

# The final girls in contemporary Indonesian horror films: reclaiming women's power

*by Anton Sutandio*

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FILM STUDIES | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The final girls in contemporary Indonesian horror films: reclaiming women's power

Anton Sutandio<sup>1\*</sup>

**Abstract:** In this work, the concept of “final girls” in contemporary Indonesian horror films is interpreted as a way for women to reclaim their natural rights in the patriarchal world, countering the prevalent portrayal of female characters in popular films as victims or monsters. Therefore, contemporary Indonesian horror films can be viewed as a medium for negotiating gender-related issues, including women's caring nature and nurturing temperament. In this qualitative study, these issues are examined by closely focusing on the cinematography. The findings yielded by analyzing the visual data reveal that culturally-specific strategies are used to reclaim women's power and position by both confirming and challenging their normative roles in Indonesian society. Yet, despite the growing popularity of the final girls, their performance continuously reproduces double meaning in the context of reclaiming women's power.

**Subjects:** Cinema Studies & Popular Cinema; Gender & Cinema; Horror; World Cinema

<sup>11</sup> **Keywords:** Indonesian horror films; the concept of final girls; the gender issues in contemporary Indonesian society; culture; women's nature and temperament

## 1. Introduction

The term “final girls” was first coined by Carol J. Clover (1992) in her seminal book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* in which she studied American slasher, occult, rape-revenge films released in the 1970s and 1980s. The author observed that, in most slasher films, a female character is a sole survivor, and can thus be dubbed “the final girl.” This character usually defeats the villain or is saved at a critical moment by someone else, for example, an authority figure. According to Paszkiewicz and Rusnak (2020), by adopting the “final girl” term, Clover “challenged the simplistic assumption that the pleasures of horror cinema are and end in the sadism of misogynistic men, finding in slasher films a productive space to explore the issues of gender ambiguity and cross-gender identification” (p. 1). Her argument is guided by Mulvey's (1975) concept of male gaze in horror cinema. By adopting the psychoanalysis theory, Mulvey argued that “horror films offer visual pleasure through the camera's role as the active/male gazer which looks at the passive/female in the traditional exhibitionist role of women” (p. 11).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anton Sutandio was born in May 1974 in Bandung, Indonesia. He received his BA in English Literature from the English Department, Maranatha Christian University, in 1997, after which he pursued a master's degree in English Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Indonesia. In 2009, he received a Fulbright scholarship, allowing him to gain a doctoral degree at Ohio University, majoring in Film and Theatre. Currently, Anton works at the English Department, Faculty of Languages and Cultures at Maranatha Christian University as Associate Professor and Dean of the Faculty of Languages and Cultures (2016–2024). He has published several academic articles on films and two books.

Accordingly, Clover's final girls are attempting to reverse the gaze by shifting the audience's attention to the surviving female characters.

Decades after the publication of Mulvey's article, it is still debated whether these final girls are true feminist icons that symbolize the victory over monsters as well as the men (who usually die in the films). For instance, according to Pulliam (2020), the concept of final girls is rooted in misogyny that dictates what kind of female characters can survive (i.e., only those that are pure and morally good). This perspective is aligned with Garner's (2019) argument that these characters are given the "privilege" of being survivors because of "their implied moral superiority" (par. 2). As a counter argument, some authors posit that, in many horror films, the final girl must possess certain masculine traits to survive. Others are of view that such traits do not necessarily imply that the female character is masculinized, but rather suggest that she is optimizing her potential as a person and as a woman. Indeed, Pinedo (1997) acknowledged this problem when she stated "If a woman cannot be aggressive and still be a woman, then the female agency is a pipe dream. But if the surviving female can be aggressive and be a woman, then she subverts this binary notion of gender that buttresses male dominance" (p. 83). This view is supported by the "Girl Power" discourse that predominated in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which can be viewed as a contemporary derivation of the final girl concept and is often understood "through the lens of fantasies of empowerment and neoliberal 'Girl Power' discourse, the shift that speaks to the complex redefinition of gender roles 'legitimized' under postfeminism" (Paszkwicz & Rusnak, 2020, p. 2). Still, the ongoing debates confirm that the gender issue in horror cinema requires further exploration.

