Body, Terror, and Gender: The Representation of Women in Contemporary Indonesian Horror Films

Dwi Prasetyo[1]*, Tia Saraswati[2], Yahya Muhammed Bah[3]
[1]Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Indonesia
[2]Universitas Airlangga, Indonesia
[3]University of The Gambia, School of Arts and Sciences, Brikama Campus, The Gambia, West Africa
*Corresponding Author: dwiprasetyo@unesa.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This article analyzed the representation of the female body in contemporary Indonesian horror films by drawing on feminist film theory and cultural studies frameworks. Focusing on four key films released between 2017 and 2020, Pengabdi Setan, Sebelum Iblis Menjemput, Kuntilanak, and Impetigore, the study examined how terror was constructed through visual, narrative, and symbolic strategies shaped by gender perspectives. Using a qualitative approach that combined textual and semiotic analysis, the findings revealed that the female body was portrayed ambivalently: both as a victim and as a source of power, referencing the concept of the monstrous-feminine. These representations were mediated through aesthetic techniques, such as camera angles, sound design, and lighting that shaped cultural meanings related to motherhood, sexuality, and social taboos. The study revealed that Indonesian horror films drew on local myths, spiritual beliefs, and socio-religious tensions to produce a distinctly Indonesian variant of the monstrous-feminine, which differed from its Western counterparts. While some films reproduced patriarchal norms by punishing transgressive female characters, others offered subversive narratives that positioned women as agents of revenge and resistance. This study contributed to global feminist film discourse by foregrounding the Southeast Asian context and highlighted the role of the horror genre in expressing contemporary cultural anxieties surrounding gender and the body in Indonesia.

Keywords: Female Body; Feminist Film Theory; Gender Representation; Indonesian Horror; Monstrous-Feminine.

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INTRODUCTION

Horror has long been an important part of the cultural landscape in various parts of the world. This genre is capable of capturing collective fears, reconstructing myths and legends, and presenting social and ideological tensions through cinematic narratives (Carroll, 2015). In film studies, horror is often considered one of the most effective genres for expressing the collective unconscious, historical trauma, and anxieties about the future. Horror serves not only as entertainment but also as a "dark space" for articulating ideas and concerns that are difficult to express directly within a cultural context (Wood, 2003).

Indonesian horror films experienced significant growth over the past decade, driven by several key factors. Firstly, the emergence of a new generation of directors who brought fresh perspectives played a major role in introducing innovation and new stylistic

approaches to the genre. The deregulation of the film industry in the post-reformation era also provided greater creative freedom, allowing filmmakers to express themselves without rigid constraints (Permana et al., 2019). This shift enabled the exploration of bolder and more contemporary themes, making these films increasingly relevant to modern audiences.

The selection of "Pengabdi Setan", "Sebelum Iblis Menjemput", "Kuntilanak", and "Impetigore" is based on four key considerations. First, all were released after 2010, a pivotal period in the resurgence of Indonesian cinema, reflecting shifts in contemporary horror themes and styles. Second, these films center female characters both as victims and sources of terror, aligning with this study's focus on the representation of the female body. Third, they have gained both national and international recognition, reinforcing their relevance in global discussions of horror and gender. Fourth, each film incorporates strong local elements such as myth, ritual, and religious symbolism, offering rich material for analyzing the intersections of horror, culture, and ideology in the Indonesian context.

Moreover, the increased accessibility of digital platforms played a crucial role in the development of this genre. With the rise of streaming services, viewers gained easier access to a wide array of horror films, from new releases to classic titles. This contributed to the growth of a broader and more diverse fan base (Djamaly et al., 2023; Setyaningsih, 2023). Research showed that horror became one of the most popular genres among Indonesian audiences, leading to a heightened demand for fresh and innovative content (Fa et al., 2024).

In addition, the growing international appreciation for Asian horror content helped Indonesian horror films gain global attention. This trend was part of a broader international interest in Asian cultural products, including horror films (Debby et al., 2020);(Annissa & Adiprasetio, 2022). Indonesian horror films not only received positive reception domestically but also drew the interest of international film festivals, thereby expanding their reach and influence in global markets (Varlina & Syauqiyah, 2024). Studies on the representation of female ghosts in Indonesian horror cinema revealed that these characters often served as symbols of social struggle and stigma, attracting interest from both local and international audiences (Annissa & Adiprasetio, 2022).

