

Disability and Structural Injustice in *Miracle in Cell No. 7*: A Critical Disability Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines how intellectual disability and structural injustice are constructed in *Miracle in Cell No. 7*, directed by Hanung Bramantyo. It aims to analyze the discursive construction of disability and the reproduction of structural discrimination within legal and social contexts. Using a qualitative research design with a critical discourse analysis approach, this study applies Critical Disability Theory to interpret selected dialogues and key scenes that reflect power relations and institutional practices within the narrative. The findings reveal that intellectual disability is constructed as deviance within legal discourse, leading to discursive marginalization and the denial of agency. Discrimination operates structurally through institutional mechanisms such as coercive interrogation, lack of accommodation, and biased legal procedures within the criminal justice system. At the social level, stigma and dominant cultural narratives construct disability as a marker of danger and incompetence, reinforcing exclusion and legitimizing injustice. The novelty of this study lies in highlighting how cinematic narratives reproduce institutionalized ableism across both legal and social domains. It contributes to Critical Disability Studies by emphasizing discrimination as a multidimensional and structurally embedded phenomenon shaped by power relations. Practically, the study underscores the need for disability-inclusive legal frameworks and increased social awareness to promote justice, equality, and dignity for persons with disabilities.

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1. Introduction

Currently, many films explore social issues and highlight injustices within society. One such film is *Miracle in Cell No. 7* by Hanung Bramantyo (2022), a remake of a South Korean film. This adaptation sheds light on the discrimination faced by people with disabilities. Discrimination, often rooted in social prejudice, manifests in various forms and reflects deep-rooted systemic inequalities that persist across different aspects of life (Williams et al., 2019).

According to Bohren et al. (2022), discrimination is not only a moral issue but also has significant social and economic consequences. From this perspective, discrimination arises from unequal treatment based on group identity, which ultimately weakens marginalized groups. Although the Indonesian Constitution (Article 28I paragraph 2) guarantees equal rights for all citizens, in practice, individuals with disabilities are still frequently subjected to unfair treatment.

Persons with disabilities are an integral part of society and possess the same rights, obligations, and roles as other citizens. However, they often face barriers in participating fully in social life due to both physical and social environments (Hackett et al., 2020). Disability refers to long-term conditions, including physical and mental limitations, which may hinder individuals' ability to carry out daily activities and engage in society.

Muster (2023) explains that despite ongoing efforts to promote equality and inclusion, there are still gaps in understanding disability justice, particularly within institutional systems such as the criminal justice system. Similarly, Taruk Allo (2022) argues that stereotypes and misconceptions about disability often become the root causes of discrimination, affecting various aspects of life, including education, employment, and social participation. Therefore, changing societal perceptions is essential in creating a more inclusive and equitable environment.

The film portrays the life of Dodo Rozak, a father with an intellectual disability who works as a balloon seller and lives happily with his daughter. His life changes drastically when he is falsely accused of murdering a child. Due to his cognitive limitations, Dodo is unable to explain the situation clearly, leading to his imprisonment and eventual death sentence. Throughout the story, the film illustrates how his disability makes him vulnerable to misunderstanding, manipulation, and injustice within the legal system.

Despite the tragic narrative, the film also highlights themes of love, empathy, and solidarity, particularly through the relationship between Dodo and his daughter, Kartika, as well as the support he receives from fellow inmates. These elements provide a powerful contrast to the structural injustice he experiences.

Previous studies on *Miracle in Cell No. 7* have predominantly focused on its emotional narrative, moral values, and themes of family and empathy. While these studies provide valuable insights into the film's affective dimensions, they tend to overlook how disability is constructed within broader systems of power, particularly through legal discourse and institutional practices. As a result, limited attention has been given to the ways in which structural injustice and ableism are reproduced and normalized within the narrative.

To address this gap, this study critically examines how intellectual disability is not only represented but also constructed and regulated through social and legal discourses in the film. By shifting the focus from emotional interpretation to structural analysis, this research offers a deeper understanding of how discrimination operates at the institutional level, particularly within the criminal justice system.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the construction of disability and the reproduction of structural injustice in *Miracle in Cell No. 7* using a Critical Disability Theory perspective.