To elucidate the link between the horror genre and gender-related issues, quoting Clover, Garner (2019, p. 12) argued that "horror films tap into society's repressed fears of gender," particularly when the female characters are portrayed as victims. In our patriarchal world, the tendency to victimize women or create monstrous women in the horror genre reflects this repressed fear. On this issue, Langil (2014) remarked that "Early scholarship focusing on gender and horror most often interpreted this relationship as one where strict gender binaries and misogynistic patterns were cemented" (par. 1). In so doing, the author aptly surmised the relationship between the horror genre and gender-related issues, as film has always played a significant role in bringing to light pertinent societal dilemmas. This is not surprising, as its wide-reaching and ubiquitous nature makes the film an important instrument for sending cultural, social, or political messages. In the context of Indonesia with its prevailing patriarchal system, film has also become an arena for gender representation. Since its inception, Indonesian horror genre has focused on gender conflict, depicting women as either monsters or victims. However, in contemporary Indonesian horror, heroines are increasingly depicted as strong-willed, persevering female characters, even though they are still either victims or monsters.

These issues are discussed in this paper by analyzing five films from different sub-genres, which were produced between 2000 and 2020 (to ensure their relevance) and have a final girl character. These five films are *Kuntilanak* (Mantovani, 2006), a supernatural movie; *Rumah Dara* (Mo Brothers, 2009), a slasher; *Air Terjun Pengantin* (Mantovani, 2009), which focuses on shamanism; *Marlina: The Murderer in Four Acts* (Surya, 2017), psychological horror; and *Perempuan Tanah Jahanam/ Impetigore* (Anwar, 2019), dealing with superstition, which are deemed representative of their respective sub-genres.

In this analysis, the "final girl" concept is extended to the female characters that survive the oppression of patriarchal or authoritative power. In addition to the aforementioned criteria, Mantovani's *Kuntilanak* was chosen because it is the first horror film of the 21st century that brings back *kuntilanak*, one of the icons of Indonesian monster movies. Although Mantovani later produced further five horror films about *kuntilanak*, the film analyzed here was seen by around 1.2 million viewers, and has won the MTV Indonesia Movie Award in the category of best scary scene. On the other hand, *Rumah Dara* was chosen because it is the first Indonesian slasher film.

Likely owing to its memorable protagonist and antagonist played by Julie Estella and Shareefa Danish, respectively, the movie attracted around 379.000 viewers and generated around 2.8 billion rupiahs. It was also screened at the Puchon International Fantastic Film Festival in South Korea in 2009 where Shareefa Danish received the Best Actress award. On the other hand, *Rumah Dara* was banned in Malaysia due to its sadistic and violent scenes. Similarly, *Air Terjun Pengantin* is the first film in the 21st century about shamanism. Moreover, even though the final girl (played by Tamara Bleszynski) defeats the shaman in the end, the film's poster suggests the objectification of female bodies. The film generated around 37 billion rupiahs and attracted around 1 million viewers. The choice of *Marlina: The Murderer in Four Acts* as a representative of the psychological horror sub-genre was based on its stoic female protagonist as the final girl, which marked a departure from the other Indonesian psychological horror films. The film grossed about 350 million rupiahs and its audience was limited to only 150.000 viewers, but it received good reviews in some film festivals such as Cannes. Lastly, *Impetigore* was chosen due to its prominent female protagonist and antagonist, played by Tara Basro and Christine Hakim, respectively. *Impetigore*, which attracted nearly 1.8 million viewers and grossed around 60 billion rupiahs, has strong feminine aspects that relate to women's caring nature and nurturing temperament. It was also screened at the Sundance Film Festival and penetrated the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. markets through the platform *Shudder*.