Through a combination of innovative direction, support from digital platforms, and growing global interest in Asian horror, Indonesian horror cinema became increasingly well-positioned within the film industry. Rooted in local culture, traditions, and societal values, its organic elements significantly contributed to its uniqueness, establishing it as one of the most compelling aspects of contemporary Indonesian filmmaking (Kurniawan & Santabudi, 2023).

The history of Indonesian horror cinema is rich and complex, shaped by the contributions of iconic figures such as Suzanna during the 1970s and 1980s. Suzanna was instrumental in popularizing female ghost characters that were both terrifying and erotically charged, an element that often became a defining theme of horror films in that era (Azizah & Z, 2023);(Setiyawan, 2019). Films like Beranak dalam Kuburan and Sundel Bolong illustrate how female portrayals were frequently associated with sensuality and oppression, giving rise to ghostly figures rooted in gender-based injustices (Annissa & Adiprasetio, 2022);(Agustiningsih & Rostiyati, 2019).

In the decades that followed, particularly the 1990s and early 2000s, the popularity of horror films fluctuated. However, the genre experienced a revival through the introduction of new sub-genres such as horror comedy and psychological horror (Setyaningsih, 2023). Horror films have since become a form of emotional recreation, providing audiences with the thrill of fear as a source of entertainment (Saputra & Limbong, 2019). Within this context, horror cinema serves not only to entertain but also to interrogate broader social and cultural issues, including gender representation and structural inequalities (Anggraini & Br. Ginting, 2020; Debby et al., 2020).

The depiction of female characters in Indonesian horror is often marked by a duality that intertwines eros and death. Women are portrayed simultaneously as victims and as powerful, fearsome entities (Isnaini, 2022; Paranta et al., 2023). Many narratives feature

female ghosts who return as agents of revenge, their supernatural vengeance often rooted in traumatic experiences and social injustices(Annissa & Adiprasetio, 2022);(Agustiningsih & Rostiyati, 2019). From a psychoanalytic perspective, these portrayals reflect deeper emotional and societal undercurrents surrounding gender and power (Supriansyah, 2023).

Ultimately, Indonesian horror films create a discursive space for engaging with cultural taboos and social anxieties. Drawing heavily from local myths and folklore, the genre not only evokes fear but also functions as a potent medium for critical social commentary (Kurniawan & Santabudi, 2023);(Ihsana & Urfan, 2024).

One of the most distinctive features of Indonesian horror films is the use of female figures as central narrative elements, particularly in roles that emphasize mystical, demonic, or victimized aspects. This phenomenon raises deeper questions: Why is the female body so frequently used as a medium for expressing terror? How representations of women in Indonesian horror films reflect broader discourses on gender norms, patriarchal power, religious values, and social conditions serve as the main research problems in this study. These questions form the foundation of the analysis and guide the direction of this article.

Feminist film studies have long emphasized how the female body was frequently depicted as an object of the gaze and sexual desire in cinema (Mulvey, 1989). In the horror genre, the tension between desire and fear was often embodied through female figures portrayed as the "sexy victim" or the "beautiful-faced monster" (Creed, 1993). Numerous studies have suggested that horror served as fertile ground for the reproduction of patriarchal values, where women were tortured, portrayed as victims, or reduced to objects of sadistic viewer gratification (Hurley, 2016). Nevertheless, the genre also offered space for the emergence of powerful and empowered female figures who resisted oppression, either through human characters or mystical entities seeking revenge.

In the theoretical framework of this study, Feminist Film Theory serves as a key foundation, particularly through the concept of the male gaze introduced by Mulvey (1989). This concept highlights how the camera and cinematic structures position women as objects of the gaze, primarily for an assumed heterosexual male audience. In horror films, this gaze is often accompanied by representations of violence, rendering the female body not only a sexual object but also a symbol of suffering and fear. Furthermore, the notion of the monstrous-feminine proposed by Creed (1993) deepens this analysis by suggesting that the figure of the "female monster" in horror reflects cultural anxieties about the female body and sexuality, particularly concerning pregnancy, childbirth, and bodily fluids. This concept plays a crucial role in uncovering how the female body is constructed in horror films as both repulsive and alluring, creating a distinctive tension within the genre.

