

## Female Agency in Contemporary Indonesian Horror Films

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### Abstract

Studies of women in Indonesian horror films usually employ two perspectives. The first perspective sees women as being exploited, objectified, and sexually commodified. The second one perceives women as scary figures since in Indonesian horror films the ghosts who terrorize human life are women or used to be women when they were still alive. The article takes a different view as it uses female agency concept to look at contemporary horror that feature women as the main characters. The article examine how women are represented when they become main characters in two films: *Pengabdian Setan* (2017), and *Perempuan Tanah Jahanam* (2019). The films were chosen due to the prominent feature of women, cinematic achievement, and commercial success. In the article, textual analysis is used to uncover cultural structure, and through it, the article critically examined their ideological contents. The article employed female agency as a new analytical framework in looking at gender representation in horror films where in previous studies women were only seen as victims of sexual exploitation and/or as perpetrators of terror. The two films being analyzed represent women as strong characters without turning them into ghosts. The female protagonist in *Pengabdian Setan* is practically a leader in her family as they try to deal with supernatural events threatening them. Meanwhile in *Perempuan Tanah Jahanam* the main female character take on mysterious events in a remote village which is unknowingly related to her family and is able to remove a curse plague them for many years. This article shows that female characters in contemporary Indonesian horror films do not always be sexual exploitation or turn into terrorizing ghosts so that the binary opposition of victims or perpetrators is no longer the norm.

**Keywords:** women; horror film; agency

## Introduction

Indonesian horror films usually represent women in exploitative and sexualised manners (Imanjaya, 2010). In these films women are sex objects that can be traded and this is something that is considered normal in the history of Indonesian cinema (Ayun, 2015). In Indonesian horror films, as it is the norm for the national cinema, sexuality is not shown openly but sexual exploitation still occurs by showing half-naked women's bodies and implied sex scenes. Thus, Pangastuti (2019) stated that Indonesian horror films present women as sexually exploited, objectified, and commodified. Although according to her, in several films, female characters are seen as independent and not just victims, women are still sexually objectified. Besides being shown as sexual objects, women are also shown as scary figures because the ghosts that appear are mostly depicted as women. Indonesian horror films have always featured female ghosts as important but have scary roles and spread fear in human life (Permatasari and Widisanti, 2019). Even, according to Kusumaryati (2016), the scary aspect is the feminine body since almost all the female characters turn into ghosts with terrible appearances. Soh (in Pangastuti, 2019) argues that women may be victims of sexual violence and murder, but they reappear to take revenge and terrorize not only men, but also women. After looking at the scholarly accounts above, it can be concluded that studies of women in Indonesian horror films look at two aspects. The first one views women as being exploited, objectified, and sexually commodified, or in Imanjaya's terms (2010): victims of 'sexploitation.' The second perceives women as scary figures wherein Indonesian horror films the ghosts who terrorize human life are women or who used to be women when they were still alive. The article takes a different path, namely using female agency perspective to examine the representation of women in contemporary horror films. Female agency refers to self-confidence, awareness of their rights, as well as their ability to influence their own lives by making choices and controlling the necessary resources (Qutteina, 2019).

The issue of female agency needs to be carried out since some horror films currently feature women as the main characters who do not always turn into ghosts who terrorize everyone so that they are not trapped in the binary opposition of victims or perpetrators. Therefore, this article specifically looks at how the female characters are represented when they become the main character in horror films in terms of female agency in the film. In general, this article shows how gender is represented in the media and attempt to produce a new analytical framework in perceiving gender representation in horror films where in previous studies women were only seen as victims of sexual exploitation and/or as perpetrators of terror.

## Literature Review

There have been a number of studies that have been conducted on how women are represented in horror films. According to Permatasari and Widisanti (2019) women and horror films are almost inseparable from each other. Many Indonesian horror films feature female ghosts as highly important characters in the narrative since in general this film genre in Indonesia always presents women as ghost figures. One of the most popular classic horror film actors is Suzanna, who was an icon of Indonesian horror films in the 1970s to 1980s.