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. How is intellectual disability constructed within legal and social discourse in the film?
2. What forms of structural discrimination are reproduced through institutional practices in the narrative?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Discrimination

Discrimination refers to unfair treatment toward individuals or groups, particularly those who are marginalized and lack power over their rights. It can take various forms, including physical violence, verbal abuse, social exclusion, and limited access to opportunities. Discrimination not only harms individuals psychologically but also weakens social cohesion and hinders inclusive development.

Rizky (2015) states that discrimination is a serious violation of human rights, causing negative impacts such as isolation, low self-esteem, and depression, while also limiting

individuals' participation in society. Similarly, Goodley (2017) explains that discrimination is constructed through dominant discourses of normality, where individuals with disabilities are positioned outside socially accepted standards, particularly in relation to productivity and social expectations.

Mann (2022) highlights that discrimination is deeply rooted in social and workplace structures, where marginalized groups—such as women, minorities, and persons with disabilities often receive unequal treatment despite having similar qualifications. Furthermore, Arisal et al. (2020) argue that discrimination is closely linked to social stratification, where individuals in lower social positions are more vulnerable to unfair treatment due to stigma and societal perceptions.

In the Indonesian context, Bahrudin (2022) emphasizes that disability discrimination is a fundamental injustice, particularly when reasonable accommodations are not provided in legal processes, as mandated in Law No. 39 of 1998 on Human Rights. This shows that discrimination is not only individual but also institutional.

From a literary perspective, Purwarno & Efrizah (2025) highlight that literary works often reflect social inequalities and marginalized voices, making literature a medium to critically examine injustice and discrimination within society. In line with this, Efrizah & Purwarno (2026) argue that power relations and domination, as seen in literary texts, reveal how oppression is structurally maintained, which can also be applied to understanding discrimination in broader social contexts.

Building on these perspectives, this study adopts a Critical Disability Theory framework, viewing discrimination not merely as unequal treatment but as a structural issue embedded in social systems, legal institutions, and cultural norms. However, these perspectives tend to conceptualize discrimination primarily as unequal treatment or social exclusion, without fully addressing how it is systematically produced and reproduced within institutional and cultural structures. From a Critical Disability Theory perspective, discrimination must be understood through the concept of ableism, which refers to the normalization of able-bodiedness and the marginalization of individuals with disabilities. In this sense, disability is not merely an individual condition but a socially constructed category, shaped by dominant norms, power relations, and institutional practices. Therefore, discrimination operates not only at the interpersonal level but also as a form of institutional oppression, particularly within legal systems that fail to recognize and accommodate cognitive differences.

2.2 Types of Discrimination

While these categories provide a useful framework, they often fail to capture how discrimination operates simultaneously across multiple structural levels, particularly in the case of disability.

Discrimination can be categorized into several types. Caroline et al. (2022) explain the concept of disparate treatment, referring to unequal treatment based on protected characteristics. They further note that discrimination may occur based on identity factors such as race, gender, religion, age, or disability, both through direct actions and systemic practices. The Equality Act 2010 (UK Government, 2010) classifies discrimination into four main types:

1. Direct Discrimination

Direct discrimination occurs when individuals are treated unfairly explicitly because of certain characteristics. In the context of film analysis, Emananda and Zuhriya (2023) demonstrate that discrimination toward persons with disabilities in *Miracle in Cell No. 7* is represented through unjust accusations and unequal treatment rooted in prejudice. Similarly, Dodo Rozak experiences direct discrimination when he is accused and

convicted without proper evidence, as his intellectual disability is immediately associated with criminal behavior.

2. Indirect Discrimination

Indirect discrimination refers to seemingly neutral rules that disproportionately disadvantage certain groups (Campbell & Smith, 2023). In the film, legal procedures requiring logical defense disadvantage Dodo, who cannot fully understand or respond due to his condition.

