

## THE ICONICITY OF WOMEN IN INDONESIAN HORROR FILMS: A SEMIOTIC RESEARCH OF POSTERS FROM 2022-2023

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### Abstract

*This article aimed to investigate the sign system in Indonesian horror film posters throughout the years 2022-2023. Over the past two years, an intriguing trend emerged in relation to horror films in Indonesia, wherein iconicity involving women became the representamen of the sign system within a film poster. The research methodology used was qualitative description, with Indonesian horror films from the years 2022-2023 serving as the data source. To comprehend the meanings encapsulated within the latest Indonesian horror film posters, Charles Sanders Peirce's paradigm on signs was adopted as a reference to understand the research material – the Indonesian horror film posters from 2022-2023. The research results showed that the representation of meaning in the Indonesian horror film posters from 2022-2023, which were employed as icons within their posters, centered around women. In terms of color selection for the letters in the posters, the use of red was notable, symbolizing the color of blood.*

**Keywords:** poster, women, Indonesian horror films, Peirce

### IKONITAS PEREMPUAN DALAM TAYANGAN HOROR INDONESIA: TELAAH SEMIOTIKA PADA POSTER FILEM 2022-2023

#### Abstrak

Tujuan dari penelitian ini untuk menelaah system tanda pada filem horor Indonesia antara 2022-2023. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah metode penelitian deskripsi kualitatif. Sumber penelitian dari poster filem horor Indonesia tahun 2022-2023. Untuk mengetahui makna yang terkandung dalam poster filem horor Indonesia tahun 2022-2023 menggunakan analisis semiotika Charles Sanders Peirce. Dari hasil penelitian ini adalah representasi mengenai makna dari poster filem horor Indonesia tahun 2022-2023 yang dijadikan ikon dalam posternya adalah perempuan. Dari segi pemilihan warna pada huruf-huruf dalam poster menggunakan warna merah yang mewakili sebagai identitas warna darah.

**Kata kunci:** poster, perempuan, filem horor Indonesia, Peirce

## INTRODUCTION

Posters have become one of the effective communication media and continue to be extensively utilized in the global film industry, including in Indonesia. Communication through posters necessitates the involvement of a complex semiotic system. The interpretation of signs in a film poster (including horror film posters in Indonesia, which are the subject of this research material) is closely related to visual communication design. A poster is a component of art and design with its own style, movement, and trends, inseparable from the technology and lifestyle of a particular era (Adi, 2007). Among all the elements of a work, the film poster serves as the first foundation (if not the primary one) for potential viewers before they ultimately decide whether to watch a film or not. Therefore, creating a film poster or cover aims to provide a glimpse or a part of the content within the work. This article intends to examine horror film posters in Indonesia with the purpose of understanding the underlying aspects behind the massive iconicity of women in Indonesian horror films over the past two years.

In the world of filmmaking, productions involve many individuals, commonly referred to as a production team. However, the one orchestrating everything is still a

single person, the director. There are numerous directors, yet their approaches vary during film creation as a distinctive hallmark of each. In Indonesia, film genres encompass comedy, horror, drama, action, and more. The genres most favored by Indonesians include drama, horror, and drama films. Notably, horror films capture a significant portion of interest among the younger and adult audience. During the 1970s, Indonesian horror films were closely associated with local legends or folklore, whereas the 2000s took on an urban legend theme (Van Heeren, 2012). Among these, 'Leak,' a horror film released in 1981, stands out as it represents the mystical world of Bali.

The portrayal of women in horror films is predominantly characterized by negative attributes (Lasty, 2020). As women are portrayed as eerie, cruel, weak, and tormented, the depiction of women in these horror films can reflect the dimensions of societal life. The emergence of these female ghosts stems from cultural contexts of the past, as each roaming spirit undoubtedly carries its own peculiarity related to its demise. Among the countless horror films within the realm of cinema, the dominant female antagonists, reminiscent of the past and notably recognized among the community, such as Suzanna. The female ghost characters often emerge with chilling

attributes in Indonesian horror films, like “*kuntilanak*,” “*sundel bolong*,” and “*siluman*.” (Kusumaryati, 2011). Tidak hanya di Indonesia saja melainkan negara lainnya juga.

There have been several previous studies that the researcher discovered, aimed at avoiding duplication. A study conducted by (Larasati & Adiprasetyo, 2022) explored the representation of female ghost inequality in horror films from 1970 to 2019. In this research, an overall mapping of Indonesian horror films was carried out, followed by an analysis of three criteria: the gender of the main protagonist, the gender of the primary ghost, and the gender of the director in horror films. Therefore, this research delved into how the genre configuration in representing humans and children from 1970 to 2019 had evolved. The research findings indicated that the representation of female employees as ghosts could historically justify levels of severity. In this context, horror films often portrayed realistic depictions of real-world events, addressing previously taboo subjects and exploring various themes.

