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No.	Perihal	Tanggal
1.	Bukti konfirmasi submit abstrak dan abstrak yang disubmit	13 Maret 2021
2.	Bukti konfirmasi undangan dan artikel	20 April 2021
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1. Bukti konfirmasi submit abstrak artikel

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Sincerely,
Miao Chi
Editorial assistant

Skinned Performance: Female Body Horror in Joko Anwar's *Impetigore*

Anton Sutandio
Universitas Kristen Maranatha
anton.sutandio@lang.maranatha.edu

Abstract

This article discusses the 2019 Indonesian horror film, *Impetigore* (*Perempuan Tanah Jahanam*) directed by Joko Anwar. In 2021, *Impetigore* became the first Indonesian horror film to represent the country at the Academy Awards. This article focuses on the film's mystification of the female body, which points towards the discourse of gendered monstrosity within a patriarchal world. This interdisciplinary research utilizes the concept of body horror, particularly relating to the skin, gender criticism, and the study on *wayang* mysticism. The novelty of the research lies on the combination of these concepts that have never been discussed before. The findings show that the film metaphorically underlines the ongoing disconcerting perspective of contemporary Indonesian society on women's embodied agency. The film's portrayal of strong female characters also suggests an attempt to challenge the mainstream patriarchal narrative in contemporary Indonesian horror cinema, and at the same time hints at the perpetuating subjectification of woman's body as a threatening yet desirable agency.

Keywords: body horror, mystification, female body, *Impetigore*, Indonesian horror film

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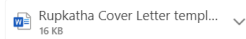


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We are looking forward to receiving your full paper. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to get in touch with us.

Sincerely,
Miao Chi
Editorial assistant

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Abstract

This article discusses the 2019 Indonesian horror film, *Impetigore* (*Perempuan Tanah Jahanam*) directed by Joko Anwar. In 2021, *Impetigore* became the first Indonesian horror film to represent the country at the Academy Awards. This article focuses on the film's mystification of the female body, which points towards the discourse of gendered monstrosity within a patriarchal world. This interdisciplinary research utilizes the concept of body horror, particularly relating to the skin, gender criticism, and the study on *wayang* mysticism. The novelty of the research lies on the combination of these concepts that have never been discussed before. The findings show that the film metaphorically underlines the ongoing disconcerting perspective of contemporary Indonesian society on women's embodied agency. The film's portrayal of strong female characters also suggests an attempt to challenge the mainstream patriarchal narrative in contemporary Indonesian horror cinema, and at the same time hints at the perpetuating subjectification of woman's body as a threatening yet desirable agency.

Keywords: body horror, mystification, female body, *Impetigore*, Indonesian horror film.

1. Introduction

In early November 2020, the Indonesian Oscar Selection Committee decided to choose *Impetigore* (Anwar, 2019b) to represent Indonesia at the 93rd Academy Awards in the International Feature Film Award category. The chairperson of the committee and a well-known director, Garin Nugroho, states that the film has fulfilled all the required technical criteria and it carries local Indonesian values. Anwar claims that it took him 10 years to develop the film (Prambors, 2020) and the result is not disappointing. The film breaks the record for most nominations in the history of Indonesian Film Festival in 17 different categories and won 6 of them including the best film, the best director, and the best supporting actress. The film is also released internationally in the U.S., U.K, and Canada through the platform Shudder.

Despite its quality, originality, and achievement, the film has not received much attention academically, most likely due to small number of film scholars that specialize in horror genre. One previous study (Wulandari & Islam, 2020) focuses on the visual meaning of the film's poster and concludes that being a horror film, the poster is unique as it does not represent typical exploitation of the ghosts or monsters. One bachelor thesis discussed a semiotic analysis on the representation of the female masculinity and concluded that the female characters have masculine traits such as powerful and courageous (Dediana, 2020). Another research looked at swear words inside the film in a sociolinguistic study and categorized the words into the context of intimacy, closeness, insult, threaten, surprise, and disturb (Fredy & Haristiani, 2020). Another one discussed the portrayal of female sexuality using Peirce's semiotic method (Cuaca, 2021). There is also the discussion of the film through Marxism approach in the context of the commodification of the *wayang* performance in the film (Salim et al., 2020). Another thesis applies a reader response theory on the film to find out the attractiveness of the film to a group of students in a certain university (Nadilah, 2020). None of the research articles above discusses the film from the perspective of body horror, thus this research will fill the gap and enrich the variety of research topic on the film. The combination of the concept of body horror, gender criticism, and the *wayang* performance studies become the novelty of this article. It is hoped that this research will bring a deeper understanding on how popular horror film can be an

effective instrument to discuss contemporary issue such as gender and the ongoing tension between the modern and the traditional within the context of Indonesian society.

This article explores female body horror in Joko Anwar's *Impetigore*. More specifically, it focuses on the mystification of the female body that equates women's worth with their biological functions and appearance, which—in this context—centers on the skin. This article aims to reveal how the mystification of female body and the *wayang* performance in the film carry symbolism that points at the perpetuating gender issue and the tension between the modern and traditional within contemporary Indonesian society.

The imagery of bodies being deformed, burnt, skinned, or mutilated is a staple of the horror genre that can swiftly tap into the audience's conscious or unconscious trepidation and generate fear. Hurley, (Dudenhoeffer, 2014: 7) defines body horror as “a hybrid genre that recombines the narrative and cinematic conventions of the science fiction, horror, and suspense film in order to stage a spectacle of human body defamiliarized, rendered other.” There is an argument that contemporary body horror, which is of the 21st century, has different bodily concerns to those of the traditional body horror that focuses on the mutilation and alteration of the flesh. Wercholewski argues that in contemporary body horror, “the body becomes the object under attack by tyrannical individuals or, in some cases, companies of a system of punishment” (Wercholewski, 2019). Departing from this shift in the preoccupation's of the body horror genre, *Impetigore* encompasses both traditions, as it depicts the mutilation and repurposing of body parts by superstitious and tyrannical individuals who mystify the female body. This blend of the traditional and contemporary aspects of the body horror genre reflects the conflict between the traditional and modern that the film depicts through its characters and events.

Impetigore should be seen as more than simply a body horror film. The horror genre often uses symbolism to comment on the society, that the monsters or ghosts serve as symbols to certain social anxieties and the audience will be given hints through the visual so that they will understand the implied messages that the film carries (Bagwell, 2014: 1). *Impetigore* includes symbolism that relates to contemporary Indonesian society's unsettling attitude towards the female body's embodied agency. In this regard, the film is inscribed with the narrative of gendered monstrosity, which focuses on the female body—particularly the skin—as a mystical agent that carries both desirable and threatening supernatural properties.

Focusing on the mutilation and repurposing of female skin, *Impetigore* can be classified as a slasher film, a horror sub-genre that is relatively rare in the Indonesian horror cinema.

However, body horror, “whose most common feature is the often graphic destruction or the degeneration of human body” (Rocha, 2017: 1) is not a new phenomenon for Indonesian cinemagoers. Famous Indonesian actress, Suzanna, also known as “Indonesian Queen of Horror,” who was active in the last three decades of the 20th century, pioneered the Indonesian body horror performance. In *Beranak Dalam Kubur (Birth in the Grave)* released in 1971 (Awaludin & Shahab, 1971), Suzanna played Lila, a pregnant woman whose life is ruined by her sister, who splashed acid into her face and then buried her alive with her unborn child still in the womb. In a way, *Impetigore* resonates with this destruction and degeneration of the female body that relates to pregnancy and childbirth that is set against occultism and ritualistic Javanese *wayang* performance.

In the context of female representation, Joko Anwar is known as a director who often creates strong and independent female characters, such as Talyda in *The Forbidden Door* (Anwar, 2009), Sari in *A Copy of My Mind* (Anwar, 2016), Rini in *Satan's Slave* (Anwar, 2017), or Sedah in *Gundala* (Anwar, 2019a). Yet, his female antagonists/monsters are also memorable, such as the mother figure in *Satan's Slave*, Talyda in *Forbidden Door*, or Nyi Misni in *Impetigore*. Indeed, *Impetigore* is a film fully driven by four major female characters, including the antagonist played by Christine Hakim, a legendary Indonesian actress. This is in stark contrast to the New Order regime's representation of female characters in Indonesian horror cinema in the last four decades of the 20th century. During that period (1966—1998), women were politically and culturally subdued under the strong authoritarian and patriarchal regime of Soeharto, the second president of Indonesia. As a result, unless their on-screen portrayal abided by the ideology, the film would be harshly censored. Suzanna challenged this attitude, as she played strong female characters in at least twenty horror films, mostly mystical beings, like *Nyi Roro Kidul* or *Nyi Blorong* (demi-god creature) or monsters such as *kuntilanak* or *sundel bolong* (vengeful female ghost). However, her show of power and domination on screen was still limited by strict rules that usually involved specific plot template aligned with the regime ideology. For example, no matter how strong or dominating the female characters were, there had to be a higher power which usually came in a form of a powerful male such as king, old wise and pious man, or *Ustaz* (Islamic religious leader) that will restore the order. Kusumaryati affirms this assertion, arguing that “the feminine grotesque deeply tying together motifs of femininity with horror, is a common element of Indonesian horror” (Guttman, 2016: 4). In addition, the strict censorship and dominating patriarchy at that time limited the roles women could play to a housewife, lover, victim, or monster.