3. Harassment

Harassment involves degrading or abusive behavior directed at individuals based on identity (Gunawan et al., 2020). In the film, Dodo faces verbal and physical mistreatment, reflecting broader societal prejudice toward people with disabilities.

4. Victimization

Victimization refers to an adverse experience involving physical or psychological harm caused by harmful actions inflicted by others (Janssen et al., 2021). In this study, Dodo's experience reflects not only individual victimization but also structural victimization, where institutional practices such as coercive interrogation and legal exclusion systematically produce harm and reinforce injustice.

2.3 Mental Disabilities

Disability is understood differently across contexts. Taylor (2018) explains that it can be seen as a medical condition or as the result of interaction between individuals and environmental barriers. According to Law No. 8/2016, persons with disabilities experience limitations that affect their participation in society (Republic of Indonesia, 2016).

People with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to discrimination due to stigma and lack of awareness. Sakdiyah and Ulum (2024) notes that they are often labeled as incapable or dependent, which reinforces negative stereotypes. In reality, many individuals with disabilities strive for independence and meaningful participation in society.

Discrimination against people with mental disabilities often appears in the form of exclusion, unequal treatment, and limited access to services. These challenges highlight the need for inclusive policies and social awareness to ensure equal rights and dignity. Although some individuals still hold negative perceptions, others recognize persons with disabilities as equal members of society who deserve respect and fair treatment.

From a Critical Disability perspective, intellectual disability is not merely a medical condition but is shaped by social interpretations that position individuals as incapable, thereby reinforcing exclusion and dependency.

3. Research Method

3.1 Study Design

This study employs a qualitative research design with a critical discourse analysis approach. Qualitative research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of social and human phenomena through interpretation rather than quantification (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach allows the researcher to explore how meanings, power relations, and social realities are constructed through discourse.

The analysis is guided by Critical Disability Theory as the theoretical framework to interpret how disability and structural injustice are constructed within discourse. The data consist of dialogues, scenes, and narrative elements derived from the film *Miracle in Cell No. 7*. Through this approach, the study examines how intellectual disability is represented and constructed through language, institutional practices, and social interactions. The use of discourse analysis enables the researcher to explore how meanings, power relations, and forms of discrimination are produced and reproduced within the narrative.

Therefore, this study not only identifies forms of discrimination but also analyzes how structural injustice and ableism are embedded within legal and social discourses in the film.

3.2 Data Collection

The primary data source of this study is the film *Miracle in Cell No. 7*, directed by Hanung Bramantyo. The data consist of selected dialogues, scenes, and narrative sequences that represent acts of discrimination and the construction of intellectual disability.

The data were collected through several steps. First, the researcher watched the film repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding of the storyline and context. Second, relevant scenes and dialogues were identified and documented.

The selection of data was based on the following criteria:

1. Scenes that explicitly depict discrimination toward the protagonist
2. Dialogues that reflect societal or institutional attitudes toward intellectual disability
3. Narrative moments involving legal processes (e.g., interrogation, trial, imprisonment)
4. Scenes that illustrate power relations and unequal treatment

These criteria ensure that the selected data are relevant to the research focus on structural discrimination and discourse construction.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a thematic discourse analysis approach. The analysis was conducted through several stages. First, the collected data were organized and coded based on recurring themes related to discrimination, such as stigma, legal injustice, coercion, and institutional bias. This coding process allowed the researcher to systematically categorize patterns within the data. Second, the identified themes were interpreted using the framework of Critical Disability Theory, particularly focusing on concepts such as ableism, social construction of disability, and institutional oppression. At this stage, the analysis examines how language, dialogue, and narrative structure contribute to the construction of disability as deviance within the legal and social system. Third, the analysis explores how these discursive constructions reflect broader power relations and structural inequalities, particularly within the criminal justice system portrayed in the film. Finally, the findings are presented descriptively and analytically, supported by selected excerpts from the film to strengthen interpretation and argumentation.

3.4 Validity and Trustworthiness

To ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the findings, this study applies theoretical triangulation by integrating multiple perspectives from discrimination theory and Critical Disability Theory. This allows the analysis to be examined from different conceptual angles.