*Kuntilanak* (Mantovani, 2006) is the first film that visually reconstructs the mystical monster *kuntilanak* traditionally described as a long-haired woman dressed in white. "In some narratives, it is said that she is a victim of rape who fell pregnant and was eventually killed by her rapists. *Kuntilanak* appears here as a traumatized ghost seeking revenge against men" (Duile, 2020, p. 286). However, this film depicts the monster as a half-human half-animal entity that can be summoned through chanting. Mantovani's continuous depiction of *kuntilanak* in many of his horror films has popularized this monster and has made it a prominent ghost of Indonesia.

This film tells a story of a young student named Samantha (played by Julie Estelle) who runs away from home to avoid her pervert stepfather. Having little money, she ends up in an old house repurposed as a dorm where she mystically connects with the supernatural being that has been living there. *Kuntilanak* is categorized into a supernatural sub-genre as the film mostly deals with the interaction between the human protagonist and the supernatural being.

*Rumah Dara* (Mo Brothers, 2009) is the first Indonesian slasher film. One characteristic of slasher films is "most of the action in these films occur in a single, isolated non-urban location where a killer clandestinely and closely monitors his/her young victims' actions before offing them through close-up attacks" (Clasen & Platts, 2019, p. 24). Visually, a slasher film depicts gory and bloody violence and focuses on the way the killer eliminates the victims. The story focuses on a group of young people that, on their way from Bandung to Jakarta, encounter a woman named Maya, who claims to be a victim of a burglary and asks for a lift home. It turns out that Maya is part of a twisted family that likes butchering people. In this film, the antagonist Dara (played by Shareefa Daanish), and the final girl Ladya (played by Julie Estelle), who in the end kills Dara and escapes, are depicted as strong female characters.

*Air Terjun Pengantin* (Mantovani, 2009) tells a story of a group of adults and young adults visiting an exotic island where a killer shaman lives. Despite the visualization of the female characters as to-be-looked-at objects when they are in their bikinis on the beach, the film carries a strong symbolic meaning of the feminine challenging the powerful patriarchal system. This message is further conveyed by having the final girl character, Tiara (played by Tamara Bleszynski), kill the shaman in a gruesome duel after all her male companions are killed by the shaman.

<sup>28</sup> *Marlina: The Murderer in Four Acts* (Surya, 2017) is set on Sumba island and has no supernatural content. Rather, it explores the psyche of a woman named Marlina (played by Marsha Timothy)

and her attempts to fight strong patriarchal culture, and her display of courage by helping a younger woman.

The last film included in this analysis, Anwar's *Perempuan Tanah Jahanam (Impetigore)* (Anwar, 2019), deals with superstition constructed by the powerful authority over the people in a remote village. When an independent and resilient city girl named Maya (played by Tara Basro) comes to the village to claim her inheritance, she is entangled in a messy secret that involves her family, the local patriarchal authority, and the traditional *wayang* performance. In the end, Maya manages to escape from the village and break the curse that had fallen upon its inhabitants.

It is evident from the brief introduction to the five films that Indonesian horror, irrespective of the sub-genre, tends to deal with gender issues in a similar manner. This is not surprising, given that Indonesian horror stories originate from legends and folklore, which still serve as a platform for the exploration of urban legends. For the same reason, most Indonesian "famous" monsters are feminine, such as *Kuntilanak*, *Sundelbolong*, *Nyi Roro Kidul*, *Ratu Ilmu Hitam*, *Nyi Blorong*, *Suster Ngesot*, and *Si Manis Jembatan Ancol*. Consequently, "feminine grotesque" (Kusumaryati, 2016, par. 1) is a common element in the Indonesian horror genre.