The fall of the regime in 1998 opened new possibilities for female actresses. In horror cinema, the concept of “final girl” (defined as the last girl to survive) coined by Clover started to emerge. For example, Rizal Mantovani’s *Kuntilanak* (2006), *Kuntilanak 2* (2007), and *Air Terjun Pengantin* (2009), and Mo Brothers’ *Macabre* (2009), which is perhaps the first Indonesian slasher film, feature female characters who become the sole survivor of tragic and horrifying events. However, even in these cases, in order to defeat their male counterparts, these women need to incorporate what is traditionally viewed as male characteristics, such as brave and resourceful. In other words, if they did not transform into a masculinized female, they would not survive.

Impetigore, however, offers a different kind of empowered woman, as she is able to survive without having to incorporate male characteristics. The protagonist, Rahayu, and her friend, Dini, are non-typical characters in Indonesian horror cinema as they do not show stereotypical female traits such as weak, dependent, and emotional. They are independent, hardworking, resilient, and are not chained to traditional social norms that bind women to certain roles and positions. Even the antagonist, Nyi Misni, is portrayed as an old matriarch that has control over the entire village, including her *dalang*/puppeteer son, Ki Saptadi, who is highly respected in the region. These facts about the female characters add to the excitement and uniqueness of the film.

2. Method of Research

This research is a qualitative and interdisciplinary research that combines film studies, gender criticism, with the study of *wayang* mysticism. The findings are interpreted as a layered allegory to the gender struggle of the marginalised/the weak and to the context of female bodies’ mystification within the contemporary Indonesian society.

This article’s main critical approach is film studies, particularly the context of body horror in the study of horror genre. The film’s visuals become the main source on the discussion of body horror. The film’s cinematography and *mise-en-scène* provide the data that are later interpreted in accordance with the analyzed context. Gender criticism is applied to understand the context of Indonesian patriarchy, gender identity and female body depicted in the film. The study of *wayang* mysticism will provide the readers with understanding on the significance of *wayang* as a traditional, mystical, and symbolical performance that remains an important part of contemporary Indonesian society, especially in Java where the film is set.

The research begins by multiple screenings of the film to ensure that the visual data required are sufficient and accurate. The next step is to explore and interpret the visual data related to the discussed topics. The discussion is divided into three parts: gender issue that focuses on the main female character, mystification of the female body that focuses on the female skin and skinning, and the *wayang* performance that relates to the traditional value. The findings of the research are then summed up in the conclusion.

3. Theoretical Framework

The horror genre has almost always been emphasising body spectacle: in horror films, the audience can see bodies being transformed, mutated, cut, decapitated, burnt, or broken to provide a visceral experience and heighten the tension of the screening experience. Body horror as a sub-genre has been around for almost 70 years, and its most basic definition refers to the horror on bodies and how they change due to illness, experiment, supernatural cause, or rituals (Baker, 2000). Reyes defines body horror as “abnormal states of corporeality, and attacks upon the body” (Rapoport, 2020: 620), which aligns with the context of body horror in *Impetigore*. In Indonesia, something similar has been seen since the 1980s, mostly focusing on the destruction and degeneration of the female body, which says a lot about the views of the Indonesian cinema on the female body. Among so many standpoints on the horror genre, this research would like to draw from Robin Wood's perspective of horror, based on Freudian psychoanalytic standpoint, as the sense of the uncanny, something that is familiar yet alien and scary (Wood, 2003). The uncanny bit refers to the skinless and the skinned bodies in *Impetigore*. Jay McRoy stated, “skin, the membranes that separate us from other objects, functions in the horror film ‘at once as a point of contact, a site of resistance, and a method of transference’ of the inside to the outside” (Dudenhoefter, 2014: 3). When the inside is shown on the screen without the outside, anxiety, and fear of the uncanny arise. The transformation of the skin as the thin membranes into a *wayang* to accommodate certain mystical functions only heightens the level of body horror.

The concept of mystification is reflected through the theory of objectification, which can be simply defined as “the seeing and/or treating a person, usually a woman, as an object” (Papadaki, 2019), particularly in a sexual nature. *Impetigore*, however, does not suggest a sexual objectification of women, but a mystical one, specifically when a woman's body is seen as an object that carries certain supernatural property. This kind of mystification of women and their bodies has almost become a trope in the Indonesian horror genre where, in many instances of horror films from different periods, women are almost always apt to carry a mystical aura. The fact that

most of the famous monsters in Indonesian horror films are female ghosts or spirit prove it; for instance, *kuntilanak*, *sundel bolong*, *wewe gombel*, *Si Manis Jembatan Ancol*, *Hantu Casablanca*, *Nyi Blorong* or *Nyi Roro Kidul*. “When women are shown in horror films, the impression of sensuality is slowly fading replaced by a mystical impression that makes the audience always guess the female character who appears in the film is a ghostly figure” (Tiwahyupriadi & Ayuningtyas, 2020: 121). Metaphorically, it conforms to the dominant underlying patriarchal ideology of the Indonesian society that constantly attempts to subjugate women’s position by representing them in films in such ways that date back, as Sen argues, to the New Order regime between 1966 to 1998 with its “ideological emphasis on women being seen primarily as wives and mothers rather than as career women or being able to lead independent productive lives” (quoted in Hanan, 2017: 246).

The metaphor is strengthened by the *wayang* performance as an important part of the film. The *wayang* scene is a direct reference to the old and traditional medium of entertainment and guidance as opposed to the new and modern takes on films. Traditionally, leather puppet performance is often seen as a symbolic language of spiritual life, this is often referred to as moral guidance for how people should live and treat others (Soetarno, 2011: 301). Thus, the presence of the *wayang* performance on screen not only strengthens the mystical aspect of the film but also signifies the underlying theme of gender conflict and the traditional vs the modern symbolically.

4. Discussion

There are numbers of research and books discussing the sub-genre of body horror since its golden age in the 1980s. Some recent articles that resonate this research including Cruz (2012) who argues that body horror is biological horror that includes hybrids, metamorphoses, mutations, aberrant sex and zombification. (Rapoport, 2020) looks at how female writers use horror fictions to demystify and normalize the discussion of female body within popular culture. In a similar way, *Impetogore* also attempts to challenge the mystification of the female body through its main character. Revert (n.d.), in his discussion of Cronenberg’s *The Fly* and Tsukamoto’s *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* argues that the metamorphoses of the male bodies in the films are projection of the identity crisis within societies. *Impetigore* talks about the constant shift of contemporary Indonesian identity that relates to the traditional and the modern. There are also numbers of master’s Thesis discussing about body horror such using Kristeva’s concept of the abject, for example Rocha (2017) who discusses some body horror films in their context in generating disgust and the abject. Chabot (2013) looks at Hollywood classical body horror

films as a form of political resistance in his thesis, and Bagwell (2014) discusses Cronenberg's *Videodrome* as a symbol of social anxieties.

Impetigore's body horror may remind the audience of Tobe Hooper's 1984 *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* with the presence of skinned bodies, a deranged family, and a final girl. Even the escape scene in the ending is quite similar: when Rahayu stops and climbs a truck, she screams in relief and horror knowing that she is away from the hellish place. But that's where the similarities stop as *Impetigore* has its original storyline in that it is uniquely Indonesian. This is one characteristic of young Indonesian filmmakers, who, as Barker (2019: 84) argues, "have successfully combined features of global horror with locally resonant tropes, iconography and references." Even though the film opens in a metropolitan setting with all its global nature, *Impetigore* carries strong Javanese tropes through the icon of *wayang*, the Javanese traditional house, colloquial language, and the *kejawen* belief that dominate the whole narrative.