In addition, the Cultural Studies approach offers a complementary lens for understanding representational dynamics in film. The concepts of representation and ideology, as outlined by Perreault (2023) and Hall (1997), emphasize that media do not merely reflect reality; they also produce and construct meaning. In this context, the representation of women in horror films can be understood as a manifestation, negotiation, or even a form of resistance against dominant ideologies, particularly patriarchy. Furthermore, the ideas of intertextuality and local context, as articulated by Kristeva & Roudiez (1980) and Fiske (1999), stress that Indonesian horror films cannot be separated from folklore, local beliefs, and broader national narratives. Therefore, any analysis of these films must carefully consider the social, historical, and cultural contexts in which they are produced and received to fully grasp their meanings.

In Indonesia, horror is often intertwined with local myths such as kuntilanak, sundel bolong, and wewe gombel. These figures are not only terrifying in a supernatural sense but also serve as reflections of social and cultural traumas, particularly those concerning the position of women in society. For instance, the kuntilanak is frequently depicted as the spirit of a woman who died during pregnancy or was betrayed by a man, forming a narrative of revenge rooted in patriarchal injustice. Such interpretations, however, require more

systematic and contextual analysis, given Indonesia's vast cultural, religious, and social diversity (Suryadi, 2015).

Research Objectives and Significance

This study aims to uncover how the female body is constructed and represented in four contemporary Indonesian horror films produced between 2010 and 2020. This study did not conduct interviews to collect data. The research relied entirely on qualitative textual and semiotic analysis of four selected Indonesian horror films. The data collection involved repeated viewing of the films, taking narrative notes, and thematically coding scenes, without any interviews or direct participant involvement. Practically, this research may serve as a reference for Indonesian directors, producers, and film practitioners to become more sensitive to issues of gender representation. For academics, the study is expected to contribute to the development of feminist film studies and Southeast Asian cinema, which have received relatively less attention compared to Western cinema. Furthermore, with the growth of digital platforms enabling international distribution, a deeper understanding of the content and context of Indonesian horror films becomes increasingly relevant to global scholarship.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm, aiming to explore the meanings embedded in film texts (Denzin, N.K., & Lincoln, 2018). The qualitative characteristics are considered relevant due to the study's focus on the contextual analysis of narrative, visual, and symbolic elements. The interpretive approach enables the researcher to examine films not merely as entertainment products but as cultural artifacts that convey ideologies, power relations, and social negotiations (Hall, 1997).

Research Object

This study analyzes four selected Indonesian horror films, "Pengabdi Setan" (2017), "Sebelum Iblis Menjemput" (2018), "Kuntilanak" (2018), and "Impetigore" (2019), which were chosen based on several criteria. First, the films were released after 2010, a period that marks the resurgence of Indonesian cinema in the post-reform era and the growing influence of digital platforms. Second, the selected films prominently feature horror narratives with female characters as central figures, either as protagonists or as sources of terror. Third, these films gained widespread popularity both domestically and internationally and remain legally accessible to viewers.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection involved several steps. Each film was viewed multiple times to closely observe scenes, dialogues, and visual elements related to the representation of the female body. Key scenes, particularly those depicting moments of terror, character interactions, symbolic violence, and portrayals of femininity, were documented through detailed narrative notes and brief transcripts. These scenes were then thematically coded using categories such as victimization, monstrous embodiment, maternal terror, and agency or resistance. This coding process enabled a structured thematic analysis, following the framework proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006).

Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach within an interpretive framework, aiming to explore the meanings embedded in film texts, not merely as entertainment products, but also as cultural artifacts that represent ideology, power relations, and social negotiations.

This approach is considered appropriate given the study's focus on examining the narrative, visual, and symbolic elements of contemporary Indonesian horror films.

The research method applied is textual and semiotic analysis, drawing on the concepts of sign, signifier, and signified as proposed by Roland Barthes. Through this approach, the study seeks to uncover how visual and auditory symbols in the films construct specific meanings and discourses. Additionally, the research incorporates feminist theoretical frameworks, such as Laura Mulvey's male gaze and Barbara Creed's monstrous-feminine, as well as Stuart Hall's cultural representation theory, to enrich the interpretation of the analytical findings.

Data collection was conducted through repeated viewings of four selected Indonesian horror films—Pengabdi Setan, Sebelum Iblis Menjemput, Kuntilanak, and Impetigore. During these viewings, the researcher recorded detailed narrative notes, documented brief scene transcripts, and carried out thematic coding of key scenes related to the representation of the female body, including categories such as victimization, monstrous embodiment, maternal terror, and agency or resistance.