In addition, data triangulation is applied by analyzing multiple forms of data, including dialogues, visual scenes, and narrative context, to provide a more comprehensive interpretation.

Furthermore, the researcher ensures theoretical validity by consistently aligning the data interpretation with key concepts such as ableism, discourse, and structural injustice, thereby strengthening the credibility and rigor of the analysis

4. Discussion

This study analyzes how discrimination against individuals with intellectual disabilities is constructed and reproduced in *Miracle in Cell No. 7*. Moving beyond narrative

description, the discussion focuses on how the film reflects institutionalized ableism, discursive marginalization, and structural injustice through legal and social practices.

4.1 Construction of Disability in Legal Discourse

The film demonstrates how intellectual disability is discursively constructed within legal institutions as a form of deviance rather than a condition requiring protection. From a Critical Disability Theory perspective, this reflects institutionalized ableism, where legal systems normalize able-bodied standards and marginalize those who do not conform.

This construction is evident in the interrogation scene, where the investigator states, *"We already know who you are."* This statement reduces Dodo's identity to his disability and positions it as sufficient evidence of guilt. Rather than being treated as a vulnerable individual requiring support, Dodo is framed as inherently unreliable.

Dodo's response, *"I didn't do anything,"* is ignored, illustrating discursive marginalization, in which his voice is systematically invalidated. This aligns with the argument that disability is constructed through dominant norms of "normality" that position individuals with disabilities as deviant and unreliable (Goodley, 2017). Thus, the legal discourse in the film does not operate neutrally but actively constructs disability as deviance, reinforcing exclusion and injustice.

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Picture 1

Discrimination against Dodo Rozak (26:56)



4.2 Institutionalized Ableism and Legal Exclusion

The legal process depicted in the film reflects institutional oppression, particularly through the absence of accommodations for individuals with intellectual disabilities. During the interrogation, Dodo is pressured to confess despite his confusion, as reflected in the command, *"Quickly explain what really happened."*

This demand assumes cognitive ability and ignores Dodo's limitations, illustrating legal exclusion, where institutional procedures systematically disadvantage individuals who cannot conform to normative standards.

Furthermore, the forced reconstruction of the crime scene demonstrates how institutional power operates coercively. Dodo's compliance is not a reflection of guilt but of vulnerability under pressure. This reflects structural injustice, where the legal system prioritizes efficiency and predetermined outcomes over fairness.

From a Critical Disability perspective, this confirms that disability is not inherently disabling; rather, it is the institutional failure to accommodate difference that produces injustice.

Picture 2

Dodo Rozak is forced to practice a murder scene (30:18)



4.3 Social Stigma and Discursive Construction of Guilt

Beyond legal institutions, discrimination is reinforced through societal attitudes. This is evident in public reactions such as, “*People like him can’t be trusted.*” Such statements reflect how social stigma constructs disability as synonymous with danger and incompetence. This aligns with Sakdiyah and Ulum (2024), who notes that individuals with disabilities are often labeled as incapable, reinforcing exclusion. In the film, the community’s immediate assumption of Dodo’s guilt demonstrates how stigma operates as discursive power, shaping perception without evidence.

From a Critical Disability perspective, this reflects ableism at the social level, where dominant cultural norms define who is considered “normal” and exclude those who deviate. These social constructions legitimize institutional discrimination, showing how injustice is reproduced across multiple levels.

Picture 3

People's Views on Dodo Rozak as a suspect (30:29)



4.4 Discrimination within Carceral Space

Discrimination against Dodo continues within the prison, where he is initially treated as inherently dangerous due to both his alleged crime and his disability. This reflects the intersection of criminal stigma and ableism, reinforcing his marginalization.

However, this perception shifts as inmates begin to recognize his innocence and humanity. For example, their protective actions toward Dodo and his daughter indicate a rejection of the dominant narrative imposed by the legal system.

This transformation illustrates that discrimination is socially constructed and therefore subject to change. It also highlights the tension between institutional labeling and human relationality, where interpersonal interaction can challenge oppressive structures.