In Wilger's findings (2016), female ghosts in Indonesian horror films often have to be adapted to the dominant morality in each period. In the New Order period, the prevailing morality regime did not allow women to act freely, in the early post-New Order period its morality allowed women's advancement, while in the post-2010s period, Islamic morality is developed which prioritized piety. However, based on the findings of Ayun (2015) and Pangastuti (2019), although there is a different periodization, Indonesian horror films still construct women as sexual objects which indirectly reinforces the social reality where women's sexuality is dominated by men. Women are used as sexual objects in horror films to fulfill the sexual needs of male characters and to strengthen the privilege of men over women. In addition, whereas women in the New Order horror films are depicted as submissive and dependent on men, in the post-New Order era, women are depicted as survivors who are more independent, independent, active, but still cannot truly escape from patriarchal culture.

In looking at women in Indonesian horror films, this article uses the perspective of female agency. Mahmood (2005), using the Foucaultian approach, states that the processes and conditions that subordinate a person are also the means by which that person has self-awareness and agency. Therefore, agency is always a process of creating and remaking society and culture. Although agency is part of the power matrix, it also allows people to act in pursuit of their own goals. However, according to Mahmood (2005) the conceptualization of agency is actually beyond the common binary opposition or against power because there are many ways to form the relationship between the subject and the external norm. Agency for women refers to two types, namely intrinsic and instrumental (Qutteina, 2019). Intrinsically agency refers to self-confidence and awareness of their rights (powers that exist within themselves). While instrumentally, agency refers to the ability to influence one's own life by having the power to make choices and control the resources needed. With the agency, women are empowered to achieve the goals set by themselves. This female agency approach has been used by researchers to read the representation of women in contemporary Islamic films. Hariyadi (2020) shows

that in contemporary Islamic films, women still have agency. However, the existing female agency is not a progressive one because it is limited and constructed by networks of power outside of women.

## Methods

The research leading to this article employed qualitative method as it deals with cultural texts in need of depth analysis. Stokes (2003) states that the study of cultural texts is important to look at the general codes, terms, ideologies, discourses, and individuals that dominate cultural practice. In the first year of research, the objects of analysis were texts in the form of visuals and narratives in the films *Pengabdi Setan* or *Satan's Slave* (2017) and *Perempuan Tanah Jahanam* or *Impetigore* (2019). The films were selected based on considerations of commercial value as well as artistic achievement. In general, textual analysis requires researchers to reveal the structure of culture, and through it, the ideology of a culture (Stokes, 2003).

In the more operational level, researchers collected and selected scenes as material for analysis. The selection was adjusted to pre-determined criteria, namely those that presented women not only as ghosts but also as humans, more specifically those that placed women outside the binary opposition of victims or perpetrators. After the selection, the researchers developed a frame of view that was outside the framework of the binary opposition that could be used to read and interpret the scenes in the three Indonesian horror films analyzed.

## Results

The film *Pengabdi Setan* is a remake of the 1980 film of the same name. This film stars Tara Basro, Endy Arfian, Nasar Anuz and Adhiyat Abdylkhadir. This 107-minute film was first released on 28 September 2017. The film, directed by Joko Anwar, won several awards at the 2017 Indonesian Film Festival, including Best Film, Best Director (Joko Anwar), and Best Adapted Screenwriter (Joko Anwar). This film tells the story of a family consisting of a father, mother and four children. The story opens with their family's financial problems running out of funds for their mother's medical expenses. Because the family needed money, they eventually sold the house and had to move to their grandmother's house in a village. The illness was so severe for three and a half years that her mother, Mawarni, was unable to move her body and just lay in bed.

Their finances are getting more and more worrying day by day. Various attempts were made by Rini's family to earn extra money, including dropping out of college and asking for royalties from Mawarni, who had a career in singing. Tony's

younger brother is also willing to sell motorbikes and other personal items to help his family. Every effort made to make her mother recover from her illness failed after Rini found her mother fell on the floor of her room and breathed her last. At Mawarni's burial place, Rini's family is introduced to a Ustad (Arswendi Bening Swara) and his son, Hendra (Dimas Aditya) who helps Rini's family in their mourning period.

