



The Narrative of Women and Local Wisdom in Modern Indonesian Films: A Study of Culture and Gender

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Abstract:

The development of contemporary Indonesian cinema shows an interesting transformation in the representation of women and local cultural values. Films function not only as entertainment media but also as social discourse that reflects societal views on gender and tradition. This study aims to examine how women are represented as symbols of local wisdom in contemporary Indonesian films. The research uses a descriptive qualitative approach, drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Elaine Showalter's perspective on cultural feminism to analyze the symbolic meanings embedded in film narratives.

Keywords: Women Representation, Local Wisdom, Indonesian Film, Cultural Studies, Cultural Feminism

Abstrak: Perkembangan sinema Indonesia modern menunjukkan transformasi yang menarik dalam representasi perempuan dan nilai-nilai budaya lokal. Film tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai media hiburan, tetapi juga menjadi wacana sosial yang merefleksikan pandangan masyarakat terhadap gender dan tradisi. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana perempuan direpresentasikan sebagai simbol kearifan lokal dalam film-film Indonesia kontemporer. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan berlandaskan teori representasi Stuart Hall serta perspektif feminisme kultural Elaine Showalter untuk mengkaji makna-makna simbolik yang terkandung dalam narasi film.

Kata Kunci: Representasi Perempuan, Kearifan Lokal, Film Indonesia, Kajian Budaya, Feminisme Kultural.

Introduction

Film is one of the forms of mass communication media that possesses significant power in shaping public perceptions of social and cultural

realities. As a cultural product, film functions not only as entertainment but also as a social text that embodies the values, ideologies, and worldview of a nation. In the Indonesian context, film serves as an important space for negotiating national identity, particularly when confronting

the forces of globalization and modernity, which often bring value transformations and challenges to the sustainability of local cultural identities.

The representation of women in Indonesian cinema has undergone significant changes over time. In the early era of Indonesian filmmaking, women were frequently positioned as passive objects subordinate to patriarchal values. However, along with social developments and the growing awareness of gender equality, the position of women in film has gradually shifted toward that of active subjects who possess agency, intellect, personal aspirations, and strong social roles. This transformation not only reflects broader social changes but also serves as an indicator of the increasing public awareness of gender equality and women's roles in society.

This phenomenon can be observed in contemporary Indonesian films that explore themes of women and local wisdom, such as *Kartini* (2017), *The Dancer* (2011), and *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* (2018). These films demonstrate the efforts of Indonesian cinema to portray women not only as individuals engaged in personal struggles but also as custodians and preservers of regional cultural values. Therefore, women in film are not merely symbols of emancipation but also representations of cultural values that continue to exist and evolve within local communities.

Furthermore, the study of women's representation and local wisdom is essential for understanding how culture and gender interact in shaping national identity. Local wisdom, encompassing values, norms, and social practices passed down through generations, serves as a moral foundation for Indonesian society. When these values are incorporated into films, an intriguing process of cultural reinterpretation occurs, as cinema, a modern medium, interacts with traditions as dynamic systems of values that continuously adapt to social change.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze how women are represented as symbols of local wisdom in contemporary Indonesian films. Through the perspectives of cultural studies and representation theory, this research is expected to provide a deeper understanding of how Indonesian cinema interprets female identity and its role in preserving local cultural values amid the currents of globalization and modernization.

Literature Review

This study is grounded in the theory of representation proposed by Stuart Hall (1997), which views media as a construction of social meaning. Representation is not a reflection of reality but rather a process of producing meaning through language and symbols. Furthermore, the cultural feminist approach developed by Elaine Showalter (1985) positions women as active subjects in cultural production. Meanwhile, the ideas of Koentjaraningrat (1990) and Heddy Shri Ahimsa-Putra (2012) provide the foundation for understanding local wisdom as a cultural heritage that must be preserved and transmitted as an integral part of community identity.

Previous studies by Arifin (2021) and Lestari (2020) indicate that contemporary Indonesian films increasingly portray women in more empowered and contextualized roles. However, the relationship between women's representation and local cultural values has not been extensively examined in depth. This gap provides an important opportunity for further investigation and serves as the primary focus of the present study.

Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach. The primary data consist of narratives, dialogues, and visual elements from three contemporary Indonesian films selected through purposive sampling. The analysis is conducted using the semiotic method developed by Roland Barthes and the discourse analysis

approach proposed by Stuart Hall to identify meanings related to gender and cultural representations.