4.5 Impact of Structural Discrimination

The impact of discrimination on Dodo is both structural and personal. His repeated statements, such as “*I just want to go home,*” reflect not only emotional distress but also systemic disempowerment, where he is denied agency within institutional processes.

This supports Mann’s (2022) argument that discrimination is embedded within structural systems rather than isolated actions. Dodo’s experience demonstrates how legal, social, and institutional discrimination intersect to produce cumulative injustice.

Additionally, the impact extends to Kartika, whose struggle to defend her father illustrates how discrimination operates relationally, affecting family members and reinforcing broader patterns of marginalization.

4.6 Reframing Justice

The film critiques formal legal justice through its failure to recognize Dodo’s condition and protect his rights. This is challenged in the courtroom when Kartika asserts, “*My father is innocent,*” reframing the narrative imposed by the legal system.

From a Critical Disability perspective, this moment represents resistance to structural oppression, where marginalized voices challenge dominant institutional narratives. The eventual recognition of Dodo’s innocence highlights the limitations of legal systems that rely solely on procedural logic without considering social context and cognitive diversity. The film thus advocates for a more inclusive understanding of justice based on recognition, dignity, and humanity.

4.7 Synthesis of Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that discrimination against individuals with intellectual disabilities in *Miracle in Cell No. 7* operates across multiple interconnected levels: legal, institutional, and social. First, the analysis shows that intellectual disability is discursively constructed within legal institutions as deviance, answering the first research question. This construction leads to the marginalization of Dodo’s voice and the denial of his legal agency. Second, the study reveals that structural discrimination is reproduced through institutional practices such as coercive interrogation, lack of legal accommodation, and biased judicial processes, addressing the second research question. Furthermore, discrimination is reinforced by social stigma, which legitimizes institutional injustice and normalizes exclusion. These findings confirm that discrimination is not merely individual but structurally embedded within systems of power, as emphasized in Critical Disability Theory.

Overall, the film illustrates how ableism operates as a dominant ideology that shapes legal discourse, social perception, and institutional practices, resulting in systemic injustice against individuals with intellectual disabilities.

These findings also suggest that cinematic representations play a significant role in shaping public understanding of disability and justice.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals that discrimination against individuals with intellectual disabilities in *Miracle in Cell No. 7* is not merely an expression of individual prejudice but is systematically produced through legal, social, and institutional practices. By applying a Critical Disability Theory perspective, the findings demonstrate that intellectual disability is discursively constructed as deviance within dominant legal and social frameworks, leading to the marginalization and exclusion of individuals like Dodo Rozak.

The study makes a theoretical contribution by extending the application of Critical Disability Theory into film analysis, particularly by highlighting how institutionalized ableism, discursive marginalization, and legal exclusion operate simultaneously within

cinematic narratives. It shows that discrimination should be understood as a multidimensional and structurally embedded phenomenon, rather than as isolated acts of bias.

In terms of practical implications, the findings underscore the urgent need for more inclusive legal frameworks that recognize cognitive diversity and provide appropriate accommodations for individuals with intellectual disabilities. The study suggests that legal institutions must move beyond procedural formalism toward a more humane and context-sensitive approach to justice. Additionally, it highlights the importance of increasing public awareness to challenge stigma and reshape societal perceptions of disability.

Furthermore, the film illustrates that while empathy and solidarity represented through Kartika and the prison community, can function as forms of resistance against oppression, such efforts remain insufficient without broader systemic reform. This reinforces the need for institutional accountability in addressing discrimination.

For future research, this study recommends further exploration of how disability is constructed across different media, cultural contexts, and legal systems. Comparative studies could provide deeper insight into how institutionalized ableism operates globally. Additionally, future research may focus on integrating interdisciplinary approaches, particularly between legal studies and disability studies, to develop more comprehensive frameworks for analyzing and addressing structural discrimination. Ultimately, this study emphasizes that achieving justice for persons with disabilities requires not only legal reform but also a fundamental shift in how society understands and values human difference.

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