Data validation was achieved through a thematic coding process following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), ensuring consistency in the interpretation across the four analyzed films. The reliability of the interpretation was strengthened by employing well-established theoretical frameworks, thus allowing the research findings to be justified both theoretically and contextually.

Data analysis was conducted using two main approaches. First, textual and semiotic analysis was employed to examine visual elements such as lighting, color, and setting, as well as auditory aspects like background music and sound effects, to understand how meaning is constructed around the female body in the films. Second, contextual interpretation was applied to connect the textual findings with feminist theories, cultural representation theories, and Indonesia's socio-cultural conditions, including local myths, religious norms, and moral values that influence meaning-making within the film narratives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Findings

This section presents the research findings in detail, focusing on four main aspects: (1) a brief overview of the four films; (2) patterns of female body representation; (3) gendered terror and power dynamics; and (4) visual, narrative, and intertextual elements.

a) Pengabdi Setan (2017)
Director: Joko Anwar

Figure 1. Pengabdi setan (Rapi Film)

Summary:

This film is a remake of the 1980s horror classic, telling the story of a family haunted by the ghost of a deceased mother. Her absence triggers a series of supernatural events. The film intertwines Islamic religious undertones with satanic cult elements, creating a tension between faith and malevolent forces.

Gender Relevance:

The mother, typically a protective figure, becomes the source of terror, emphasizing the ambiguity of maternal roles. The children, particularly the female character, are rendered vulnerable as they are attacked by a frightening maternal figure.

A textual and semiotic analysis of Pengabdi Setan (2017) reveals how visual and auditory symbols shape the cinematic experience while simultaneously conveying implicit messages. Drawing on Roland Barthes' concepts of sign, signifier, and signified, the film skillfully applies symbolism in both its narrative structure and aesthetic design. One notable example lies in the camera work that selectively frames the female body, which can be interpreted as both a reproduction and a challenge to the patriarchal gaze. Cinematographic techniques ranging from wide shots to extreme close-ups are employed to enhance emotional engagement and underscore key moments in the storyline.

Visually, the film is dominated by dim lighting and a cold color palette, which effectively builds a gloomy atmosphere and amplifies the horror tone throughout the narrative. Auditory elements such as the background score and sound effects are strategically used to intensify suspense, emphasize frightening scenes, and evoke a deep sense of terror. All these elements work in synergy to construct a distinctive horror experience while simultaneously representing the female body within a world saturated by darkness and mysticism.

A contextual approach to Pengabdi Setan opens up broader interpretive possibilities, especially when analyzed through the lens of feminist and cultural theory. From the perspective of the male gaze framework, women are often positioned as objects of male visual pleasure. However, this film presents an ambivalent portrayal of femininity, particularly through the mother figure who transforms into a source of horror. This representation resonates with Barbara Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine, in which the female body becomes a site of fear for transgressing domestic norms and the idealized notion of motherhood.

Furthermore, through Stuart Hall's theory of representation, it becomes evident that Pengabdi Setan not only reflects Indonesian social realities but also actively shapes discourse on morality, religiosity, and the position of women in society. Its intertextuality with local myths, use of religious symbols, and portrayal of a satanic cult create a deeply rooted local context, reflecting the religious experiences of Indonesian communities. Pengabdi Setan functions not merely as a horror film, but as a critical reflection on gender issues, cultural values, and evolving ideologies within the context of contemporary Indonesian society.

b) Sebelum Iblis Menjemput (2018)
Director: Timo Tjahjanto

Figure 2. Sebelum iblis menjemput (Sky Media)

Summary:

Sebelum Iblis Menjemput follows the story of Alfie, a young woman whose life descends into horror after her father makes a sinister pact in pursuit of wealth. The narrative is driven by demonic entities and a series of supernatural events that terrorize Alfie and her stepsister.

Gender Relevance:

Alfie is portrayed as a victim of patriarchal consequences, specifically, the destructive choices made by her father. Nevertheless, she also embodies agency as she fights back against malevolent forces, aligning with the notion of the "final girl" (Clover, 1992a), a figure of female resilience within horror cinema.

The film offers a rich case for analysis through textual and semiotic frameworks, particularly Roland Barthes' theory of signs, signifiers, and the signified. Visual elements such as spirit-summoning rituals, occult inscriptions, and depictions of supernatural beings act as symbols that encode deeper meanings surrounding fear, sin, and inherited curses. Cinematographic techniques such as low-key lighting, strategic camera placement, and a dark color palette effectively construct a tense and foreboding atmosphere while also visually representing the characters' psychological states, especially the overwhelming sense of helplessness experienced by female characters.