4.1. The Gender Contender

The film revolves around the protagonist, Rahayu (played by Tara Basro), a 20-year-old and low-class female worker who tries to escape poverty. When she almost runs out of fortune working in the city, she decides to return to her unfamiliar home-village as she has been living in the city throughout her life. She never knows why her parents let her go but she knows that they own a property in her home-village, which may change her fortune. Rahayu (see figure 1) is depicted as a single, carefree, hardworking, and independent woman, who struggles to survive first from the cruel grip of metropolitan life and then later from the murderous superstitious villagers.



Figure 1: The main female character, Rahayu: "Do you want to buy a bra?"

The screenshot above depicts the scene in a market where Rahayu is trying her fortune in selling women's clothing. Albeit a brief scene, her casually offering a bra to another character and

almost to the audience points at a significant shift in how the female body is presented in contemporary Indonesian horror films, as well suggests she is a non-traditional female character. In most cases, when a bra is shown on-screen, it always hints at sexuality as the bra is attached to the female's breast. Thus, when Rahayu separates the bra from the context of the female skin, her action symbolically removes the sexual context of the bra and turns it into a common object.

Produced in 2019, there is a significant shift in gender roles through the portrayal of Rahayu. Throughout the narrative, there are no dialogues about love, man or marriage that emphasise her independence. Even in the horror genre, the female characters are usually depicted to either be in a relationship or have a close boyfriend. Thus, the absence of a strong male figure that usually protects the female main character signals the shift in the traditional gender role. As can be seen from the image above, the close-up shot of Rahayu depicts her as she is, without make-up, a nice hairdo or fancy clothes which strengthens her character as an independent and hardworking woman.

In another instance, the film depicts taboo issues such as sex and vulgar visuals without making them look indecent or crude. In the opening scene, Ratih and Dina who work as toll booth attendants, are talking to each other via a cell phone, and Rahayu complains to Dini that her neighbours name her a *perek* (slang word for whore) as she always comes home late at night. Interestingly, Rahayu does not mind being called a *perek* if she is one, but she is not. The conversation then shifts to how it is good to be a *perek*, working just once at night and get some good money. The dialogue then shifts to the discussion of penis size. Dini says that she can tell the difference and claims that Rahayu will never understand because she is still a virgin. The whole dialogue is spoken in a laidback manner as if the topic is of not that significance to them. These opening scene dialogues indirectly reflect the dynamic of gender role in contemporary Indonesian society when the two women openly discuss sex in public (to the audience), which usually falls under the male domain. Such vulgar topics have never been heard in other popular Indonesian horror films, or at least not openly discussed by the female characters.

The second instance is related to a vulgar visualisation when Rahayu is leisurely taking a pee while the camera is with her inside the restroom. The scene symbolises how Rahayu claims her body as her own when a part of Rahayu's body is exposed but not in a sexual context. In the mainstream popular Indonesian horror cinema, the exposure of the female body is almost always sexual, but this scene has no sense of sexual innuendo because it reveals an important clue when Rahayu unintentionally discovers a piece of talisman inside her inner thigh (figure

2). Thus, besides providing a clue for the audience, the scene symbolises an attempt to disassociate female body with sexuality, particularly in a popular horror film.



Figure 2: Rahayu takes out a talisman from her inner thigh

However, when Rahayu arrives in the village, she encounters womanhood in its most conservative role as a wife and child-bearer. All the women in the villages are depicted to be submissive, passive and bound to their traditional role, except for Ratih, a young widow, and Nyi Misni, the matriarchal figure. Rahayu has to face the patriarch of the village, Ki Saptadi, a local famous puppet master or *dalang*. Ki Saptadi is merely the authoritative face of the village; the brain is his mother, Nyi Misni, a black magic practitioner. Nyi Misni also hides the fact that Rahayu is her son's biological daughter. Later in the story, it is revealed that Ki Saptadi has an affair with Rahayu's mother.

The village, Harjosari, has a sinister mystery that involves Rahayu's parents. The mystery also ties to the *wayang* performance, which is an important and spiritual event for the villagers. The presence of superstition and superstitious people living in a rural, almost isolated area reflects the conventional setting of the New Order horror cinema, in which rural area and its people are associated with superstition, backwardness—uneducated and traditional—whereas the good, educated and logical belong to the big city and its people. When an urbanite like Rahayu comes to a rural area, a clash is unavoidable as Rahayu is believed to be the key to the curse in the village.

In many Indonesian horror films, this encounter often allegorises conflicts between the modern/new and the traditional/old. However, the similarities with the New Order horror cinema end there, as *Impetigore* still has its storyline that is in contrast with the traditional horror plot. Different from typical contemporary Indonesian horror films where young urbanites usually come to a mystical suburban and encounter the supernatural, Rahayu in *Impetigore* is originally a part of the suburban, who was taken to the city when she was small

and returns to her home village to claim her inheritance. Unknown to her, the locals have been searching for her, the “lost daughter”, because they need her skin to lift the curse.

Near the end of the story, Rahayu, helped by Ratih, manages to figure out what happens to the village, with the assistance of three ghost girls. This collaboration between a young female urbanite, a simple-minded villager and the restless spirits, who all happen to be female, is an interesting point that the film offers. They represent the marginalised, which in this case is the young female characters, who have to confront a much powerful adversary. Rahayu is an orphan struggling to get a better life in ruthless city life and becomes the minority in the village. Ratih is a young widow who learns from Rahayu that her husband has been killed in the city after trying to murder Rahayu while the three ghosts are the victims of the black magic ritual by the powerful male *dalang*. The way the restless spirits are depicted in the film is uncommon because in almost all contemporary Indonesian horror films, the restless spirits or ghosts become the main antagonist who needs to be defeated. The three restless spirits, however, bring no harm to anyone; in fact, they seem helpless. Although they are minor characters, their existence in the film is significant. The director clearly understands the need to have restless spirits in a horror film as “spirit remain key to the realm of the invisible or inscrutable (*gajib*) and continue to have a strong hold on the popular imagination in communities and on TV screens across the archipelago” (Bubandt, 2017: 103). In addition, “they continue to play an important role in the post-colonial present...spirits of the dead remain ubiquitous” (Bräunlein & Lauser, 2016: 1) in Southeast Asian countries. There is a strong sense of sisterhood within the collaboration that centres around Rahayu. Although Ratih knows that her husband has died because of Rahayu, she is still willing to help her. Further, although the ghosts know that Rahayu has grown into a normal young woman because of their death, they help Rahayu by telling her to unite their buried bones with their skins to lift the curse. This collaboration emphasises Anwar’s trademark in portraying the weak, the nobody, the marginalised as the hero/heroine which is also a way of giving them a voice to challenge the established and powerful in this context, the patriarchal/traditional authority.

Another important scene that signifies the challenge to gender conflict occurs at the end when after knowing the reality of the curse, Ki Saptadi who feels guilty slices his own throat in front of his mother, who later follows his action. It is unusual for a patriarchal figure to admit their mistake and take responsibility, let alone committing suicide. In a traditional plot, the patriarch is usually the order restorer, but in this case, just like the others, they are just a victim of their ignorance and superstitious belief.

The mystification of the female body does not end with the death of Nyi Misni because in the film denouement, Nyi Misni returns to the village as a baby-eating monster. The film ends with a long hysterical scream of a pregnant woman who suddenly loses her baby and realises that a frightening old woman is eating the baby in front of her. One interpretation for this scene is that Anwar is probably hinting at a new film about this monster, but from the gender conflict perspective, this scene reconfirms the subjugation of women by depicting them as the undesired or the monster as having been reflected in many other Indonesian horror films. The depiction of Nyi Misni as a mysterious old woman who practices black magic may remind the audience of the traditional concept of a witch. In this context, Nyi Misni's role as the antagonist and the monster is another instance of the mystification of the female body.

4.2. The Skinned Performance of the Mystified Body

In *Impetigore*, skin becomes the ultimate part that the cursed village lacks. Due to the curse, every local couple cannot give birth to normal babies as all of them are born skinless and murdered right away. Thus, the skin here symbolises their future that will preserve their traditional way of living. Rahayu's skin is believed to be the village's future as its transformation into *wayang* lifts the curse.

The skin and its transformation are also inscribed with a narrative of gender conflict. The skin has to be of women and when it is transformed into a *wayang* character, its movement is controlled by a male *dalang* or puppeteer in any narrative of their choice, to be performed as a spectacle. Also, the film shows the local females who are akin to a reproductive machine when they are depicted to be in a pregnant state. When they give birth to an abnormal baby, the male authority heartlessly dismisses it. The mothers have no voice or right to defend their newborn; they submit to and are powerless against the patriarchal authority.