After Mawarni's death, terror, strange, supernatural, and scary events often occurred. They are often visited by a figure who resembles their late mother. Almost every day his family gets a frightening terror. One of the peaks was when the grandmother fell into an old well and died which was found by Bondi. After her grandmother died, Rini found a letter addressed to Budiman Syailendra (Egy Fedly) who was a friend of her grandmother. When Rini goes to deliver her grandmother's letter to Budiman, Rini discovers facts about her mother's past. That in the past her grandmother did not approve of her parents' marriage because Mawarni was an artist and could not have children. Because of this, Mawarni was said to have joined a satanic cult in order to have children. This black agreement made with a spirit has consequences that threaten the life of the family. Meanwhile, Tony is reading the Maya magazine that Budiman gave him, which has an article on Satan's servants, in which the article talks about their mother's relationship with the Satanist sect. The consequence of following a sect is that it is possible that the last child in this family, Ian, will be adopted by the sect after the age of 7 years. Some of the terrors got worse and unnatural, they finally called a religious cleric to check their house and they were advised to worship more. The terror not only hit Rini's family but also the cleric family, because he interfered with Rini's family. Hendra, the son of a religious cleric, died in an accident while going to Budiman's flat, after Budiman called him and gave him the article he wrote as a correction to the previous article. With the death of his son, the cleric gave up on meddling in Rini's family affairs.

After her father returned from the city, Rini recounted all the terrible incidents and terrors. Until finally their family decided to move to the flat and waited for the car to pick them up, but until evening no one came to pick them up. Ustad came to see them to apologize for not being able to help. It was a very tense night, at exactly 12 o'clock at night Ian would have his 7th birthday. All the families were haunted by the undead, their homes were surrounded by the undead that had risen from the cemetery. Bondi finds Ian speaking a foreign language while looking out the window (even though Ian does not seem to be able to speak before). The family also found that Ian had walked into the crowd of the undead with the ghost of Mawarni and found the Ustad who had died by being stabbed. After some time,

Budiman arrived and took Rini's family away. A year later, Rini's family has settled in the flat.

Our finding of the film confirms Permatasari and Widianti's suggestion (2019) that in the film *Pengabdian Setan* (2017), female ghosts are metaphors for female subjects who are excluded from the category of 'ideal' women in patriarchal ideology. In one of the best-selling horror films, the violation to one of the 'ideal' constructions of women in the patriarchal ideology occurred when the females are unable to produce offspring and become a 'true' mother. The ghost of the mother in the film *Pengabdian Setan* is the representation of a 'failed product' because she is unable to have children. In the film *Asih*, although the female character who later becomes a ghost is able to give a birth, it is off the marriage relationship which is still considered sacred by the Indonesian people. It also happens to *Pengabdian Setan* as the female character is suggested to have children from her relationship with multiple men (not only one) of the satan cult she joins in in order to be the 'ideal woman.'

Considering the fact that Mawarni became a ghost after she died due to her joining into the satanic cult and her joining due to the issue of female fertility, it can be said that she is a victim of patriarchal ideology. One of the things that is emphasized in the patriarchal ideology is that women must have children because their main and first role is as mothers who carry out reproductive functions. Having children and becoming a mother is constructed as the dream of all Indonesian women. This is due to the perception that requires women to have children or offspring in order to be considered as 'true' and complete women. In the context of Indonesian society, the ideal woman is constructed into two things, namely as a wife who serves her husband and is able to provide offspring in the household and as a good and wise mother, able to educate, and raise her children. Thus, women as subjects cannot be separated from the state ideology that developed at that time. Julia Suryakusuma called it 'Ibuisim' as women are required to be able to produce offspring and give birth to the nation's children. According to Permatasari and Widianti (2019), Mawarni's appearance as a female ghost can be categorized as a subject or a 'failed product' because it does not enter into the construction expected by the state and patriarchal society. However, in our reading of the film Mawarni does submit to the power of patriarchy as she joins the cult to have children and be accepted by her husband's family, particularly her mother-in-law. Thus, in this film Mawarni actually affirms the 'ideal' role model when she wanted to be integrated into her husband's family and finally succeeded albeit with horrific consequences.