While Sebelum Iblis Menjemput avoids overtly sexualizing the female body, a common trope in male gaze-oriented horror, it still places female suffering and fear at the visual and narrative forefront. These symbolic portrayals invite reflection on the gendered dimensions of horror, particularly the ways women are depicted as both victims and sites of supernatural confrontation.

Contextual interpretation further reveals the film's embedded ideological messages. Through the lens of Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory and the concept of the monstrous-feminine, the narrative may be seen as an attempt to position the female body simultaneously as an object of horror and a vessel of latent strength. Set within the cultural context of Indonesia, where religious values and spiritual beliefs remain deeply influential, the film draws upon local myths to create its horror landscape. At the same time, it critiques how traditional norms, past transgressions, and patriarchal systems continue to shape contemporary life.

By weaving intertextual connections between horror conventions and indigenous belief systems, Sebelum Iblis Menjemput transcends mere visual spectacle. It engages with broader social discourses in Indonesian society, where themes such as morality, sin, and divine retribution are integral to the construction of fear and the narrative's ideological depth.

c) Kuntilanak (2018)
Director: Rizal Mantovani

Figure 3. Kuntilanak (MVP Pictures)

Summary:

This film centers on the legend of the kuntilanak, a wandering female spirit believed to emerge due to a tragic death or injustice during her lifetime. In the story, a group of orphans discovers a cursed mirror that releases the spirit of the kuntilanak.

Gender Relevance:

The kuntilanak is portrayed as a female ghost figure with long hair, a white dress, and a high-pitched scream. This depiction reflects a societal fear of women who are perceived as seeking revenge for the betrayal or wrongdoing they experienced in the past.

Kuntilanak (2018) can be analyzed through textual and semiotic approaches to reveal how visual and auditory symbols construct meaning, particularly concerning the representation of the female body. Referring to Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, the film presents various signs composed of signifiers and signifieds that work together to produce specific meanings within the context of local culture. The camera work, which often focuses on parts of the female body such as the face, hands, or hair, serves not only an aesthetic function but also acts as a representational mechanism that frames the female body in an ambiguous position, as both an object of fear and a source of power.

This opens up space for critical reading through the lens of the male gaze theory, where women are represented as visual objects within a narrative structure dominated by the male perspective. However, Kuntilanak also demonstrates resistance to patriarchal domination by portraying a female figure as a source of threat through the horror figure of the kuntilanak, which aligns with the concept of the monstrous-feminine (Creed, 1993), the image of a terrifying woman who deviates from the idealized female construct in society.

Visual aspects such as the dominance of dark colors, dim lighting, and the setting of an old house enhance the horror atmosphere and serve as symbolic backdrops for the film's narrative and psychological conflicts. Auditory elements like eerie background music and frightening sound effects further shape the emotional atmosphere and emphasize the connection between fear and the female body. This representation is inseparable from the symbolic operation of ideology, as articulated by Hall (1997), who argues that cultural representation is a site where meaning and power are actively negotiated.

In the context of Kuntilanak, women who transgress social or spiritual norms are often depicted as sources of chaos, while simultaneously serving as vessels for the expression of collective fear. The use of local myth as a narrative foundation highlights strong intertextuality between the film and the cultural memory of Indonesian society. The old wardrobe, from which the ghostly figure emerges, functions as a symbolic link between the past and present fears, as well as a metaphor for the repression and containment of women within the social order. Kuntilanak serves not only as entertainment but also as a reflective space for exploring gender relations, ideology, and local culture in the context of contemporary Indonesian horror cinema.

d) Impetigore (2019)
Director: Joko Anwar

Figure 4. Impetigore (Rapi Films)

Summary:
The film tells the story of Maya, a young woman pursued by a family curse in a remote village. Elements of ritual, blood, and birth serve as central themes. Supernatural events unfold under the weight of social rules that demand "atonement."

Gender Relevance:
The female body becomes the primary site of terror, particularly because pregnancy and childbirth are seen as potential conduits of a curse. The film reflects a collective anxiety surrounding women's reproductive roles and how these roles can be manipulated by the community.