Gender conflict becomes the root of the problem when the powerful male lusts after a woman who is not his wife which then ends up in the curse. The lust always comes from looking at the skin, or outer beauty, as can be seen from Ki Donowongso's, Rahayu's non-biological father, act of impregnating his servant, Nyi Misni. Later, he sees the beautiful Nyai Shinta and also lusts after her and finally marries her. Ki Saptadi, Ki Donowongso's illegitimate child, lusts after Nyai Shinta and their affair gives birth to Rahayu. This skin-deep lust is ended when Nyi Misni curses Rahayu who is born skinless. This drives Ki Donowongso to perform a demonic ritual by skinning three local little girls and transforming their skin into *wayang* puppets, and,

mystically, Rahayu is gradually covered with skin. The villagers who suspect Ki Donowongso's foul play kill him, and Rahayu is saved by the house servant who takes her to the city. From there on, the goal of the local villagers is to bring the cause of the curse, Rahayu, back to the village to be skinned. The narrative unravels "gender, at its heart, [as] a structural power relation that rests upon a central set of distinctions between categories of people, valuing some over others" (Mazurana & Proctor, 2013: 2). The value of Rahayu is based on her skin, and the value of the other women in the village is for their reproductive property only while the men control everything.

The corporeal monstrosity in *Impetigore* is not overtly exploited, as there are only three notable scenes when the skin and the skinless are exposed. The first is when Nyi Misni dries Dini's skin under the sun, the second when Nyi Misni thins and smoothens the skins to be transformed into a *wayang* and the third is when Rahayu and Ratih meet Tole, a skinless individual who lives by himself in the forest. The skinning of the three little girls is not shown on-screen but the audience can see the *wayang* as the final product, made of the girls' skin.

The female skinning is staged as a sort of a ritualistic performance when the victim is hung upside down with a bucket right under her head to hold the blood as her throat is slit (see figure 3). This scene takes place when Dini, who is mistaken as Rahayu, is prepared for the ritual. The villagers only realise the mistake when Nyi Misni, who makes the *wayang*, says that they have slit the wrong girl's throat because the curse remains even after Ki Saptadi performs a *wayang* performance with the new *wayang* made of Dini's skin. The camerawork as seen in the image below provides a clue of Dini's untimely and manner of death when the position of the knife is parallel with Dini's neck and then her throat is cut.



Figure 3: Dini is hanged upside down for the ritual preparation

The image above, which occurs twice with Rahayu in the same position later in the story, also serves as a metaphorical reference to how the two women's lives are turned upside down when they decide to visit the village. The upside-down position also symbolises the gender

conflict and the clash between the old traditional values and the new modern values that the two women represent. The arrival of two metropolitan, independent and non-traditional women is metaphorically seen as a threat to the village's patriarchal society led by Ki Saptadi. When the villagers are searching for Rahayu, they refer to her as "the city girl", which further emphasises the city/village dichotomy. At the same time, the locals have been waiting so long for the return of Rahayu as the "missing child" who is believed to be the cause of the curse. The two "empowered" women are then seen as prey, or in other words, the "non-traditional women" have to be sacrificed for the perpetuation of the traditional. The fact that Rahayu was born in the village and then returns there voluntarily as she needs something from it also symbolises the long-established interconnectedness between the modern and traditional which in a way reflects the actual condition in contemporary Indonesian society when the modern/traditional dichotomy converges.

The scene after Dini's horrifying death follows the process of *wayang*-making. First, the skin is dried, which can be seen when Nyi Misni hangs Dini's fresh skin in front of her house (figure 4). The heavy Javanese background is clearly shown in the image with the looming *joglo* house (a traditional Javanese house) in the back, and Nyi Misni as the matriarch is taking the central point in this shot to emphasise her power. The choice of the breast skin to be exposed, besides providing an easy identification for the audience, is to emphasise the mystification of the female body in a non-sexual way; the display of the breast in this way prompts horror.



Figure 4: Nyi Misni hangs Dini's skin

The second scene is when Nyi Misni thins and smoothens the dried skin as the next step before it is turned into a *wayang* (see figure 5). Again, Nyi Misni becomes the central point of the shot that emphasises her significant role in the whole events that happen in the village. She is scraping the skin to remove the left flesh or hair before drying it again for the

second time. Besides being informative to a common audience on the *wayang*-making process, the scene wants to underline the value of the skin.



Figure 5: Nyi Misni smoothens Dini's skin

The skin is treated in such ways to produce a beautiful *wayang* (see figure 6) that will look alive on stage once the *dalang* manipulates it. The 'skin performance' in the three screenshots emphasising the *wayang*-making process signifies the mystification of the female body in which it is treated as an object whose mystical parts can be literally peeled away. It also symbolically points at the gender conflict when the powerful attempt to subjugate women's positions and control them.



Figure 6: The *wayang* as the end product made of Dini's skin

4.3. The Mystical Wayang

Impetigore strengthens its superstitious element by incorporating a symbolic Javanese traditional performance, *wayang kulit* performance (skin-leathered puppet show), as an important aspect of the film. The *wayang* is known to be symbolic, representing the Javanese

nature. Although the film does not explicitly mention the set to be a village in Central Java, the costumes, names, *wayang* performance and dialect used in the film all point to the set being a fictional place in Central Java. Set in a traditional Javanese background, the film strongly suggests the reminiscent of the old patriarchal authoritative of the New Order regime with its *kejawen* belief, as subtly reflected through the villagers' belief. *Kejawen* is a Javanese philosophy which is applied in everyday life and manifested in symbols and rituals (Prakoso & Wilianto, 2020: 165). The aim of the Javanese' life is to find and create a balance between the microcosmos and macrocosmos (Mulyani, 2015: 2-3). *Kejawen* is inseparable from mysticism, which is called *kejawen* mysticism that contains the Javanese life philosophy, art, culture, tradition, ritual, manner and virtue (Ulya, 2019: 2). A high-level *kejawen* practitioner needs to prevent oneself from misusing the skill to perform black magic/mysticism, which is what the film depicts. The antagonist, Nyi Misni, uses black magic to take revenge on her male master, Ki Donowongso, who raped her. A curse falls upon her master's daughter who is born without skin. One later learns that the daughter is Rahayu, the protagonist. In return, the master performs his black magic to cure Rahayu by butchering three local little girls whose skin is turned into leather puppets that the master uses during the village's ritual leather puppet performance. *Wayang* performance is known to be a medium to attract the ancestors' power or spirit to ward off evil or bad luck or, in this case, to prevent the restless spirits from taking revenge or for certain magic to work. To protect Rahayu, he inscribes a talisman which he inserts below her daughter's thigh skin. The curse somehow stays in the village that results in all babies being born skinless, and the villagers believe that the only way to lift the curse is to skin Rahayu and transform her skin into a leather puppet. In every birth event in the village, Ki Saptadi is always present to check whether the new-born has skin or not. He personally drowns the skinless baby, which is claimed to be an act of mercy.

The skin becomes the leitmotif of this film as events that unfold revolve around the absence/presence of the skin. Halberstam argues that "...skin functions as the material that divides the inside from the outside" (Dudenhoeffer, 2014: 3), that when the inside becomes the outside like the skinless babies, they turn into the uncanny or the monster; thus, drowning them right after they were born is considered right and merciful. The skin or the outside becomes a very significant aspect in the story that can bring normalcy and things back in order. It explains why Rahayu's father and the villagers are willing to do anything for the skin. In a superstitious and mostly uneducated society like the village, an abnormality such as skinless babies is never seen as a medical issue but a mystical one, thus putting much heavier pressure on the people. Under a patriarchal authority, women's physicality is also of great concern, considering their

feature, including the skin, is an investment to ensure a traditional life as a wife and a mother. Just like the *wayang* which is the most important feature is the skin, so are women. Without the leather, the puppet will be soulless and incomplete. Without smooth and beautiful skin, women will find difficulties in finding partners.

The *wayang* is traditionally made of water buffalo hide, dated back as far as the early 11th century. The existence of a *wayang* made of human skin, though, remains a myth, although some believe it exists. One study mentions that a small village called Kedakan in Magelang regency, Central Java is said to have one leather puppet made of human skin, which is considered a sacred object. It is passed down from one generation of puppet master to another, and only performed on special occasions such as Javanese Syawal or Safar months (Dananjaya, 2020). However, no one knows why and how someone's skin ends up as a *wayang*. The fact that human-made *wayang* is not a myth brings a realistic aura to the film that elevates the horror.