Moving forward, the subsequent study is being conducted by (Mawaidi, 2020), who is examining the research object of a collection of short stories by Intan Paramaditha titled “*Sihir Perempuan*” (Women's Sorcery). In this research, the

study is presenting the portrayal of female ghosts in the collection of short stories “*Sihir Perempuan*,” utilizing a feminist framework. In contrast to the previous study, this research employs Cixous' theory that unveils aspects of feminism. Cixous states that the written outcomes of women about femininity tend to produce a greater effect of coherence than men's. The research findings indicate a paradox in the construction of femininity as carried out by Intan Paramaditha. In the attempt to construct femininity, female ghosts are depicted as legends within the realm of patriarchal cultural influence. The presence of female ghosts delves into the exploration of the physical and psychological aspects of these spectral women.

The subsequent research is being conducted by (Isnaini, 2022), also using Indonesian horror film posters released between 2010 and 2015. This study aimed to examine Indonesian horror film posters that were related to women's sensuality and highlight the portrayal of women within feminist discourse. The theory employed in this research was the feminist literary theory, which sought to reposition women in their rightful place within a patriarchal society's framework using signs and symbols. This research shared a common element in terms of the chosen research object, namely Indonesian horror film posters. However, it

differed in the chosen years, and the theory applied. The research findings illustrated that the portrayal of women in Indonesian horror film posters was sensual and fetishized. These two elements contributed to Indonesian horror films presenting the female body as an object within the capitalist economic system, woven together by the patriarchal structure.

Based on the description above, the researcher's reason for selecting this research subject was the period from 2022 to 2023. During this time, there was a noticeable trend of numerous Indonesian horror film posters featuring women as iconic figures on these posters. Indonesian horror film posters predominantly used a color combination of red and black, which was associated with an eerie atmosphere. Hence, the researcher was intrigued to explore Indonesian horror film posters from the years 2022 to 2023 using Charles S. Peirce's semiotics. The focus of this study revolved around the concept of iconicity: 1) Images, 2) Diagrams, and 3) Metaphors.

## **METHOD**

The research method used in this study was qualitative descriptive research. The data source for this research comprised Indonesian horror film posters from 2022-2023 that featured women as icons. The data collection method used was

observation and note-taking. Subsequently, the data analysis technique involved expounding on the meanings found in several Indonesian horror film posters from 2022-2023 using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory.

Peirce proposed that within a sign, there are three elements: the representamen, the object, and the interpretant. The representamen is the element of the sign that stands for something, the object is what is represented, and the interpretant is the sign that appears in the recipient's mind after seeing the representamen. Peirce also stated that this triadic nature of semiotics can continue, meaning one sign can give rise to another sign, and so on, forming an endless chain of triadic semiotic concepts.

Peirce developed a typology of signs known as icons, indexes, and symbols. An icon is a relationship that can be described based on resemblance (Zaimar, 2008). An icon is a sign that contains elements of 'likeness' so that its users easily understand it. In an icon, the relationship between the representamen and its object is seen to possess a certain degree of correspondence (Wibowo, 2013). Thus, the representamen bears a resemblance to the object it represents.

The index is a relationship that possesses an existential range (Zaimar, 2008). An index

is a sign that can depict the connection between the representamen and the object because it has a phenomenal or existential correlation. In an index, the relationship between the sign and its object is concrete, actual and often occurs in a sequential or causal manner (Wibowo, 2013).

The symbol is the most sophisticated sign based on societal agreement (convention) (Zaimar, 2008). A symbol is a type of sign that is arbitrary and conventional according to the agreement or convention of a group of people or a society. Language signs are generally symbols. Common examples people encounter their daily are not far from traffic signs, which are symbolic in nature (Wibowo, 2013).

Peirce expressed that an icon is a sign that bears a resemblance to its object (Budiman, 2005). An icon is a sign based on a resemblance between the representamen and its object, whether the object truly exists or not. In fact, an icon encompasses not only realistic images like paintings and photos but also expressions such as graphics, diagrams, geographical maps, mathematical equations, and even metaphors. According to (Leeuwen as cited in Thellefsen & Friedman, n.d.), colors also indicate identity, albeit with significant differences, an uncertain signified identity. Meanwhile, according to (Darmaprawira as cited in Thellefsen & Friedman, n.d.), each

color possesses its own characteristics and attributes.