Using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, this analysis highlights how signs, signifiers, and the signified interact to construct cultural meanings surrounding the female body. One of the film's notable strategies includes the use of camera angles that emphasize specific parts of the female body, such as close-up shots of the protagonist Maya's face or body. These techniques not only build narrative tension but also challenge the dominance of the male gaze, traditionally positioning women as visual objects within patriarchal frameworks. While the camera at times seems to force the viewer into a male point of view, the film's narrative subverts this perspective by presenting an active female character who resists submission to oppressive power structures.

Visually, the film employs dark colors, dim lighting, and a bleak rural setting to intensify the horror atmosphere. These elements help construct an image of women as figures associated with trauma, suffering, and sacrifice. On the auditory level, the dissonant gamelan music and eerie sound effects amplify the mystical aura surrounding the female body, as if it serves as a medium between the real and supernatural worlds. This representation can be further examined through the lens of the Monstrous-Feminine theory (Creed, 1993), which posits that the female body is feared not merely for its vulnerability but for its potential power and mystery that threatens the masculine order.

A deeper contextual analysis enhances understanding by connecting the film with Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory, Stuart Hall's theory of representation and ideology, and Indonesia's sociocultural conditions. In this context, Impetigore functions not only as entertainment but also as a cultural text that reflects and critiques patriarchal power structures. The film utilizes local myths and folklore, such as village curses and child sacrifices, to expose the tensions between modernity and tradition. The narrative of a curse transmitted through the female womb suggests that women's bodies become the epicenter of moral, spiritual, and social conflict. In the Indonesian context, such representation also reveals how religious values and social norms continue to shape perceptions of women's roles and status in society.

Impetigore serves as a convergence point for cultural symbols, ideological tensions, and horror narrative. The film not only reproduces fear of the "othered woman" who defies normative roles but also opens space to reimagine the position of women within narrative, culture, and social life. It stands as a relevant case study for exploring how cinema can represent, deconstruct, and negotiate ideological meanings of the body, gender, and power in the Indonesian cultural context.

2. Patterns of Female Body Representation
The Female Body as a Suffering Object: Victimization and Eroticism

In Sebelum Iblis Menjemput, Alfie is frequently portrayed through scenes with minimal lighting, tight framing, and low camera angles. Her body appears fragile, surrounded by darkness, and threatened by the presence of supernatural beings. When she is injured or afraid, the camera uses close-ups that emphasize her expressions of pain and helplessness. From the perspective of the male gaze theory (Mulvey, 1989), this representation creates ambivalence: on one hand, it evokes sympathy, while on the other, it invites a voyeuristic desire to "enjoy" the suffering of women.
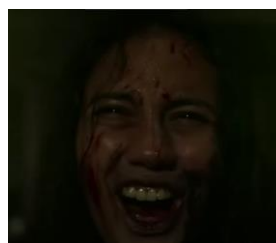
Figure 5. Sebelum Iblis Menjemput

A similar phenomenon appears in Kuntilanak, where the female ghost is depicted wearing a sheer white dress that accentuates the silhouette of her body, while her long hair covers part of her face. Beyond evoking a sense of terror, the visual emphasis on the beauty of her hair and body shape can be interpreted as a form of visual indulgence. This type of eroticized horror was common in Indonesian films of the 1980s, where erotic and horror elements were often intertwined. Although it is less pronounced in contemporary cinema, the pattern of using the female body to simultaneously evoke attraction and fear continues to persist (Masak, 1993).

Figure 6. Kuntilanak

Monstrous-Feminine: The Female Body as a Source of Terror

The concept of the monstrous-feminine (Creed, 1993) helps explain how women, particularly those tied to reproductive roles, can be perceived as terrifying beings. In Pengabdi Setan, the figure of the deceased mother returns to haunt her children. This transfiguration subverts the social expectation of the "mother as protector," turning her into a "mother as the bringer of terror." She is visualized wearing tattered clothes, with a pale face, and often appears in the dark corners of the house. This emphasis reinforces the notion that her body now exists outside the social order an abject that provokes both disgust and fear (Kristeva & Roudiez, 1980).

In Impetigore, the role of pregnancy is extended into a source of catastrophe. The pregnant female body is believed to carry a curse that affects the entire village. A series of ritual scenes involving blood, fetuses, and worship suggests that women's biological processes are not only sacred but also potentially disastrous. This narrative reflects the idea that women's reproductive power is viewed ambivalently: on one hand, revered as the source of life, and on the other, feared because it defies understanding and control within patriarchal norms.