In the film, the new human-skin *wayang* then has to be used in a ritual performance for its mystical power to take effect, as Ki Donowongso carries out the mystical *wayang* performance once he completes making the *wayang* characters out of the girls' skin. The chosen narrative is called *Banjaran Jarasanda*. It tells a story about a king with his twin wives. After years of having no children, both the wives finally get pregnant, but each only carries half of the baby (Salim et al., 2020: 45). The narrative resonates Ki Donowongso's own life where he has no child after years of marriage. When her wife is finally pregnant, she gives birth to a skinless baby. After the performance, though, Rahayu gradually grows skin and becomes a normal girl who signifies the success of the ritual. The portrayal of a respected yet infertile male *dalang* strongly suggests a challenge to the patriarchal authority who, in this case, is incapable of giving offspring.

Thus, the presence of human skin *wayang* is a compelling evidence of the supernatural aspect although the *wayang* themselves do not show any obvious power in the film. What is interesting is the use of little girls' skin to form the *wayang*. Naturally, the young possess smoother and finer skin, although there are no rules on what kind of human skin to use regarding the puppet. Rahayu's father performs black magic to "transfer" the little girls' skin to Rahayu. The skin as the "outside" is removed from the body only to be transformed into an object that makes the skin to be both "inside" and "outside" in the form of the *wayang*.

The puppeteer or *dalang* is a male-dominated and highly respected occupation. There are some female *dalang*, but their skills are doubted due to society's skepticism compared to the male *dalang*. The way the *dalang* controls the puppets and chooses the narrative is a direct

metaphor to how patriarchy controls “the stage” and treats the women as subordinates. Indeed, “Javanese culture, when juxtaposed with other cultures, has a dark track-record in positioning women. As happens in majority of cultures, women are positioned as a second-class under men” (Ardiani, 2018: 1). This subordination is evident as well in the *wayang* narratives when the male characters are always depicted to be more powerful than the female characters. Thus, the whole universe of the *wayang* performance and the village of Hardjosri revolves around perpetuating the status quo and undermining women as the marginalised. However, the film manages to challenge this domination through some events surrounding the *wayang* performance. First, the choice of *wayang* narrative called *Banjaran Jarasanda* sheds light on the powerless king who cannot have a normal offspring. This condition is also reflected by the infertile Ki Donowongso, who is later killed by Ki Saptadi. Ki Saptadi himself, being a respected *dalang*, slashes his own throat when he learns about the truth. Thus, the death of all the male authorities can be metaphorically interpreted as a challenge towards the perpetual patriarchal domination.

5. Conclusion

The mystification of the female body (skin) becomes the film premise that sees the body or its part as the means to achieve something mystical/spiritual. The mystification of the body is amplified through how the female skin is transformed into a spiritual and mystical *wayang* character. Skin, through the morbid scene, represents the mystic of the surfaces and, as the skin is transformed into a *wayang* and the human essence becomes skin deep. In other words, the essence of the female characters is limited to their beauty (skin) and their reproductive aspect. The monstrosity of this postmodern Indonesian horror, adopting Baudrillard’s term of ‘immediate visibility’ of the obscene, in contrast shows the obscenity of the ‘delayed invisibility,’ as the *wayang* maker requires time to process and transform the female skin into a *wayang* character. On the one hand, the audience does not immediately see the obscenity, but in delay. On the other hand, the female skin on the *wayang* becomes “invisible” or transparent when being put against the *wayang* screen during a performance. The obscenity of the skinned performance becomes subtle and unknown, even mystical to the audience and definitely terrifying.

The discourse of gendered monstrosity in the film is skin-deep and paradoxical when the borrowed female skin is mystified and accursed yet desired because it is believed to bring normalcy and allure. Metaphorically, *Impetigore*’s utilisation of its mystical bodily imagery through the transformation of female body skin also signifies the desired/threatening nature of

women in the context of gender relation within a patriarchal society. Women's threatening body is symbolically "neutralised" when its part is turned into a *wayang* and later controlled by the male *dalang*.

However, the film also challenges the traditional gender construction that appears in many contemporary Indonesian horror films. The depiction of Rahayu as a non-traditional character becomes the symbol of resistance against the patriarchal power and superstitious society when her resilience and resourcefulness prevent her from being disfigured and transformed into a "puppet." Rahayu also embodies strong womanhood through unusual collaboration with a local widow, Ratih and the girl ghosts. These marginalised females break both the curse and the powerful authority that controls the villagers' lives. Where traditional horror films usually treat the ghosts as a threat, *Impetigore* shows them to be the victim. Abnormalcy becomes the threat to the point when eliminating the abnormal is considered normal, even seen as an act of mercy. This situation is an allegory to how normalcy is a social construct, that when something exists outside the construction, it will be outcasted or rejected.

Impetigore's skinned performance does not reflect skin-deep meaning. Through the mystification of the female body and the *wayang* performance, the film succeeds in both confirming the perpetual gender conflict and challenging it. The character of Rahayu becomes a symbol of the resistance against the discourse of gendered monstrosity while the character Nyi Misni embodies it, first metaphorically when she is still alive and then literally when she is dead and turned into a monster. However, at the same time, Nyi Misni also symbolises the power of matriarchy when she cunningly manages to overtake the patriarchy power in the village through black magic. The *wayang* performance symbolises the traditional Javanese patriarchy that often subjugates women's position. What is interesting is that the male characters' roles are made diminutive, as seen in the character Ki Saptadi, the villagers, and Ki Donowongso. Ki Satpadi, a respected *dalang*, and the villagers become "puppets" to Nyi Misni who orchestrates the village affairs. Ki Donowongso, Rahayu's non-biological father who is also a respected, famous *dalang*, is literally made infertile when he cannot impregnate his wife. In addition, Rahayu is born skinless, which brings shame to him as a powerful figure.

Unlike most contemporary Indonesian horror narratives about restless spirits that seek revenge for their death, the three girl ghosts merely want to be reunited with their skin and help the protagonist in the process. In a way, their presence does not invoke fear, but sympathy. The character Ratih, the local widow, also symbolises a resistance against the male domination when she decides to help Rahayu although she knows of the risk if she is found. Her action suggests

that she is challenging the authority or the norms that everyone believes. In conclusion, *Impetigore* indeed is never a simple horror story; it carries a deeper issue despite the skin-deep mystification of the female body that it depicts.

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3. Bukti konfirmasi submit revisi pertama, respon kepada reviewer, dan artikel yang diresubmit

Rupkatha [Decision: Revision Requested]

You replied on Wed 9/8/2021 10:49 AM

Rupkatha Journal East & Southeast Asian Section Editor <sectioneditorasia@gmail.com>
To: Anton Sutandio

Sat 9/4/2021 12:36 PM

Dear Dr. Sutandio,

Thank you for your patience during this review process. We have received the comments from your reviewer. The reviewer finds your essay to be promising, but requests further minor revisions. The reviewer wants more clarification in certain sections and also a restructuring of the essay so that the argument is more swiftly and forcefully introduced. The reviewer writes:

I have read the paper with great interest. I think it brings a very important topic of discussion, i.e. negotiation of gender relations in popular Indonesian film. However, I find the analysis wanting, which I believe results from the unclear argument(s) presented in this paper and numerous claims that are not clearly explained or referred to. One instance: "In a traditional plot, the patriarch is usually the order restorer..." This implies that the author has screened numerous other Indonesian horror films with a strong focus on the patriarch or perused previous scholarly articles that claim so.

Structure-wise, this paper waits a little bit too long before it gets to the gist of the discussions. I would suggest that, for the sake of effectiveness and in order to get the reader by the hand, Method of Research and Theoretical Framework, for example, could have just been written, briefly, as part of the Introduction. Similarly, The Mystical Wayang could as well be integrated into the Discussion, of which title could just be changed with the title of one of the two sub-parts of the discussion, or the combination of them.

All that said, this paper is worthy of publication.

We know it could be discouraging to have to do another round of revisions, but we agree with your reviewer that it will make your paper stronger--and therefore a better publication for you. At the very least, we encourage you to introduce and clarify your central argument in the introductory matter of your paper.

If you are willing to revise your essay, may we expect it by the 10th of September? Please let us know.

Sincerely,

--
Section Editor
East and Southeast Asian Studies
Rupkatha Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities (indexed in Scopus, WoS, MLA)

Respon terhadap review:

I have read the paper with great interest. I think it brings a very important topic of discussion, i.e. negotiation of gender relations in popular Indonesian film. However, I find the analysis wanting, which I believe results from the unclear argument(s) presented in this paper and numerous claims that are not clearly explained or referred to. One instance: "In a traditional plot, the patriarch is usually the order restorer..." This implies that the author has screened numerous other Indonesian horror films with a strong focus on the patriarch or perused previous scholarly articles that claim so.