These figures are highly relevant, given that the New Order regime under Soeharto imposed authoritarian paternalism, also dubbed "Bapak-ism," which gives precedence to men over women in all aspects of life. The regime also asserted strict censorship in the film industry that prevails to this day, given that the country is still run as if it is a family with the president as the authoritative father. As a result, women are in a submissive position as "Under Suharto's New Order regime, official notions of femininity were highly circumscribed, with women's citizenship closely tied to their duties as wives and mothers" (Platt et al., 2018, p. 5). The state apparatus also controls every piece of information that is delivered through the film to ensure that it is fully aligned with the state ideology. This practice has given rise to the concept of "Ordered Cinema" because the plot is structured in the "order-chaos-order" format. This means that, by the end of any film, a patriarchal figure must restore order.

The horror genre of this period is characterized by overt objectification, victimization, and demonization of women, who are portrayed as victims, "damsels in distress," sexual objects, or monsters. Generally, "female characters in horror films are considered weak, having no physical or emotional power" (Luniar & Febriana, 2022, p. 7). They must also follow strong traditional gender norms, which mandate that they should be submissive, dependent, and passive, and must obey men, as the father figure or authoritative male is always the one in charge. In other words, women are seen either as helpless, sexually desired, or dangerous and grotesque objects. Suzanna, a late Indonesian actress, who played many roles in horror films in the 1980s, embodies these traits, as she is portrayed as a helpless and alluring yet dangerous character in many of her films. Her charming, sometimes innocent and mysterious, characteristics in her roles as mystical creatures have entitled her the queen of Indonesian horror. However, her character does not have real power because, as seen in many horror films of that time, she must submit to a higher patriarchal power at the end of the story. In addition, the fact that her roles are often related to the supernatural emphasizes the threatening and dangerous nature of women to the dominant patriarchy. Consequently, in her roles as mystical creatures such as *sundel bolong*, *Nyi Roro Kidul*, *queen of black magic*, and *Nyi Blorong*, Suzanna transgressed the gender norms, as these characters were mysterious, assertive, and possessed supernatural powers, rendering them independent of men, as they were not from the realm of human beings and did not have to conform to the prevailing social stereotypes. This is a common pattern in the Indonesian horror genre of the New Order regime, signifying that women can only challenge the patriarchal power when they become non-normative or the "Other." Even then, the plot formula disallows them from maintaining their power, as patriarchal figures will eventually bring back order espoused by the male-dominated world. However, this pattern started changing in the 21st century, as noted by Widagdo (2020), who stated that "Today's Indonesian horror films are far from the spice of eroticism as in the late 1980-

1990 years before the 'suspended animation' era of Indonesian cinema because such gimmicks are no longer in demand for film fans today" (p. 5). The departure from the norm started by elevating the role of female characters of contemporary horror as protagonists or heroines.

#### 4 Analysis

The fall of the New Order regime in 1998 brought a wind of change to the Indonesian film industry. The resulting more open and freer atmosphere offers possibilities to explore and re-explore topics that were previously considered taboo and sensitive, such as political, ethnic, and gender issues. Young filmmakers such as Rizal Mantovani, Riri Riza, Mira Lesmana, and Joko Anwar bring fresh ideas and styles to Indonesian cinema. This is recognized by BPI (2018), as indicated by the assertion that "Indonesian cinema experienced a new wave of national productions after the end of the New Order regime in 1998 . . . . This new generation of filmmakers started to reshape the idea of contemporary Indonesian cinema and are still passionate filmmakers today" (p. 13). In particular, there is an obvious shift in the portrayal of female characters in horror films. Moreover, the so-called "order-chaos-order" structure is increasingly being abandoned in favor of different format. In fact, the first Indonesian box-office horror film of the 21st century, Mantovani's *Jelangkung*, ends in the opposite way, as all the young characters die in the hands of supernatural power. In addition, there is no dominant patriarchal figure, as the film features a group of young people who, out of curiosity, are obsessed with finding the supernatural. The exploration of urban legends is another new feature in the contemporary Indonesian horror genre. The shift from horror that usually happens in the suburbs into the urban setting also signals the detachment from the traditional horror template. For example, many horror films in the 1970s and 1980s were set in the suburbs, isolated villages, or places that are far from the city, including *Beranak dalam Kubur*, *Ratu Ilmu Hitam*, and *Nyi Roro Kidul*. On the other hand, many horror films made at the start of the 21st century, such as *Terowongan Casablanca*, *Bangsai 13*, *Jelangkung*, *Hantu Jeruk Purut*, *Rumah Pondok Indah*, and *Mall Klender*, explore the urban landscape as the source of horror. This formula thus became a new template for many subsequent Indonesian horror films.

