P-ISSN: 2356-3877 E-ISSN: 2301-9166

PAI-PAK Elementary School Textbooks as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA): A van Leeuwen Critical Discourse Analysis Framed by Ecofeminism on the Construction of Gender–Ecology in the Independent Curriculum (Merdeka Curriculum)

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ABSTRACT

Purpose — To assess the ideological construction of gender–ecology in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) and Christian Religious Education (PAK) elementary-level textbooks under the Independent Curriculum (Merdeka Curriculum) used in Sekolah Penggerak (2021–2023), addressing the research gap that has not regarded textbooks as a state ideological product

Design/methods/approach — A descriptive qualitative study using van Leeuwen's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) combined with ecofeminism. Data: eight books (grades 1–4) published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology and the Ministry of Religious Affairs; a text–visual documentation study; online interviews with five informants (two teachers, one editor, two authors); purposive sampling; categories of inclusion/exclusion, activation/passivation, role allocation, genericisation/specification; source triangulation and research ethics were applied. The scope is limited to eight books and two subjects.

Findings – Identifies patterns of domestication of women; marking of femininity (e.g., the color pink); involvement of women in ecological activities that are subordinate and anonymous, whereas men are named/activated as protectors or givers; women are passivated as recipients of assistance. The integration of gender equality values and ecological awareness is not systematic. The state, through the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), reproduces patriarchal—anthropocentric discourse.

Research implications – Proposes a CDA–ecofeminism rubric-based audit–revision across the entire publishing cycle; editorial–design guidelines (balance of roles, equal naming, avoidance of essentialist visual codes); discourse literacy training for teachers; as well as periodic, transparent evaluations with feedback channels from schools and religious communities.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 April 2025 Revised 16 July 2025 Revised 25 August 2025 Accepted 08 September 2025

KEYWORDS:

ecofeminism; Critical Discourse Analysis; Independent Curriculum; religious textbooks; gender–ecology representation.



Jurnal Pendidikan Islam

1. Introduction

Ecofeminism is an interdisciplinary approach that views a close linkage between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature (Gaard, 2015). Ecofeminism identifies patriarchal structures and anthropocentrism as the roots of social and ecological inequalities (Gaard, 2015). In the Indonesian context, this approach becomes important because the high rates of gender-based violence and the environmental crisis are mutually entangled, especially within the education system.

Indonesia still faces serious challenges in environmental issues and gender inequality. Pollution, deforestation, and climate change threaten the sustainability of life, while gender-based violence remains high. Nearly 300,000 cases of violence against women were recorded in one year (Komnas

Perempuan, 2021). At the same time, the number of victims of environmental degradation was reported at 3.49 million people to 9.88 million people between 2017 and 2018 (WALHI, 2021). These conditions sufficiently illustrate that Indonesia's problems are essentially environmental problems and gender discrimination.

One strategic way to address gender and ecological problems is through education. Education is a future-oriented instrument. Although not decisive, instilling values of concern for ecology and gender justice through the educational pathway is a long-term effort to create a generation that upholds nonexploitative and gender-unbiased values. One of the main instruments of education is the textbook, which not only conveys information but also reproduces ideology. The state uses the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) such as schools and curricula to disseminate dominant values in subtle and systematic ways (Althusser, 2015). Textbooks, in this case, are a principal vehicle in shaping children's perspectives on gender and nature. However, problems will emerge if textbooks, as texts, have the potential to sustain values that are unjust to gender and tend to be exploitative. Therefore, textbooks in the world of education need to be critically examined.

The ideological construction of gender and the environment contained in textbook materials at the elementary-school level is determined by the structure of the education curriculum in Indonesia. The determination of the education curriculum in Indonesia by the state has a long history. During the New Order from 1968 to 1998, national education implemented four curricula: 1968, 1975, 1984, and 1994. The 1975 curriculum was the first New Order curriculum to foreground the Pancasila doctrine applied to education (Darmaningtyas, 2015). Through this doctrine, the government indicated the points of Pancasila as the point of departure, teaching practices through rote memorization, and an applied system (Darmaningtyas, 2015). Significant changes occurred in the Reform era. Various education policies began to accommodate interests based on ethnicity, religion, and other identities. However, what did not change much was how the state produced educational textbooks.