Thank you for the suggestion, I have re-read my writing and revised some unclear claims/arguments which hope will make the paper clearer. Indeed, I have made claims based on previous screenings and writing on many Indonesian horror films and used it here as a reference so that the readers are informed about some characteristics of Indonesian horror cinema.

Structure-wise, this paper waits a little bit too long before it gets to the gist of the discussions. I would suggest that, for the sake of effectiveness and in order to get the reader by the hand, Method of Research and Theoretical Framework, for example, could have just been written, briefly, as part of the Introduction. Similarly, The Mystical Wayang could as well be integrated into the Discussion, of which title could just be changed with the title of one of the two sub-parts of the discussion, or the combination of them. I have shortened the paper to around 5000 words (without the references) and have integrated the method and theoretical framework into the introduction to make it more concise.

I have also followed your suggestion to integrate the sub-topic in the discussion into just one title.

All that said, this paper is worthy of publication.

Thank you for your review and suggestions!

Artikel yang sudah direvisi:

Skinned Performance: Female Body Horror in Joko Anwar's *Impetigore*

Abstract

This article discusses the 2019 Indonesian horror film, *Impetigore* (*Perempuan Tanah Jahanam*) directed by Joko Anwar. In 2021, *Impetigore* became the first Indonesian horror film to represent the country at the Academy Awards. This article focuses on the film's mystification of the female body, which points towards the gender relations. This research utilizes the concept of body horror, particularly relating to the skin, gender relations, and *wayang* mysticism. The findings show that the film metaphorically underlines the ongoing disconcerting perspective of contemporary Indonesian society on women's embodied agency. The film's portrayal of non-traditional female characters suggests an attempt to challenge the mainstream patriarchal narrative in contemporary Indonesian horror cinema, and at the same time hints at the perpetuating subjectification of woman's bodies as a threatening yet desirable agency.

Keywords: body horror, mystification, female body, *Impetigore*, Indonesian horror film.

1. Introduction

In early November 2020, the Indonesian Oscar Selection Committee decided to choose *Impetigore* (Anwar, 2019) to represent Indonesia at the 93rd Academy Awards in the International Feature Film Award category. The chairperson of the committee and a well-known director, Garin Nugroho, states that the film has fulfilled all the required technical criteria and it carries local Indonesian values. Anwar claims that it took him 10 years to develop the film (Prambors, 2020) and the result is not disappointing. The film breaks the record for most nominations in the history of Indonesian Film Festival in 17 different categories and won 6 of them including the best film, the best director, and the best supporting actress.

Impetigore is important as a horror film because it is the first Indonesian horror film that represents the country in the Academic Award and the film has been screened in number of international film festivals: Spain Sitges Film Festival, Rotterdam International Film Festival,

Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival, and Sundance Film Festival. *Impetigore* is different from other Indonesian horror films for several reasons. First, the 10-year process is a proof of how much effort and research are done to produce the film. Secondly, the presence of dominant and memorable female characters, and thirdly, the original premise of the story that mixes mysticism, traditional *wayang* performance, and gender relations.

This article explores female body horror in Joko Anwar's *Impetigore*. More specifically, it focuses on the mystification of the female body that equates women's worth with their biological functions and appearance, which—in this context—centers on the skin. Jay McRoy stated, “skin, the membranes that separate us from other objects, functions in the horror film ‘at once as a point of contact, a site of resistance, and a method of transference’ of the inside to the outside” (Dudenhoeffer, 2014: 3). When the inside is shown through the skinless character, it becomes what Kristeva called an abject which existence threatens normality. The female skin that is transformed into a *wayang* adds another layer to *Impetigore*'s body horror.

The concept of mystification is reflected through the theory of objectification, which is simply defined as “the seeing and/or treating a person, usually a woman, as an object” (Papadaki, 2019), particularly in a sexual nature. *Impetigore*, however, does not suggest a sexual objectification of women, but a mystical one, specifically when a woman's body is seen as an object that carries certain supernatural properties. This kind of mystification of women and their bodies has almost become a trope in the Indonesian horror genre where, in many instances of horror films from different periods, women are apt to carry a mystical aura. “When women are shown in horror films, the impression of sensuality is slowly fading replaced by a mystical impression that makes the audience always guess the female character who appears in the film is a ghostly figure” (Tiwahyupriadi & Ayuningtyas, 2020: 121). Metaphorically, it conforms to the dominant underlying patriarchal ideology of the Indonesian society that constantly attempts to subjugate women's position by representing them in films in such ways that date back, as Sen argues, to the New Order regime between 1966 to 1998 with its “ideological emphasis on women being seen primarily as wives and mothers rather than as career women or being able to lead independent productive lives” (quoted in Hanan, 2017: 246).

The metaphor is strengthened by the *wayang* performance in the film. The *wayang* scene is a direct reference to the traditional medium of entertainment and guidance. *Wayang* performance is often seen as a symbolic language of spiritual life and referred to as moral guidance for how people should live and treat others (Soetarno, 2011: 301). The world of *wayang* is patriarchal both in the gender relation of the *wayang* characters where the dominant

characters are mostly male, and in the context of the *dalang* which is a male-dominated profession. In this line of reasoning, the presence of the *wayang* performance on screen not only strengthens the mystical aspect of the film but also signifies the problematic gender relations.

The body horror has almost always been emphasising body spectacle: bodies being transformed, mutated, cut, decapitated, burnt, or broken that provide a visceral experience and “stage a spectacle of human body defamiliarized, rendered other” (Dudenhoeffer, 2014: 7). In Indonesia, something similar has been seen since the 1970s, mostly focusing on the destruction and degeneration of the female body, which says a lot about the views of the Indonesian cinema on the female body. For instance, the film *Beranak dalam Kubur* (1972) depicts a protagonist whose face is destroyed by acid; in *Sundelbolong* (1981) the monster is a female ghost with a gaping hole in her back; and *Perkawinan Nyi Blorong* (1983) depicts a mythical creature who has a head of a female and a body of a snake.

Impetigore's narrative is driven by the major female characters. This is in stark contrast to the New Order regime's representation of female characters in Indonesian horror cinema in the last four decades of the 20th century. During that period (1966—1998), women were politically and culturally subdued under the strong authoritarian and patriarchal regime of Soeharto, the second president of Indonesia. As a result, unless their on-screen portrayal abided by the ideology, the film would be harshly censored. During that period, Suzzana's roles as powerful and mystical characters in horror films such as *Nyi Roro Kidul* or *Nyi Blorong* (demi-god creature) or monsters such as *kuntilanak* or *sundel bolong* (revengeful female ghost) can be seen as a challenge and negotiation of the gender relations. However, her show of power and domination on screen was still limited by strict rules that usually involved specific plot templates aligned with the regime ideology. No matter how strong or dominating the female characters were, there had to be a higher power which usually came in the form of a powerful male such as wise and pious man, or *Ustaz* (Islamic religious leader) that will restore order. Kusumaryati affirms this assertion, arguing that “the feminine grotesque deeply tying together motifs of femininity with horror, is a common element of Indonesian horror” (Guttman, 2016: 4).

The fall of the regime in 1998 opened new possibilities in gender relations. The concept of “final girl” coined by Clover started to emerge in Indonesian horror films. For example, Rizal Mantovani's *Kuntilanak* (2006), *Kuntilanak 2* (2007), and *Air Terjun Pengantin* (2009), and Mo Brothers' *Macabre* (2009) feature female characters who become the sole survivor of tragic events. However, even in these cases, in order to defeat their male counterparts, these women

need to incorporate what is traditionally in Indonesian context viewed as male characteristics, such as rational and dominant. In other words, if they did not transform into a masculinized female, they would not survive.

Impetigore depicts non-typical female characters. The protagonist, Rahayu, her friend, Dini, and the antagonist, Nyi Misni do not show stereotypical female traits in horror films such as dependent, emotional or masculinized. They are independent, resilient, and are not chained to traditional social norms that bind women to certain roles and positions which suggest a different negotiation of the gender relations.