The 1998 reformation has led to the freedom of expression that is also apparent in the film production. In a way, "reformasi held the possibility of new spaces for political organising and the public expression of new gendered subjectivities and sexualities, with the belief that the New Order's prescriptive ideals had weakened" (Platt et al., 2018, p. 5). However, those old ideals have not vanished, as many recent horror films still demonize women by depicting them as monsters. Nonetheless, changes are evident, as demonstrated in the five films analyzed here.

As noted earlier, Mantovani's *Kuntilanak* (Mantovani, 2006) depicts a young female student, Samantha (Sam), who decides to leave her house after her mother dies to escape her pervert stepfather. Even though the film does not visually explore this background story, the fact that she challenges the patriarchal figure by running away from home suggests profound shifts in gender relations when the young female character rebels against the authoritative male figure. The stepfather is never shown in the film, and the audience is merely made aware of his existence in the opening scene when Sam is informed of her mother's passing by the stepfather through a closed bedroom door.

After leaving her home penniless, Sam has no choice but to live in a cheap and old dorm located in front of a public cemetery on the outskirts of Jakarta. The old building was previously used as a mess for workers of a batik factory owned by the Mangkoedjiwo family, which was destroyed by fire, and what remained was subsequently transformed into a dorm. Unknown to the dorm inhabitants, the old building carries a sinister secret of the Mangkoedjiwo family, who keeps a *kuntilanak* that can be summoned by a *durma* song to ensure that they stay wealthy and powerful. Unexpectedly, Sam turns out to have a special "gift" that enables her to chant the *durma* song and summon the *kuntilanak* while in a trance. The audience gets a hint about her gift when she has a recurring dream that is later revealed to be connected to her special powers. In one scene, when Sam arrives in the dorm, the dorm keeper mentions that *kuntilanak* can only be

summoned by someone who has “*wangsit*” (prophecy). She also learns that the *kuntilanak* lives in a big tree in the cemetery near the dorm and can come out to the human realm through mirrors inside the dorm rooms. Up to this point, the plot seems to mirror the horror films of the New Order regime, as a female figure is unintentionally involved with a supernatural being which causes her to manifest non-human powers. Yet, departing from the traditional female characters in Indonesian horror films before *Kuntilanak*, Sam is portrayed as a rebellious, resourceful, and independent young woman. These characteristics reflect the reformation period in the late 1990s and early 2000s in which youths and students played an important part. This formula is also adopted in many Indonesian horror films of the 21st century. Nonetheless, Mantovani's *Kuntilanak* still demonizes women through the portrayal of a matriarchal figure, Sri Sukma Mangkoedjwo, who in the climax faces Sam in a supernatural fight to control *kuntilanak*. There are no dominant males in the film, and among those that have insignificant impact on the storyline is Sam's boyfriend Agung, who keeps asking her for forgiveness for not being there for her when her mother was ill. Agung almost becomes the victim of *kuntilanak* when Sam unintentionally unleashes the supernatural being to attack Agung who has hurt her but eventually comes to his rescue. Another male character featured in the film is a pervert male student in Sam's dorm who dies tragically as *kuntilanak*'s victim. At first, Sam cannot control the *kuntilanak*, and this results in the death of three of her dorm friends, but eventually she learns to do so. In the end, Sam emerges as an even stronger female character due to her additional “powers.” This is conveyed in the film through her decision to remain in the dorm because she feels strong connection with the place.