Textbooks produced by the state, which are then distributed to various educational institutions, are an effort to provide ease of access to learning and equal opportunities for students to access learning resources. However, the textbooks provided by the state become an important part of the discourse on the relations between the state and its citizens through the educational institution in the form of schools. Through schools, the practice of ideologization by the state operates - or to borrow the term ISA (Althusser, 1971). This practice operates strongly and massively, which is then used as a tool to press in subtle ways so that a person is unaware, even through various symbols carried out through dogma, books, education, laws, and other things, which explains that nothing is pure behind that apparatus. In the context of this study, elementary school textbooks in the Independent Curriculum at Sekolah Penggerak constitute part of the ISA. In other words, the state's construction is presented through the contents contained in textbooks, represented in the form of texts, images, videos, and other learning media.

Islamic and Christian religious education textbooks become highly significant to examine because religious education has strong moral authority in shaping values. However, many religious narratives instead reinforce patriarchal and anthropocentric social structures. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of the role of religion in shaping gender values and concern for the environment (Oluwafemi, 2019; Sholeh, 2023; Simon, 2021). However, these studies have not examined textbooks as a state ideological product and have not used an intersectional approach that simultaneously examines gender and ecology issues. On the other hand, research emphasizes the importance of a critical approach to theological narratives in education to avoid legitimation of social and ecological hierarchies (Deane-Drummond et al., 2017). However, these works have not placed religious textbooks at the elementary level in an explicit focus of analysis, especially in the context of

textbooks at the elementary-school level in Indonesia. In addition, there has not been much research that places textbooks as a state ideological product within the frame of the Independent Curriculum.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to analyze how the ideological construction of gender and ecology is represented in Islamic and Christian Religious Education textbooks at the elementary-school (SD) level used in the Independent Curriculum. This focus is important for understanding how the state, through the elementary education system, contributes to the perpetuation or dismantling of patriarchal and anthropocentric structures.

This study formulates two main questions as follows:

- a. How are representations of gender–ecology relations constructed in the content of Islamic and Christian religious education textbooks at the elementary-school level?
- b. How does the state, through textbooks, play a role in reproducing patriarchal and anthropocentric discourse in elementary education?

Theoretically, this study uses an ecofeminism approach as a conceptual framework to examine how the dualistic relations of human-nature and male-female are formed and reproduced in the education system (Gaard, 2015). This approach is combined with the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model to analyze strategies of representation in text and visuals, such as inclusion/exclusion, activation/passivation, and role allocation (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Van Leeuwen, 2008). This combination provides a solid epistemological and methodological foundation for uncovering the dominant ideology operating behind textbook content.

2. Methods

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) method to examine ideological representation in textbook content (Van Leeuwen, 2008). The selection of this approach is based on the characteristics of the object of study, which is replete with visual constructions and normative text, requiring a critical reading of the production of meaning and power structures. Within the theoretical framework, the study is grounded in an ecofeminism approach as an interpretive lens to trace the interconnection between patriarchal domination and the exploitation of nature (Gaard, 2015; Plumwood, 2020; Warren, 2019). The combination of CDA and ecofeminism enables an analysis that not only describes but also critically uncovers how gender and ecology narratives are formed, disseminated, and received through the educational medium.