The type of sign that is grounded in resemblance is the iconic sign, and its manifestation can be referred to as iconicity (Budiman, 2005). Peirce stated that there are three types of iconic signs: image icons, diagram icons, and metaphor icons. Diagram icons represent their objects through structural and resemblance aspects. Similar to images, they are not only visual but also indexical in nature (Thellefsen & Friedman, n.d.). Metaphor icons are a kind of meta-sign or meta-symbol, and their iconicity is based on the resemblance or similarity between the objects of two symbolic signs. A metaphor is an icon that is founded on the similarity between the objects of two symbolic signs (Budiman, 2005). Metaphor icons represent their objects through resemblance to something else (Thellefsen & Friedman, n.d.). Usually, they involve abstract relational resemblances, such as similarities in attributes.

## **DISCUSSION**

In Indonesian horror film posters, there is a consistent portrayal of eerie themes, which we frequently encounter from year to year. These horror film posters consistently feature an iconic woman with an extremely frightening image as their centerpiece.



Figure 1. "KKN Di Desa Penari" Film Poster

In the film poster of "KKN Di Desa Penari" (first released on February 24, 2022, and the second release on December 29, 2022), an emblematic use of the diagrammatic icon is apparent due to the consistent use of the color red, signifying danger. The depiction of the letters "KKN" with a face resembling a dancer wearing a traditional Javanese bun (konde) signifies the metaphorical icon, representing the cultural element of dancers often associated with wearing a bun. The diagrammatic icon is also evident in the poster's background, which typically depicts the film's setting. In this case, the background displays a forest, as seen in the

presence of large trees. The second poster is enriched with the phrases "Luwih Dowo Luwih Medeni" and "More than 40 minutes of New Scenes," suggesting adding new story elements. These phrases pique the viewers' curiosity about the continuation of the plot.



The poster showcased a depiction of smoke, symbolizing the smoke from offerings. The significance of these offerings also highlights cultural elements, falling under the category of a metaphorical icon due to their connection with traditions. The primary focus of the poster is a female dancer holding a snake. The dancer carrying a coiled snake around her body can be interpreted as representing a woman possessed by a snake spirit in the film, fitting into the metaphorical icon category. The backdrop of the "KKN Di Desa Penari" film poster displays offerings, signifying a sacred or mystical belief, which also falls under the metaphorical icon category. Even in the second poster, offerings are still present, albeit positioned differently. The

second film poster maintains the presence of the same dancer with a snake but in varying poses and placements. In the first poster, the dancer's face wasn't visible, whereas, in the second poster, her face is visible, though her hand gesture remains consistent. The second poster features puddles of water and small snakes. Since snake spirits originate from ancient legends and are often associated with women like *Nyi Roro Kidul*, they have a strong connection to female characters in those stories.



Figure 2. "Qorin" Film Poster

From the film poster of "Qorin" above, which was released on December 1, 2022, The use of colors remains consistent with Figure 1, being predominantly red. The title of the film itself suggests a diagrammatic icon as the word "Qorin" originates from Arabic, meaning "Jinn." It's evident from the poster that the woman is dressed in white attire similar to a "gamis" (a type of

dress) and wears a "mukenah" (headscarf). The typography of the word "Qorin" also differs from that of Figure 1, as it appears to be in an Arabic script style. The poster already provides a glimpse of the background or setting, taking place in a *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school), particularly for female students. In terms of the photo style, the woman in the poster portrays being possessed by the "jin qorin," with a disturbing facial expression. Indeed, in our world, there are jinn or similar supernatural beings that are believed to exist around us. The "jin qorin" is believed to be created with a similar appearance and nature to humans but capable of influencing or misleading them. This signifies the metaphorical icon, aiming to convey to the audience the potential existence and attributes of the "jin qorin."



Figure 3. "Inang" Film Poster

From the film poster of "Inang" above, which was released on October 13, 2022, The poster depicts a pregnant woman with

a tense expression on her face. A diagrammatic icon is evident in the poster's color scheme, where the dominant use of red, even in the background, creates a sense of tension and eeriness. The film's title, "*Inang*," itself, according to the KBBI (Indonesian Dictionary), means a woman who cares for others, marking it as a diagrammatic icon. The underlying meaning of the "*Inang*" film poster portrays a pregnant woman who will nurture the baby within her womb. Additionally, there's a metaphorical icon observed in the text written on the pillow where the woman is resting. The text is written in Javanese script and carries significant meaning.

The film is set against the backdrop of Javanese culture, which indicates the incorporation of a distinct Javanese cultural element into the film "*Inang*." Javanese culture is indeed deeply rooted in its own traditional practices, such as the customs that pregnant individuals follow to avoid certain restrictions. The film "*Inang*" highlights one of the Javanese myths known as "*Rebo Wekasan*" or "*Rabu pungkasan*," which translates to the last Wednesday of the month of Safar. According to Javanese belief, "*Rebo Wekasan*" is a day when calamities or misfortunes may occur. Therefore, during "*Rebo Wekasan*," it's common to hold communal prayers and rituals to increase

remembrance and supplication. In the context of the film "*Inang*," the belief in mystical practices is showcased through rituals. Notably, there are prohibitions against certain actions, particularly on "*Rebo Wekasan*."



