauma. These initial portrayals emphasize her vulnerability—stabbed, helpless, and desperate—thus reflecting the objectified female figure subjected to patriarchal violence and criminal domination. Her body becomes a site of pain and violation, aligning with Mills' conception of women as objects subjected to male authority and coercion.

Conversely, Milla is positioned as an Object through patterns of low transitivity and a "lexicon of suffering" that foregrounds her vulnerability.

- Syntactic Passivity: In scenes of trauma, Milla frequently shifts from the grammatical Subject to the Affected Object. For example, in the attack scene (p. 7), the syntax utilizes passive voice ("Milla was attacked," "she was pinned") or "stative" descriptions where her body is the subject but lacks agency ("her body didn't respond").
- Lexical Fragility: The text employs a recurring set of modifiers that emphasize physical and emotional collapse, such as bleeding out, limp, sprawled, bone-tired, dispirited, and haunted.
- Narrative Displacement: In resolution units, agency is often syntactically transferred to male characters. While Milla remains the focal point, the active verbs are attributed to David or Diaz (e.g., "David had already repaired... [he] was washing up," p. 8), positioning Milla as the passive recipient of medical or protective intervention.

Oscillating Subject–Object Positioning

Taken together, these patterns reveal that Milla's positioning is not fixed but oscillates between agentic Subject and traumatised Object across different narrative phases. In professional and investigative contexts, high-transitivity clauses and agentic lexis foreground her autonomy and leadership, suggesting a break from the "damsel in distress" stereotype. However, this Subjectivity is repeatedly interrupted by scenes where her vulnerability is foregrounded through syntactic passivity and a dense lexicon of suffering, especially in relation to her maternal loss and physical endangerment.

This oscillation produces a hybrid configuration of agency that can be described as "negotiated": Milla is allowed to act, decide, and lead, but these capacities are narratively anchored in, and sometimes constrained by, her prior victimisation. Her strength is thus framed as meaningful precisely because it emerges from and is continually tested by trauma, rather than existing as an unmarked professional competence.

Reader Positioning and Ideological Implications

The linguistic patterns identified above reveal a complex ideological negotiation within the narrative. While the findings show a high frequency of agentic verbs in Milla's professional life, this "Subjectivity" is consistently interrupted by "Objectification" in her personal and physical life.

Linda Howard's *Cry No More* utilizes its thriller-romance narrative to position its readers within a complex ideological negotiation, simultaneously inviting an understanding of conventional patriarchal norms while encouraging critical reflection. Following Sara Mills' framework (Mills, 1995), this analysis focuses on how the textual strategies direct the reader's interpretation of gendered power.

The transition from a "vulnerable mother" (Object) to a "resilient leader" (Subject) aligns with agentic feminism (Hooks, 2000). However, the persistent return to a lexicon of fragility suggests that the novel does not fully subvert patriarchal norms. Instead, it offers a "negotiated agency" where Milla's strength is validated only through her endurance of suffering. The syntactic dominance of male protectors in moments of crisis reinforces the traditional gender hierarchy: the female Subject initiates the search, but the male Agent often secures the resolution.

Following Sara Mills' (1995) model, the text utilizes specific mechanisms to direct the Reader's Position:

- Internal Focalization: By centering the narrative on Milla's consciousness during her "lexicalized suffering," the text invites deep empathy. This encourages the reader to accept her vulnerability as an essential female trait.

- Evaluative Adjectives: The use of descriptors like "relentless" and "possessed" (p. 23) to describe Milla's search frames her agency as an extension of maternal instinct rather than purely professional autonomy, subtly aligning the reader with essentialist gender roles.

- Moral Alignment through Betrayal: The character of Susanna Kosper serves as a foil. Her betrayal—framed through negative nominalizations—positions the reader to favor Milla's "correct" use of female agency (maternal protection) over Susanna's "deviant" agency (smuggling/betrayal).

Ultimately, *Cry No More* creates a site of tension. It invites the reader to admire Milla's professional Subjectivity while simultaneously reinforcing a patriarchal gaze that views the female body as a site of inherent vulnerability. This dual positioning ensures that while the novel breaks certain stereotypes of the "damsel in distress," it maintains the romance thriller's core requirement of male-mediated resolution.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of Linda Howard's *Cry No More* through Sara Mills' Feminist Stylistics confirms that the representation of feminism in the romance thriller genre is not a straightforward movement from victimhood to empowerment, but a dynamic negotiation between these poles. The lexico-syntactic patterns identified in the 45 narrative units demonstrate that Milla Edge is constructed through an oscillation between agentic Subject and traumatised Object positions, particularly across the phases of victimisation, self-reconstruction, and professional leadership.

Theoretically, these findings refine Mills' model by showing that Subject–Object positioning operates not only as a contrast between different characters but also as a fluctuating continuum within a single protagonist, whose power can be intensified or withdrawn according to generic demands. This study therefore illustrates how micro-level choices of transitivity, naming, and evaluative lexis articulate macro-level negotiations of feminist agency in popular fiction, foregrounding the notion of "negotiated empowerment" as a key mechanism in romance thrillers.

Despite its insights, this study is subject to certain limitations. First, the analysis is confined to a single primary text, which prevents broader generalizations across the romance thriller genre. Second, while the use of Sara Mills' model provides deep linguistic precision, it focuses primarily on text-based discourse, perhaps overlooking the broader socio-economic contexts of book publishing and marketing that also shape gender representation. Finally, as a qualitative study of the 2003 English edition, the

findings may not account for nuances introduced in translations or the shifting cultural reception of these tropes over the last two decades.

Future investigations should consider a comparative discourse analysis across multiple authors within the genre to determine if the "negotiated agency" found in Howard's work is a universal generic convention. Additionally, incorporating reception theory through focus groups or reader interviews would provide empirical weight to the claims regarding reader positioning, moving from predicted reader responses to actual reader interpretations. Finally, future researchers might explore how these linguistic patterns of agency evolve in contemporary "post-feminist" thrillers published, investigating whether the reliance on male protectors remains a dominant syntactic feature.

In conclusion, the novel Cry No More presents a multi-layered representation of women: she is both vulnerable and resilient, dependent and fiercely independent. The constant oscillations between the Subject and Object positions, coupled with the strategic positioning of the reader, establish this text as a nuanced arena for the negotiation of gender ideology. Thus, this work not only contains traces of traditional patriarchal narratives but also critically challenges them through a complex depiction of women's experiences, significantly enriching the discourse of feminism within the romance thriller genre.

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