Figure 7. Impetigore

The Female Body and Revenge: Between Subversion and Patriarchal Reproduction

The kuntilanak, in the film Kuntilanak, represents a female spirit seeking revenge for injustices suffered during her lifetime. She appears as both an "eternal victim" and a "monster" who spreads terror. This motif can be interpreted as a subversive narrative: a woman rising against the system that oppressed her. However, in many scenes, the

kuntilanak is aesthetically objectified, emphasized through sensual facial expressions and her billowing white dress. Thus, this subversion becomes trapped within an aesthetic framework that remains patriarchal: the "female monster" remains an exotic spectacle.

A similar dynamic appears in Alfie's transformation in Sebelum Iblis Menjemput. She begins as a victim but eventually becomes a fighter who destroys the evil inherited from her father. While this may seem heroic at first glance, the visual details often highlight the wounds on her body, suggesting that her "strength" must be earned through physical exploitation. Consequently, even though horror can provide space for female resistance, its representations are still largely shaped by the patriarchal gaze (Clover, 1992a).

3. Gendered Terror and Power Dynamics
The Legacy of Patriarchy: Dark Pacts and Intergenerational Trauma

In Sebelum Iblis Menjemput, the curse that haunts Alfie originates from her father's dark pact. Similarly, in Impetigore, the catastrophe that befalls the village is deeply rooted in a past sin committed by a male character. This pattern highlights what can be referred to as the "legacy of patriarchy," where women inherit social trauma caused by destructive masculine decisions (Clover, 1992b). Horror becomes a space where the failures of male leadership are exposed, yet the ones who suffer most are women. In other words, patriarchal power, though critically examined, remains the driving force that continues to entrap and control women's bodies.

Social and Religious Control Over Women's Bodies

Pengabdi Setan intertwines Islamic teachings with satanic worship, creating a tense religious atmosphere. Female characters, especially daughters within the family, are often required to undergo certain rituals or have their movements restricted in order to avoid "evil forces." In the context of Indonesia's deeply religious society, women's bodies are frequently controlled through moral and modesty codes (van Wichelen, 2010). Horror films extrapolate this control to extreme forms: the appearance of a demon or the ghost of a mother signals that "moral rules" have been broken or that sins remain unredeemed.

In Impetigore, social control is embodied through village elders and traditional leaders. Maya's body is portrayed not merely as an individual entity but as a communal one, with far-reaching consequences. When a woman is believed to carry a "curse," the community takes it upon itself to regulate, monitor, and even eliminate her to prevent catastrophe. This echoes (Foucault, 1984) theory on how social mechanisms discipline bodies and behaviors to maintain power. What sets horror apart is how it elevates this control to the supernatural realm, emphasizing that surveillance is not only social but also mystical.

Punishment for Transgression: Women and Morality

The position of women in horror films is often linked to moral transgressions. Female characters deemed "naughty" or deviant from social norms are more likely to be subjected to supernatural violence. In Kuntilanak, although not stated explicitly, there are indications that the kuntilanak is the spirit of a woman who died unnaturally, such as during an out-of-wedlock pregnancy or as a result of betrayal. In line with patriarchal notions of morality, women perceived as "morally flawed" are more vulnerable to becoming restless spirits. On one hand, this highlights the social injustice faced by women; on the other, it reinforces the narrative that transgression is the root of terror (Mulvey, 1989).

4. Details of Visual, Narrative, and Intertextual Elements
Cinematic Strategies: Camera, Lighting, and Sound Design
Camera

Many horror scenes use a subjective point of view, placing the audience in the position of a threatened female character. This technique evokes both sympathy and tension.

However, in several scenes, the camera instead positions the viewer as a "voyeur," observing the female body from a medium distance or through close-ups of specific body parts. This practice echoes Mulvey's (1989) criticism of how women are reduced to objects of the gaze.

Lighting
Pengabdi Setan and Impetigore are rich in chiaroscuro, a play of light and shadow that emphasizes a gothic atmosphere. Female bodies are often shown half in darkness, symbolizing both ambivalence and vulnerability. Flickering lights, such as those from flashlights or broken lamps, heighten the sense of panic and disorientation, reinforcing the terror associated with female figures.

Sound Design
Indonesian horror frequently employs local sound effects, such as gamelan music, the sounds of insects at night, or the chanting of prayers. These elements are rooted in local beliefs that are deeply tied to mystical natural settings (Sen & Hill, 2000). The sound of women crying, whispering, and heavy breathing is a common marker of a female ghost's presence. Background music in a minor key further intensifies the suspense.