The stages of analysis include: (1) identifying cultural themes and symbols, (2) interpreting narrative meanings, and (3) examining the ideologies underlying the representation of women within the context of local culture.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the three selected films, namely *Kartini* (2017), *The Dancer* (2011), and *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* (2018), reveals that the representation of women in contemporary Indonesian cinema has undergone a significant shift from traditional roles toward more active and reflective positions within social contexts. In *Kartini*, the protagonist is portrayed as a woman who not only advocates for education but also challenges the social constraints that restricted women's freedom and access to learning during her era.

The Dancer depicts the complexity of womanhood within the intersections of love, tradition, and class struggle. The character of Srintil, a ronggeng dancer, symbolizes the ambivalence between freedom and cultural attachment, where the female body becomes a site of negotiation between morality and tradition. Meanwhile, *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* portrays a rural woman who courageously resists violence and patriarchy, illustrating women's resistance against male domination within patriarchal social structures characterized by unequal power relations.

The findings indicate that women in these films are positioned not merely as victims but also as agents of social change and guardians of local values. Representations of local wisdom appear through regional languages, rituals, traditional clothing, and social values that convey moral messages while reinforcing Indonesian cultural identity. Consequently, these films function as media that reaffirm the meaning of women as symbols of wisdom and cultural strength.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the representation of women in contemporary Indonesian cinema cannot be separated from the dynamics of culture and identity politics. Within the framework of Stuart Hall's theory of representation (1997), women in these films are not merely reflections of social reality but also constructions of meaning shaped by ideology and the cultural context of the filmmakers. *Kartini*, for instance, does not only portray the struggle for emancipation but also illustrates how local values such as mutual cooperation, courtesy, and respect for tradition remain essential components of women's struggles.

From the perspective of cultural feminism proposed by Elaine Showalter (1985), these films portray women not solely within the framework of Western feminism, which emphasizes individual freedom, but as figures who negotiate social and spiritual roles within the Indonesian cultural context. Women in these films become active subjects who utilize cultural values as sources of strength to survive and resist injustice. Rather than rejecting culture, they reinterpret it in ways that better correspond to women's needs and social realities in Indonesia.

Furthermore, the results suggest that Indonesian cinema has the potential to function as a medium for cultural and gender education. By portraying women as guardians of morality and traditional values, Indonesian films contribute to strengthening a national narrative rooted in local wisdom. This finding is consistent with the perspective of Ariel Heryanto (2018), who argues that popular culture, including film, can serve both as a site of resistance against global hegemony and as a means of articulating an Indonesian identity grounded in local values while remaining open to global change.

As a complement to this analysis, the concept of the "male gaze" developed by Laura Mulvey (1975) enhances the understanding of how women have often been positioned within cinematic visuality. However, in contemporary

Indonesian films, this position has gradually shifted toward a space of resistance against dominant male perspectives. This observation aligns with the ideas of Julia Suryakusuma (2011), who argues that although patriarchal power in Indonesia is structural in nature, women continue to possess opportunities to negotiate their identities dynamically within social, cultural, and political spheres.

Conclusion

Contemporary Indonesian cinema demonstrates that women are no longer represented as passive figures but rather as active subjects engaged in preserving and reinterpreting local cultural values. Characters such as Kartini, Srintil, and Marlina illustrate the complexity of Indonesian womanhood at the intersection of tradition and modernity. They emerge as symbols of moral struggle, cultural identity, and spiritual strength rooted in the local values of the Indonesian archipelago.

The presence of local wisdom through visual elements, dialogue, and narrative structures highlights the role of Indonesian cinema as a space for representing national identity. Film not only conveys social messages but also serves as a medium for the transmission of dynamic cultural values. Through representational and symbolic analysis, this study finds that women play a crucial role in maintaining the balance between traditional values and the increasingly powerful forces of globalization.

This research emphasizes the importance of further developing cultural and gender studies in Indonesian cinema through interdisciplinary approaches. Future studies may expand their focus to digital cinema, women's roles within the film industry, and the impact of cultural representations on younger audiences. In this way, Indonesian cinema can continue to provide a platform for emerging discourses that not only highlight women's emancipation but also reaffirm the importance of preserving local values as a fundamental foundation for building

national cultural identity in the era of globalization.

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