The primary data in this study consist of 8 religious education textbooks (Islamic and Christian) for the elementary-school level (grades 1 to 4) published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology and the Ministry of Religious Affairs and used in the implementation of the Independent Curriculum in Sekolah Penggerak during the 2021–2023 period. Data collection techniques were carried out through a documentation study of textual and visual content in the textbooks, as well as in-depth online interviews with 5 key informants: two religious education teachers, one textbook manuscript editor, and two textbook authors. The selection of books and informants was conducted purposively, based on direct relevance to the curriculum and the substance of the study. The analysis was conducted in two stages: first, the application of the main categories from van Leeuwen's model such as inclusion/exclusion, role allocation, and genericisation/specification; second, interpretation based on key ecofeminism concepts that highlight binary hierarchies between humans and nature, as well as masculinity and femininity. The data were analyzed manually and classified into ideological themes. To maintain validity and credibility, this study applied source triangulation, namely comparing findings from textbooks, interviews, and secondary literature. Research ethics principles were also observed through informant consent and the protection of participants' identities.

3. Results & Discussion

3.1. Domestication of Women in Family Representation

In the Grade 4 Islamic Religious Education elementary-school textbook (page 45), the illustration shows a mother accompanying a child in studying and managing household tasks, without the presence of a father figure. The mother's role is depicted as an active figure within the domestic sphere, while men are not shown at all.

Visually and narratively, this reflects a role allocation strategy (Van Leeuwen, 2008), in which active roles are assigned to women in the household domain, while men are not displayed at all (exclusion category) from caregiving roles. This narrative not only shows a role imbalance, but also creates social normalization of the notion that the household is the exclusive responsibility of women.

From an ecofeminist perspective, this phenomenon is a form of binding women to "natural spaces" that are not socially and politically recognized (Plumwood, 2020). Women are identified with nature: caring, nurturing, physically present, yet lacking power within social structures. This is dangerous because it reinforces soft patriarchal structures in elementary education, as also critiqued through the concept of symbolic domination, which shapes children's habitus to accept this inequality as natural (Bourdieu, 2002). These findings reinforce the study showing that women's roles in textbooks tend to be reduced to purely domestic functions (Setiyawan & Lestari, 2020). Such stereotypes weaken women's position as household labor, because they do not receive compensation for domestic tasks. The value of household work is underestimated. Conversely, this work is regarded as women's obligation. In this context, children who should be given an understanding of gender awareness from an early age become children who ultimately reproduce gender-biased values. This is due to image content in textbook materials that tends to remain gender-biased, such as men or fathers not being shown when handling domestic matters.

3.2. The Social Construction of Pink as a Feminine Color

In the Grade 1 Islamic Religious Education elementary-school textbook, there is an illustration of a girl wearing a pink hijab in the context of learning to love the Qur'an. The color is consistently associated with female characters in several other parts.

The use of pink is a form of the specification strategy, namely inserting a specific visual identity to strengthen symbolic association. Pink as a marker of femininity is the result of a social construction perpetuated by media and industry (Aulia, 2023). In textbooks, such color selection is not a neutral decision; rather, it is part of a process of visual ideologization that shapes students' habitus from an early age. The association of pink with femininity is not a development that occurred suddenly, but was formed through a protracted process of social construction. Pink initially had no special gendered meaning. The twentieth century marked the beginning of the shift in the meaning of pink toward the feminine (Kamila, 2024). This was driven by the role of clothing and toy companies that began using pink to market their products to girls (Aulia, 2023). Media, including television and film, influenced societal ideas about pink as a feminine color.

Within ecofeminism, symbols such as color become part of the grand narrative that separates the masculine as strong, rational, and public, and the feminine as weak, emotional, and private (Warren, 2019). Textbooks unconsciously play a role in this process, creating permanent associations between sex and visual attributes, which ultimately legitimize gender-based inequality. The effects of symbolic domination are imposed not within the pure logic of a consciousness that can be made aware, but through schemes of perception, appreciation, and action that compose habitus and underpin relations of knowledge beyond all acts of consciousness

and control of desire (Bourdieu, 2002). The social construction of pink as a feminine color has several significant effects. First, because pink is considered the "most suitable" color for girls, they are often "forced" to choose it. Second, gender stereotypes that are damaging—including the idea that women must always be powerless, gentle, and dependent on men—can be reinforced by the belief that pink is a feminine color (Khoironi, 2025).