Figure 4. "*Khanzab*" Film Poster

From the film poster of "*Khanzab*" above, which was released on April 20, 2023, The image depicts a woman wearing a "*mukenah*" (prayer attire). It can be observed that this film is set in an atmosphere of prayer being disrupted by a jinn. A diagrammatic icon in the film poster indicates its Islamic background. There's the word "*Maknum*" (congregant) above it, confirming that "*Khanzab*" is a spin-off from the "*Maknum*" film, falling under the diagrammatic icon category. In terms of title presentation, the use of white isn't the same as in Images 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6. This can be interpreted as not being related to blood in the film. The film portrays a metaphorical icon when we are praying, especially during the Tahajud prayer or the night vigil, disturbances are often



experienced, but these interruptions stem from our own thoughts. It's not just during the night vigil prayer, but even during the five daily prayers, we can be disturbed by supernatural beings, such as forgetting the number of prayer cycles. The solution is to maintain focus and complete ablution. This is because it's indeed true that supernatural beings will always attempt to disrupt when they see humans engaging in virtuous actions, as they feel defeated by such acts.



Figure 5.

"*Sosok Ketiga*" Film Poster

From the film poster of "*Sosok Ketiga*" above, which was released on June 22, 2023, the title "*Sosok Ketiga*" indicates the presence of polygamy in the film's storyline. In this poster, there's a depiction of a pregnant woman, but her pregnancy isn't shown in her belly; instead, it's on her back, with an image of a fetus. The woman is portrayed lying on her back, seemingly floating upwards, her face contorted in a screaming expression as if being possessed by a supernatural entity. A diagrammatic icon is evident in the sentence on the poster,

"*Terkadang Manusia Lebih Menakutkan daripada Setan*" (Sometimes Humans Are More Frightening than Demons), signifying that humans can go to any extent to fulfill their desires, even resorting to involving the supernatural to satisfy those desires. The metaphorical icon illustrates the phrase "*Sosok Ketiga*" (The Third Figure), which suggests that even though initially agreeing to the practice of polygamy, there will still be instances of unfair treatment and challenges in living together under one roof. Despite the various reasons a husband may have for practicing polygamy, the wives may still feel hurt witnessing such actions. This cultural practice of polygamy is becoming increasingly prevalent in our society. Polygamy is often driven by specific intentions, with the common underlying factor being the desire to have offspring.



Figure 6. "*Waktu Maghrib*" Film Poster

The film poster for "*Waktu Maghrib*," released on February 9, 2023, showcases a

young girl sitting, but her reflection in the water puddle portrays a chilling expression. The film's title, "*Waktu Maghrib*" or "Maghrib Time," serves as a diagrammatic icon, signifying that children playing with their friends are always advised to return home before maghrib (sunset prayer time). This caution stems from the belief that supernatural entities emerge during this time. The upper part of the poster features a traditional game called "*engklek*," predominantly played by girls, contributing to the diagrammatic icon category. The metaphorical icon highlights the common occurrence where young girls, who are usually the ones to go missing, are believed to be concealed by supernatural beings, often female ghosts. Consequently, the Javanese community still observes this cultural practice, urging children to return home before the maghrib call to prayer. There are other prohibitions during maghrib, such as pregnant women not being allowed to go out during maghrib, refraining from sleeping when the maghrib call to prayer is heard, and more. The prohibition against going out during maghrib is also found in hadith literature.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that the horror film posters of Indonesia from 2022-2023 depict an iconic representation of women in each poster.

The consistent use of the same colors further incorporates elements of Javanese myths. In the "*KKN Di Desa Penari*" film poster, the portrayal of the background setting in a forest with large trees and the presence of offerings indicates adherence to sacred traditions and mystical beliefs. Moving on to the "*Qorin*" film poster, which originates from the Arabic word for "Jinn," portrays a woman in prayer attire being disrupted by a jinn. The "*Inang*" film poster addresses Javanese culture by referencing the "*Rebo Wekasan*" tradition, signifying the last Wednesday of Safar. The "*Khanzab*" film poster depicts a woman in prayer attire being disturbed by a jinn. The "*Sosok Ketiga*" film poster explores the theme of polygamy intertwined with mystical elements to fulfill desires. Lastly, the "*Waktu Maghrib*" film poster highlights the prohibition of going out during maghrib (sunset prayer time). Each horror film poster carries its own unique meaning, providing a glimpse into the content of the respective films.

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