We argue that, despite Mawarni eventually became a mother who is identical with love and tenderness, she is shown as a source of horror and terror for her own

family. Mawarni is not an ideal mother (in a patriarchal sense), an antagonist who is far from the concept of a mother as an ideal woman. This is not to mention that although in the first place it is said that Marni was able to bear children through a supernatural method (worshipping Satan) Marni was actually impregnated by members of the cult (not the Satan), depicted by the children who are distinctly different from each other. It shows that Mawarni is an object where the power of men operates. It also affirms Heider's statement (1991) that in most Indonesian horror films, there are forms of violence and demonstrations of power by men against women. And in the case of *Pengabdi Setan*, it is shown by off screen sexual engagements of Mawarni and an unknown number of men.

Although Mawarni's character has an important role in the film, her position is not the main one because the portion of her on screen appearance is relatively small. The main female character in the film *Pengabdi Setan* (2017) is Rini, the eldest child of Mawarni. Rini's presence in this film can actually be said to show the agency because she is the one who takes care of the problems. This was especially apparent after the death of her mother because after her mother's funeral, Rini's father went to town for a few days. That being said that the role she played is the usual domestic role assigned to women in the patriarchal world. She has to abandon her college education due to the financial difficulty endured by her family after her mother went ill and unable to provide income (the film does not mention whether the father has a job). Meanwhile, her male brother can continue to go to school. There are only a few occasions when she shows her agency outside of the traditional sphere for women. One of them is when she tries to find a solution to the supernatural problem by going to the city to meet with her grandmother's friend who has knowledge on supernatural events, particularly surrounding the mystery of her mother's past. Another one is in the first scene when she met with a musical producer (played by the film director Joko Anwar himself) to ask for royalties from her mother's musical album.

The film *Perempuan Tanah Jahanam* (2019) narrates the story of Maya and Dini who both work as tollbooth collectors. One night at work, Maya is attacked by a man wielding a golok. Her assailant claims to be from the village of Harjosari and calls Maya by another name, Rahayu. Following the inscription on an old photo showing a young Maya with a couple in front of a large house, Maya and Dini travel to the remote Harjosari to look for the house in hopes of selling it for money. At Harjosari, the pair encounters cold, suspicious villagers. They witness funerals taking place daily and observe that many headstones in the cemetery belong to children. Dini is lured away by villagers who slit her throat and skin her, mistaking her for Rahayu whose parents owned the house. At night, Maya spies village leader Saptadi

drowning a skinless newborn infant. She finds out from a sympathetic villager, Ratih, that 20 years ago, a rich wayang kulit artist was rumoured to have made a pact with the devil to heal his daughter Rahayu who was born without skin. Since then, all babies in the village have been born skinless. The villagers are persuaded by Saptadi to believe that Rahayu/Maya must be skinned to stop the curse.

The spirit of one of the little girls murdered by the wayang artist for her skin reveals to Maya that the actual way to end the curse is to bury the skins of the slain children together with their bones. The ghost also reveals that Rahayu was born skinless because Saptadi's shaman mother had cursed the baby who was conceived from an adulterous affair between Saptadi and Rahayu's mother. Maya buries the wayang puppets made out of dead children's skin and the victims' spirits are pacified. She is captured by the villagers and, begging for her life, tells Saptadi that he is her biological father. Full of remorse, Saptadi kills himself as a healthy baby is finally born in the village. Out of guilt, Saptadi's mother kills herself too. Maya escapes as the villagers celebrate the first healthy birth in 20 years. But one year later, the wife of a villager has a violent miscarriage as it is shown that the spirit of Saptadi's mother has devoured the fetus, thus indicating the start of a much more horrific curse on the village.