3.3. Environmentally Friendly yet Marginalized Women

In the Grade 1 Islamic Religious Education elementary-school textbook (Chapter 2), five children are depicted caring for plants. Two girls are assigned to sweep and water, while one boy (named Ahmad) is portrayed as active and dominant in the narrative text.

This shows the inclusion of women as actors in ecological activities, but in subordinate roles (care, not decision-making). By contrast, the boy is explicitly mentioned by name (strategy: specification & nomination), signaling symbolic recognition of ownership and control. Women, although involved, are anonymous and narratively passive (passivation). Natural resources such as forests, agriculture, and fisheries are often considered to be managed by men. They are more prepared to manage natural resources because they possess more land, money, and access to technology. As a result, women are not involved in environmental decision-making. The environment can be adversely affected due to unequal gender role distribution.

The erasure of women from formal ecological discourse is a form of double domination: not only socially marginalized, but also symbolically exploited to support "environmentally caring" values that are merely cosmetic (Gaard, 2015). Such representations merge with the legacy of anthropocentrism in Indonesian education, preserved since the New Order era (Setiyawan & Wahyuni, 2023). Due to unequal access to environmental decision-making, women often become the primary victims of natural disasters. Women's skills and experiences in environmental management are often neglected when they lack access to natural resources and decision-making authority. This can damage ecosystems and result in unsustainable natural resource management. Because the patriarchal system has permeated every aspect of human life, women are usually confined to roles related to the household. Consequently, women naturally bear the greatest burden of the impacts of environmental degradation (Rahman & Suryandari, 2022).

3.4. Men as Protectors, Women as Victims

In the Grade 1 Christian Religious Education and Character textbook, page 87, published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. In the image, several female students are shown falling and then being helped by male students. There is no other context that balances women's position as actors.

This visual practices activation toward men (as saviors) and passivation toward women (as victims). This is not merely an incidental representation, but part of an ideological framing of power relations. In ecofeminism, this is known as a form of internalizing a "patriarchal rescue" structure that conceals unequal relations with a narrative of assistance and false empathy (Warren, 2019).

This narrative reinforces a binary logic: men as rational and strong, women as fragile and in need of protection. Instead of dismantling structures of inequality, the textbook reinforces them through visual narratives that are received without resistance.

3.5. Women as Objects of Aid and Not Social Subjects

Chapter 8 of the Grade 4 Islamic Religious Education textbook about learning mutual help depicts a mother receiving staple food assistance, while men are depicted as the givers.

This shows role allocation in which women are represented as passive recipients of men's actions. Women are present only to be "saved" and are not given social agency. In CDA, this is a form of passivation through goal-assignment (Van Leeuwen, 2008).

From the perspective of radical ecofeminism (Plumwood, 2020), this portrays women and nature as the "Other" that lacks transformational capacity, merely enduring and receiving. It also illustrates how the patriarchal state produces the image of poor women as objects of compassion rather than agents of change. Stereotypes that persist in contemporary society are remnants of a patriarchal past. In Javanese culture, which is saturated with patriarchy, for example, women are referred to as "Kanca Kedip" when referring to their wives (Pratisthita & Wardani, 2022). This issue relates to how women are depicted in film as figures who are weak and worthy of being harassed and belittled (Risman, 2024). The positioning of women as housewives, servants, and commodities to fulfill men's needs in the domestic sphere constitutes a form of gender injustice and discrimination.

3.6. The State as a Producer of Patriarchal and Anthropocentric Discourse

The content of textbooks in the Independent Curriculum does not show a systematic integration of gender equality values and ecological awareness. Representations in text and image tend to be repetitive and not critical of power structures.

This indicates that the state still acts as a dominant ideological agent through what is called the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) (Althusser, 2015). Textbooks become a medium in which patriarchal and anthropocentric structures are produced and reproduced in the form of symbols, narratives, and images. Rather than becoming instruments of transformation, textbooks instead preserve old patterns from previous curricula, merely changing their outer form. This is in line with findings that the state tends to maintain exclusive collective narratives and does not provide room for more critical alternative paradigms such as ecofeminism (Anderson, 2008).