2.The Gender Contender and the Mystical Skinned Performance

Impetigore's body horror may remind the audience of Tobe Hooper's 1984 *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* with the presence of skinned bodies, a deranged family, and a final girl. Even the escape scene in the ending is quite similar: when Rahayu stops and climbs a truck, she screams in relief and horror knowing that she is away from the hellish place. But that's where the similarities stop as *Impetigore* has its original storyline in that it is uniquely Indonesian. This is one characteristic of young Indonesian filmmakers, who, as Barker (2019: 84) argues, "have successfully combined features of global horror with locally resonant tropes, iconography and references." The film opens in a metropolitan setting, yet it carries strong Javanese tropes through the icon of *wayang*, the Javanese traditional house, colloquial language, and the *kejawen* belief. *Kejawen* is a Javanese philosophy which is applied in everyday life and manifested in symbols and rituals (Prakoso & Wilianto, 2020: 165). The aim of Javanese' life is to find and create a balance between the microcosmos and macrocosmos (Mulyani, 2015: 2-3). The curse that falls upon the village creates imbalance and the film's narrative focuses on the effort to regain the balance.

The film revolves around the protagonist, Rahayu, a young, low-class female worker. When she runs out of fortune working in the city, she decides to return to her unfamiliar home-village where her parents used to live. She does not know why her parents sent her to the city when she was small, but she knows that they own a property in her home-village, which may change her fortune. Rahayu (see figure 1) is depicted as a single, carefree, hardworking, and independent woman. *Impetigore* shows a shift in gender relations mostly through her portrayal. Throughout the narrative, there are no dialogues about love, man or marriage that emphasise

her independence. The absence of a strong male figure in the film that usually protects the female main character signals the shift in the gender relations.



Figure 1: The main female character, Rahayu: “Do you want to buy a bra?”

The screenshot above depicts the scene in a market. This scene shows a significant shift in the presentation of the female body when she is casually offering a bra to another character and almost to the audience. In most Indonesian horror films, when a bra is shown on-screen, it always hints at sexuality as the bra is attached to the female’s breast. Thus, when Rahayu separates the bra from the context of the female skin, her action symbolically removes the sexual context of the bra and turns it into a common object.

The second instance is related to a vulgar visualisation when Rahayu is taking a pee while the camera is with her inside the restroom. Although a part of Rahayu’s body is exposed, it is not in a sexual context. In the mainstream popular Indonesian horror cinema, the exposure of the female body is almost always sexual, but this scene has no sense of sexual innuendo because it reveals an important clue when Rahayu unintentionally discovers a piece of talisman inside her inner thigh (figure 2). Thus, besides providing a clue for the audience, the scene symbolises a disassociation of the female body with sexuality that supports the film’s non-traditional portrayal of the female characters.



Figure 2: Rahayu takes out a talisman from her inner thigh

However, when Rahayu arrives in the village, she encounters womanhood in its conservative role as a wife and child-bearer. All the women in the villages are depicted to be submissive, passive and bound to their traditional role, except for Ratih, a young widow, and Nyi Misni, the matriarchal figure. Rahayu has to face the patriarch of the village, Ki Saptadi, a local *dalang*. He is merely the authoritative face of the village; the brain is his mother, Nyi Misni, a black magic practitioner. Nyi Misni also hides the fact that Rahayu is her son's biological daughter. Later in the story, it is revealed that Ki Saptadi had an affair with Rahayu's mother.

Near the end of the story, Rahayu, helped by Ratih and the three ghost girls, manages to figure out what happens to the village. They represent the marginalised who have to confront a much powerful adversary. The way the restless spirits are depicted in the film is uncommon because usually the ghosts become the main antagonist. The three restless spirits, however, bring no harm to anyone; in fact, they seem helpless. Although they are minor characters, their existence in the film is significant. The director clearly understands the need to have restless spirits in a horror film as "spirit remain key to the realm of the invisible or inscrutable (*gaib*) and continue to have a strong hold on the popular imagination in communities and on TV screens across the archipelago" (Bubandt, 2017: 103). In addition, "they continue to play an important role in the post-colonial present...spirits of the dead remain ubiquitous" (Bräunlein & Lauser, 2016: 1) in Southeast Asian countries. The collaboration among the young female characters emphasises Anwar's trademark in portraying the weak or the marginalised as the hero/heroine which is also a way of negotiating the gender relations by giving them a voice to challenge the patriarchal or traditional authority.

Another important scene that signifies the negotiation of the gender relations occurs at the end when after knowing the reality of the curse, Ki Saptadi who feels guilty slices his own throat in front of his mother, who later follows his action. It is unusual for a patriarchal figure to admit their mistake and take responsibility, let alone committing suicide. The mystification of the female body does not end with the death of Nyi Misni because in the film denouement, Nyi Misni returns to the village as a baby-eating monster. The film ends with a long hysterical scream of a pregnant woman who suddenly loses her baby and the shot of Nyi Misni's bloody mouth. This scene reconfirms the subjugation of women by depicting them as the abject. However, her powerful afterlife presence in the film's epilogue can be seen as the negotiation of the gender relations when the female antagonist, albeit turned into an abject, is undefeated and

possess supernatural power that challenge normality. The fate of the two major female characters at the end of the film suggests that the shift in gender relations is unsettled. Nyi Misni, although she is now feared and powerful as a monster, is living in a different realm. Rahayu probably returns to her normal life in a worse condition than before as she does not only lose her chance for a better life, but she also loses her best friend, Dini.

In *Impetigore*, skin becomes the ultimate part that the cursed village lacks. Due to the curse, every local couple cannot give birth to normal babies as all of them are born skinless and murdered right away. Rahayu's skin transformation into *wayang* is believed to lift the curse and bring back normalcy. The skinless newborn is an abject and becomes a threat to the villagers because they are different and visually horrifying. It needs skin to be accepted as normal. In this line of reasoning, the skin becomes the mechanism that negotiates normalcy although to achieve it, the villagers have to kill and skin a person who is believed to be the source of the curse.

The skin and its transformation are inscribed with a narrative of gender relations. The skin has to be of women and when it is transformed into a *wayang* character, it is controlled by a male *dalang* or puppeteer in any narrative of their choice, to be performed as a spectacle. Gender relations become the root of the problem when the powerful male lusts after a woman who is not his wife which then ends up in the curse. The lust always comes from looking at the skin, or outer beauty, as can be seen from Ki Donowongso's, Rahayu's non-biological father, act of impregnating his servant, Nyi Misni. Later, he sees the beautiful Nyai Shinta and also lusts after her and finally marries her. Ki Saptadi, Ki Donowongso's illegitimate child, lusts after Nyai Shinta and their affair gives birth to Rahayu. This skin-deep lust is ended when Nyi Misni curses Rahayu who is born skinless. This drives Ki Donowongso to perform a demonic ritual by skinning three local little girls and transforming their skin into *wayang* puppets, and, mystically, Rahayu is gradually covered with skin. The villagers who suspect Ki Donowongso's foul play kill him, and Rahayu is saved by the house servant who takes her to the city. The narrative unravels "gender, at its heart, [as] a structural power relation that rests upon a central set of distinctions between categories of people, valuing some over others" (Mazurana & Proctor, 2013: 2). The value of Rahayu is based on her skin, and the value of the other women in the village is for their reproductive property only.

The corporeal monstrosity in *Impetigore* is not overtly exploited, as there are only four notable scenes when the skin and the skinless are exposed. The first is when Dini is hanged upside down and her throat is slit (see figure 3). The second one is when Nyi Misni dries Dini's

skin under the sun, the third when Nyi Misni thins and smoothens the skins to be transformed into a *wayang* and the fourth is when Rahayu and Ratih meet Tole, a skinless individual who lives by himself in the forest. The skinning of the three little girls is not shown on-screen but the audience can see the *wayang* as the final product, made of the girls' skin.

The female skinning is staged as a sort of a ritualistic performance when the victim is hung upside down with a bucket right under her head to hold the blood as her throat is slit (see figure 3). This scene takes place when Dini, who is mistaken as Rahayu, is prepared for the ritual. The villagers only realise the mistake when Nyi Misni, who makes the *wayang*, says that they have slit the wrong girl's throat because the curse remains even after Ki Saptadi performs a *wayang* performance with the new *wayang* made of Dini's skin.



Figure 3: Dini is hanged upside down for the ritual preparation

The image above, which occurs twice with Rahayu in the same position later in the story, also serves as a metaphorical reference to how the two women's lives are turned upside down when they decide to visit the village. The upside-down position also symbolises the gender relations and the gap between urban and the rural. The arrival of two independent and non-traditional women is metaphorically seen as a threat to the village's patriarchal society led by Ki Saptadi. When the villagers are searching for Rahayu, they refer to her as "the city girl", which further emphasises the urban/rural dichotomy.