Non-Linear Narratives: Flashbacks, Revelations, and Trauma
The unveiling of terror is often presented gradually through flashbacks. In Sebelum Iblis Menjemput, the audience slowly learns about Alfie's father's sins. This non-linear structure presents past trauma as the root of present horror (Demiray, 2015). Similarly, in Impetigore, the village's dark history and Maya's parents' secrets are revealed piece by piece throughout the scenes. This method emphasizes that horror does not emerge suddenly, but rather as an accumulation of past mistakes, sins, or the negligence of a patriarchal society. Female characters are often central to these revelations, highlighting how they eventually awaken to hidden truths.

Social Implication
These findings show that Indonesian horror films are not merely a form of entertainment but also serve as a mirror reflecting social tensions, ideologies, and gender dynamics within society. The representation of the female body in this genre holds the power to raise public awareness, spark critical reflection, and influence cultural transformation toward a more inclusive and just direction.

DISCUSSION
Based on the findings above, several key points can be drawn regarding the representation of women's bodies in contemporary Indonesian horror films. First, these findings support Mulvey's (1989) theory of the male gaze, in which the camera often positions women as objects of erotic or sadistic visual pleasure. Although there are attempts to create strong female characters who resist or fight back, the visual exploitation of women's suffering remains dominant. This condition is further complicated by local Indonesian mythologies that encode women within a framework of mystical horror.

Second, the concept of the monstrous-feminine (Creed, 1993) is highly relevant for interpreting films like Satan's Slaves (Pengabdi Setan) and Impetigore, where the figure of the mother or pregnant woman becomes a source of terror. In Indonesian cultural contexts, pregnancy and childbirth are still considered sacred and taboo domains; thus, when depicted in the horror genre, their symbolism becomes particularly powerful. The female body merges the sacred and the impure, evoking a reaction of abjection (Kristeva & Roudiez, 1980).

Third, patriarchy emerges as a structural force that, while challenged within the narrative, continues to place women in the most vulnerable positions. Father figures or

adult males often become the root of the horror through satanic pacts, dark rituals, or neglect of their families, but the consequences are primarily borne by young female characters. This pattern reflects the social reality in which the burden of male transgressions is frequently passed down to daughters (Clover, 1992).

Fourth, Indonesian horror films also carry subversive potential. The bravery of Alfie in May the Devil Take You, or the figure of the vengeful kuntilanak, opens possibilities for interpretation in which women resist and even dismantle patriarchal structures. Although still constrained by patriarchal horror aesthetics, these subversive moments align with the argument that horror can serve as a "negative space" that allows for critical discourse against the status quo (Lauro, 2017).

Fifth, the interplay between religiosity and horror adds another interpretive layer. For Indonesian audiences, the presence of prayers, ustadz (religious leaders), or Islamic symbols signifies an effort to "rebalance" the narrative, suggesting that darkness must be countered with the light of faith. However, this can also be interpreted as an attempt to control women's bodies, for example, implying that women must adhere to religious norms to avoid becoming vessels for supernatural entities. From another perspective, the inclusion of religious elements enriches the narrative with a local dimension that distinguishes it from Western horror formulas (Sen & Hill, 2000).

CONCLUSION

This study asserts that the female body in contemporary Indonesian horror films is constructed through the tension between victimization and subversion. On one hand, women are frequently portrayed as victims of both supernatural violence and patriarchal legacy, such as malevolent pacts or the sins of the father. The visualization of women's suffering, especially through close-ups of wounds, expressions of fear, and the eroticization of pain, reinforces the argument of the male gaze theory. On the other hand, horror films also create space for empowered female figures, such as the vengeful kuntilanak or female protagonists who ultimately overcome demonic forces. This echoes the concept of the monstrous-feminine, where fear of the female body is intertwined with admiration for its potential to resist.

Local culture, including myth, religiosity, and social norms, also distinctly shapes Indonesian horror. The female body is often linked to traditional rituals, pregnancy, or maternal roles imbued with sacred significance. When these elements are combined with horror aesthetics, they produce narratives that position women in an ambivalent role: both sacred and profane, beloved and feared. From a gender ideology perspective, these films often critique patriarchal power, yet they have not fully liberated themselves from patriarchal practices.

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