As we have been discussed before horror films, both during the New Order and post-Reformation eras, often used female body of woman as attraction. However, it is not the case with *Perempuan Tanah Jahanam*. Except for the taboo scenes of Nyi Sinta and Ki Saptadi, which are also described fairly, there are no sensual scenes or camera angles directing (male) audience gaze to the curves of female bodies. The film is far from the issue of objectification of women, namely the mere presence of women as objects of spectacle and pleasure, to borrow Mulvey's term (1975), to satisfy men's views (male gaze). Instead of being mere objects, all female characters in the film are described as subjects who are more flexible and 'free' in acting and positioning their bodies.

Nyi Misni, described as having a great influence on the villagers, is the mastermind and initiator of all occult, rituals, curses, and human sacrifices. Nyi Misni is a model for monstrous-maternal, the concept of a mother who on the one hand is described as naturally loving but can also facilitate the birth of terrible acts (Harrington, 2018: 184). Maya and Dini, described as daring women, perform these: chase away a man who scolds them both while chatting and smoking in the toilet; and disguised as students to trick the villagers, find out and unravel the mysteries in the village in their own way despite of Dini giving up her life in her attempt to uncover the mystery. Ratih, dared to be different from most of the villagers, helps Maya while in the village. She is portrayed as, daringly, driving away residents who

want to search her house and Maya by herself. This means that, although it is still depicted as a source of problems/conflicts, there are almost no scenes or visuals that exploit the beauty of the female body. In fact, the female characters in this evil film are described as very flexible and tactical in placing themselves and their bodies.

This film disassembles the patriarchal narrative that usually exists, namely the male figure, the father as the patron and the female as the object. Maya has been able to overcome all obstacles (the villager's pursuit, fear, the dark village itself) in her own way, in order to bury the puppets in the heritage house. Maya is a heroine who experiences and overcomes obstacles for something that in the end of the film revealed to be unclear and has no end. In this film, female agency appears to be stronger than in the film *Pengabdi Setan*. Women are the main figures both in terms of starting and ending the tragedy. In *Pengabdi Setan*, the mother figure in this film is presented as a 'monstrous mother', a mother who threatens her own children the persons she should protect the most. The film presents Misni, a female shaman as a monstrous mother since she is the one who placed the curse on her daughter in law (who doesn't know she is her mother-in law) who betrayed her husband when she had an affair and, as a result, gave a birth to Maya. The curse made Maya's daughter to forget the affair. The shaman is also the one who is responsible for the curse of having babies without skin to the villagers. In *Perempuan Tanah Jahanam* it is not only about the 'monstrous mother' as the film also present the 'monstrous father' who poses the greatest threat to his children by killing babies born without skin. However, it is also Maya's father who saves her from her grandmother who wants to kill her. The women in the film have strong characters in the form of power, courage, heroism, and leadership as a form of representation of feminism values. The character of power is presented by the grandmother, meanwhile courage, heroism and leadership by Maya and Ratih (a villager).

## Conclusion

The female agency of Rini in *Pengabdi Setan* is limited as only in a few scenes she shows, if any, the ability to perform her self-confidence and awareness. Meanwhile, in *Perempuan Tanah Jahanam*, the agency of Maya and Ratih is more intrinsic than instrumental as they display their self-confidence and awareness of their rights. It is not instrumental as they do not have the necessary power to make choices and control the resources needed thus able to influence one's own life. Ironically it is Misni, the shaman, who is represented as having instrumental female agency. Henceforth, we recommend that filmmakers should at least consider to represent more of female agency particularly in the genre of horror as it is the genre

that mostly consider having portrayed women either as helpless and sexualised victims or terrifying monsters. We also in the opinion of the necessity to examine how horror film directors construct femininity in their films, an issue that we may have to pursue in the next research agenda.

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