The scene after Dini's horrifying death follows the process of *wayang*-making. First, the skin is dried, which can be seen when Nyi Misni hangs Dini's fresh skin in front of her house (figure 4). The heavy Javanese background is shown in the image with the looming *joglo* house (a traditional Javanese house) in the back, and Nyi Misni as the matriarch is taking the central point in this shot to highlight her power. The choice of the breast skin to be exposed, besides providing an easy identification for the audience, is to emphasise the mystification of the female body in a non-sexual way and to prompt horror.



Figure 4: Nyi Misni hangs Dini's skin

The second scene is when Nyi Misni thins and smoothens the dried skin as the next step before it is turned into a *wayang* (see figure 5). Again, Nyi Misni becomes the central point of the shot to show her significant role in the whole events that happen in the village. She is scraping the skin to remove the left flesh or hair before drying it again for the second time. Besides being informative to a common audience on the *wayang*-making process, the scene wants to underline the value of the skin.



Figure 5: Nyi Misni smoothens Dini's skin

The skin is treated in such ways to produce a beautiful *wayang* (see figure 6) that will look alive on stage once the *dalang* manipulates it. The 'skin performance' in the four screenshots emphasising the *wayang*-making process signifies the abjection and mystification of the female body in which it is treated as an object. The revelation that Nyi Misni is the source of the curse suggests unsettled gender relations: on the one hand, she is seen as a cruel monster that deserves to be punished, but on the other hand, her position puts the woman in charge that challenges the patriarchy. In fact, the whole narrative is triggered by Nyi Misni's actions of punishing the lustful men who bring disorder in the first place.



Figure 6: The wayang as the end product made of Dini's skin

Impetigore strengthens its superstitious element by incorporating a symbolic Javanese wayang kulit performance (skin-leathered puppet show) as an important aspect of the film. The performance is conducted by a person called *dalang*. The *dalang* is a male-dominated and highly respected profession. The way the *dalang* controls the puppets and chooses the narrative is a direct metaphor to how patriarchy controls “the stage” and treats the women as subordinates. Indeed, “Javanese culture, when juxtaposed with other cultures, has a dark track-record in positioning women. As happens in the majority of cultures, women are positioned as a second-class under men” (Ardiani, 2018: 1). This subordination is also evident in the wayang narratives where the male characters are always depicted to be more powerful than the female characters. Thus, the whole universe of the wayang performance and the village of Hardjosari revolves around perpetuating the status quo and undermining women as the marginalised.

The wayang is traditionally made of water buffalo hide, dated back as far as the early 11th century. The existence of a wayang made of human skin, though, remains a mystery, although some believe it exists. One study mentions that a small village called Kedakan in Magelang regency, Central Java is said to have one leather puppet made of human skin, which is considered a sacred object. It is passed down from one generation of puppet master to another, and only performed on special occasions such as Javanese Syawal or Safar months (Dananjaya, 2020). The wayang is known to be symbolic, representing the Javanese nature. The film suggests the reminiscent of the New Order patriarchal regime with its *kejawen* belief, as subtly reflected through the villagers' belief. *Kejawen* is inseparable from mysticism that contains Javanese life philosophy, art, culture, tradition, ritual, manner and virtue (Ulya, 2019: 2). A high-level *kejawen* practitioner needs to prevent oneself from misusing the skill to perform black magic/mysticism, which is what the film depicts through Nyi Misni. She uses black magic to curse Ki Donowongso's daughter, Rahayu, who is born skinless as a revenge for his lust for beautiful

women. In return, Ki Donowongso performs his black magic to cure Rahayu by butchering three local little girls whose skin is turned into leather puppets that he uses during the village's ritual *wayang* performance. The performance is known to be a medium to attract the ancestors' power or spirit to ward off evil or, in this case, to make a certain magic work. To protect Rahayu, he inscribes a talisman which he inserts in her daughter's thigh skin. Ki Donowongso's action results in all babies being born skinless, and the villagers are made to believe that the only way to lift the curse is to skin Rahayu and transform her skin into a leather puppet.

The skin becomes the leitmotif of this film as events that unfold revolve around the absence/presence of the skin. Halberstam argues that "...skin functions as the material that divides the inside from the outside" (Dudenhoeffer, 2014: 3), that when the inside becomes the outside like the skinless babies, they turn into the abject or the monster; thus, drowning them right after they were born is considered right and merciful. The skin becomes a significant aspect in the story that can bring normalcy and things back in order. Under a patriarchal authority, women's physicality is also of great concern, considering their features, including the skin, is an investment to ensure a traditional life as a wife and a mother. Just like the *wayang* in which the most important feature is the skin, so are women. Without the leather, the puppet will be soulless and incomplete. Without smooth and beautiful skin, women will find difficulties in finding partners.

In the film, the new human-skin *wayang* then has to be used in a ritual performance for its mystical power to take effect, as Ki Donowongso carries out the mystical *wayang* performance once he completes making the *wayang* characters out of the girls' skin. The chosen narrative is called *Banjaran Jarasanda*. It tells a story about a king with his twin wives. After years of having no children, both the wives finally get pregnant, but each only carries half of the baby (Salim et al., 2020: 45). The narrative resonates Ki Donowongso's own life where he has no child after years of marriage. When his wife is finally pregnant, she gives birth to a skinless baby. The portrayal of a respected yet infertile male *dalang* strongly suggests a challenge to the patriarchal authority who, in this case, is incapable of giving offspring. Thus, the presence of human skin *wayang* relates to the supernatural although the *wayang* themselves do not show any obvious power in the film. Rahayu's father performs black magic to "transfer" the little girls' skin to Rahayu. The skin as the "outside" is removed from the body only to be transformed into an object that makes the skin to be both "inside" and "outside" in the form of the *wayang*.

The film manages to challenge this male domination through some events surrounding the *wayang* performance. First, the choice of the *wayang* narrative, *Banjaran Jarasanda*, sheds

light on a powerless king who cannot have normal offspring. This condition is also reflected by the infertile Ki Donowongso, who is later killed by Ki Saptadi. Ki Saptadi himself, being a respected *dalang*, slashes his own throat when he learns about the truth. Thus, the death of all the male authorities is metaphorically interpreted as a challenge towards the perpetual patriarchal domination.

3. Conclusion

The mystification of the female body (skin) is the film premise that sees the body as the means to achieve something mystical. The mystification of the body is amplified through how the female skin is transformed into a spiritual and mystical *wayang* character. Skin, through the morbid scene, represents the mystic of the surfaces and, as the skin is transformed into a *wayang*, the female characters' essence becomes skin deep. Compared to the mainstream Indonesian horror films, there is an obvious difference between the visual eroticization of the sexualized female body and the visual objectification of the skin in *Impetigore*. In it, the skin is detached from the context of sexuality by firstly, visualizing it in an unusual setting, such as in the toilet or hung under the sun, secondly by literally detaching the skin from the body, and thirdly by transforming it into a *wayang* which generates horror, not lust.

Metaphorically, *Impetigore's* utilisation of its mystical bodily imagery through the transformation of female body skin also signifies the desired/threatening nature of women in the context of gender relation within a patriarchal society. Women's threatening body is symbolically "neutralised" when its part is turned into a *wayang* and later controlled by the male *dalang*. However, the film also challenges the traditional gender relations that appear in many contemporary Indonesian horror films. The depiction of Rahayu as a non-traditional character becomes the symbol of resistance against the patriarchal power and superstitious society when she manages to escape. Rahayu also embodies strong womanhood through unusual collaboration with Ratih and the girl ghosts. These marginalised females break both the curse and the powerful authority that controls the villagers' lives.

Impetigore's skinned performance does not reflect skin-deep meaning. Through the mystification of the female body and the *wayang* performance, the film succeeds in both confirming the perpetual gender conflict and challenging it. The *wayang* performance symbolises the traditional Javanese patriarchy that often subjugates women's position. What is interesting is that the male characters' roles are made diminutive, as seen in the character Ki

Saptadi, the villagers, and Ki Donowongso. Ki Satpadi and the villagers become “puppets” to Nyi Misni who orchestrates the village affairs and Ki Donowongso is literally infertile. The character of Rahayu becomes a symbol of the resistance against the discourse of female body mystification while the character Nyi Misni embodies it, first metaphorically when she is still alive and then literally when she is dead and turned into a monster. However, at the same time, Nyi Misni also symbolises the power of matriarchy when she cunningly manages to overtake the patriarchy in the village through black magic. Even after she is dead, she remains a threat to normalcy. In conclusion, *Impetigore* is never a simple horror story; it carries deeper issues beyond the skin-deep mystification of the female body that it depicts.

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