The study also shows that, after the Reform era, curriculum content remains largely inherited from the anthropocentric and masculine mindset of the New Order (Setiyawan & Wahyuni, 2023). This mindset is internalized by the state through the content contained in textbooks. The content in the Independent Curriculum, as discussed in the previous chapter, merely reproduces content from the past. The content tends to be anthropocentric and patriarchal.

Another factor causing the stagnation of efforts to present a life that takes the side of women and nature is related to regulation (Anderson, 2008). In the regulatory context, there are government rules regarding the standardization of textbooks or education. Through this regulatory element, the state is not very serious about improving the conditions of gender equality and environmental awareness through the educational pathway, namely textbooks. Based on an analysis of regulations regarding textbooks or educational books, it can be concluded that the interest in internalizing the values of gender equality and environmental awareness has not become a serious concern of the state.

The above findings collectively reinforce ecofeminist claims about the twin dominations of patriarchy and anthropocentrism, while expanding CDA studies in Indonesia with visual evidence sorted according to Van Leeuwen's categories. The analysis shows how simple symbols—color, body position, naming-operate as mechanisms of symbolic domination (Bourdieu) and reproduction of state ideology (Althusser). These results affirm the urgency of revising textbooks so that they contain transformative narratives of human-nature reciprocity and gender equality.

4. Conclusion

This study affirms that Islamic and Christian Religious Education textbooks at the elementary-school level in the Independent Curriculum still reproduce patriarchal and anthropocentric discourse. Through a combination of ecofeminism and Critical Discourse Analysis (van Leeuwen), recurring patterns are evident in the placement of women in domestic and care work, the anonymization of women vis-à-vis the explicit naming of men, as well as the activation of men as protectors/leaders while women are passivated as recipients of assistance. Thus, the first and second research questions are answered: gender–ecology relations are constructed through visual–linguistic representation strategies (activation/passivation, role allocation, exclusion, and symbolic marking), and the state—through its ideological apparatus in the production and standardization of textbooks—continues to act as a producer of discourse that preserves these patterns.

Practically, these findings can be directly implemented through ecofeminist–CDA rubric–based auditing and manuscript revision across the entire book publishing cycle, accompanied by editorial–design guidelines that ensure balanced roles, equal naming of characters, and the avoidance of visual codes that essentialize gender. Classroom implementation is reinforced through discourse literacy training for teachers so that they are able to read critically, prepare counter-texts, and facilitate reflective discussion without altering religious substance. At the system level, ministries and independent bodies need to carry out periodic, transparent evaluations with feedback channels from schools and religious communities to monitor shifts in representation and ensure consistent improvement.

The degree of answerability of this research is high for the corpus examined, but generalization is limited by the scope of the data (eight books for grades 1–4, two religious subjects, the 2021–2023 period) as well as the qualitative nature of the analysis and the limited number of informants. Implications for further research include expanding the corpus to other levels and denominations, linking representation analysis with pedagogical practice and students' classroom reception, testing the impact of revised textbooks in a quasi-experimental manner, examining the regulation—production process of books to find policy intervention points, and enriching the intersectional perspective. If this improvement agenda is mainstreamed, religious textbooks have the potential to shift from vehicles for reproducing dominant values to pedagogical instruments that cultivate gender equality and ecological sustainability from elementary education onward.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Radius Setiyawan initiated the research topic, formulated the core research questions, and coordinated the manuscript writing process. Wijayadi contributed to the development of the theoretical framework and provided oversight on the research methodology. Riska Rahayu Roisiah assisted in refining the manuscript and ensured the consistency of the academic writing style.

Funding statement

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of Risetmu Majelis Diktilitbang PP Muhammadiyah for providing a research grant that facilitated this study.

Data availability statement

The datasets generated during and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of Interest's statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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