Sam is unlike any female character in the New Order horror films, as she is not submissive and is highly independent, as shown early on when she decides to leave home and survive on her own. However, in keeping with the formula of the New Order horror films, her great power comes from the supernatural, in this case the *kuntilanak*. Sam's strength is also shown through her defeat of Sri Sukma, whose character symbolizes the male's fear of the “Other” (women). Thus, the film highlights women's power, which is strengthened further by depicting *kuntilanak* as an anthropomorphic entity, departing from its traditional portrayal as a vengeful female spirit (Figure 1).

In sum, Sam as the “final girl” is the first example of contemporary portrayal of women in Indonesian horror films that is non-normative. She reclaims female power through gender transgression by being a resourceful and rebellious woman that dares to challenge the powerful patriarchal (her stepfather), by being independent as she does not helplessly cling to a man, and by being a *kuntilanak* summoner which represents the union of the traditional (*kuntilanak* legend) and the contemporary (modern life). This clash or union between the two worlds often appears in many Indonesian horror films of the 21st century, including the famous film franchise adapted

Figure 1. The battle between Sam (left) and Sri Sukma (right).





Figure 2. The final fight between Dara (left) and Ladya (right).



Figure 3. Tiara holding a sphere she uses to stab the shaman.



from Risa Saraswati's novels, the *Danur* series. In those films, the indigo Risa who can see and communicate with the dead uses her supernatural ability for good causes.

The second film analyzed in this work is Mo Brothers' *Macabre/Rumah Dara* which is the Indonesian slasher film that follows the Hollywood tradition such as *Texas Chain Massacre* or *The Last House on the Left*. The premise of a slasher film usually involves a group of people that come to a certain place where some bad people methodically murder them one by one. The goal is to draw the audience with the gory and violent visualization of the victims' killing. *Macabre* follows this formula by involving a group of people, consisting of a husband and his pregnant wife (Adjie and Astrid), Adjie's sister Ladya, and their friends Jimmy, Alam, and Eko. They are on their way to the airport in Jakarta to send off Adjie and Astrid to Australia. Their antagonists are the evil family consisting of a mother (Dara) and her three children, Armand, Adam, and Maya. Pretending to be a robbery victim, Maya lures the group of friends to her house where they are drugged and locked up. It turns out that the family is devil worshippers that eat human flesh in exchange for longevity. After some violent and gory scenes, in the end, Ladya manages to survive and save her newborn nephew from the grip of the twisted family.

In keeping with the contemporary depiction of female characters in Indonesian horror movies, Ladya, played by Julie Estelle, is portrayed as an independent, resourceful, and a mentally strong young woman. She became an orphan at a young age when her parents were killed in an accident, which is only mentioned as a background story. Her only relative is her brother Adjie but they do

not seem to be on good terms. To earn a living, Ladya works as a waitress in a hotel bar in Bandung city. This demonstrates that she is mentally strong because she has to endure being verbally and physically harassed by her male customers on a regular basis. When Adjie, his wife, and friends visit her before moving to Australia, Adjie offers some money to Ladya, but she refuses it even though she needs it, as she values her independence. For the same reason, Ladya is single, although the film hints that Jimmy likes her.

Nonetheless, when she and her friends are drugged and captured by the evil family, Ladya shows some feminine emotions by crying and screaming, but her resourcefulness helps her overcome all adversities. For example, when Armand ties her to the butcher table and tries to kiss her before killing her, Ladya bites his tongue, frees herself, and stabs him with a knife. In another scene, when he tries to rape her, she stabs his eyes with a pencil. This demonstrates that she can think fast under pressure, and that she does not helplessly succumb as a victim. She is also portrayed as physically fit when she relentlessly fights for her life against her captors. The way she acts to overcome the obstacles shows her bravery and quick-thinking. She also courageously fights Adam together with her wounded brother, and they manage to kill him. In the final confrontation, Ladya and Adjie must fight the evil mistress Dara, who tries to chop them with a chainsaw. Adjie does not make it, but Ladya manages to defeat Dara and drive away from the house with her newborn nephew (Figure 2).

Violent and gory scenes that involve torture and decapitation are common in slasher films in which male characters usually dominate, and female characters become the victims. Thus, *Macabre* reclaims women's power by relying on the non-normative female characters Ladya and Dara. Dara is a powerful matriarchal figure that owes her longevity to a satanic ritual that she and her family perform regularly. Ladya, on the other hand, is an ordinary young woman striving to gain her independence as an impoverished orphan. Dara's portrayal is similar to the matriarch in *Kuntilanak* who rules with the help from the supernatural and generally aligns with the traditional concept of monstrous feminine. However, her role is balanced by Ladya, as well as the birth of a new baby, allowing Ladya to display her caring nature. In addition, this film reduces the role of male characters, as there is no father figure, Dara is portrayed as a single parent, Ladya is an orphan who is independent of men, and all male characters die in the end.

The third film examined here is Mantovani's *Air Terjun Pengantin* (2009). When looking at the poster, the film's selling point seems to be the actresses' bodies, given that Tamara Bleszynski, Tyas Mirasih, Nanie Darham, and Navy Rizky Tavana are well-known for their physical beauty. Indeed, this shamanism film has many scenes that blatantly objectify the female characters' bodies which does not seem to fit into the theme of women reclaiming power. Sutandio (2015) argues that in the light of Butler's gender performativity, the performances of the female characters, despite their obvious sexualization, "carry different meanings in terms of women's identity and freedom" (p. 77). This is done through the camerawork and mise-en-scene of the film. For example, in one scene, when bikini-clad female characters are having fun on the beach, the camera lingers on their bodies, as well as captures the young male characters shyly stealing glances at their female friends. However, through the lens of postmodernist feminism, this scene can be understood as a display of gender performance, as women are shown as confident in freely expressing themselves and are proud of their own bodies.

In the course of the story, one by one, both female and male characters are butchered by the powerful male shaman. The film climax shows a physical fight between the shaman and Tiara, who is not only as a sensual and beautiful woman, but is also brave and physically strong, as she manages to kill the shaman and save her niece. As such, she is a non-normative female character in the Indonesian horror genre, and this portrayal is strengthened by the fact that her boyfriend keeps nagging her about getting married and Tiara never gives him the answer (Figure 3).

Tiara metaphorically and literally reclaims women's power when she defeats the shaman who is a fitting representation of the patriarchy with his powerful and authoritative nature as well as his phallus and his long nose mask. In addition, the absence of a father figure or a traditional family structure (father–mother–children) underlines the film's focus on the superiority of the female protagonist.

Tiara's fierce and brave characteristics are on full display in *Air Terjun Pengantin Phuket* which has a similar storyline, featuring Tiara as a fighter in a Thai boxing competition and in street fights. Sequelization of films such as the *Air Terjun Pengantin* franchise confirms that the audience likes the portrayal of non-normative women. Accordingly, a similar template appears in other horror franchises such as *Kuntianak* series, *Danur* series, *Ketika Iblis Menjemput*, and *Pengabdil Setan* in which the protagonist is an independent and mentally strong female character.

The fourth film included in the current analysis, *Marlina: Murder in Four Acts*, is a psychological horror set on Sumba island with its strong patriarchal culture (Doko et al., 2021). Rather than focusing on gory and violent fights for survival, the film depicts Marlina as a stoic and resourceful woman, capable of defeating her enemies through her cunning. She is shown alone in her isolated house, grieving the death of her husband. Her solitude is interrupted by the arrival of seven male bandits who intend to rob and rape her. Before executing their intention, the men ask for some food. Cornered and overwhelmed by the situation, Marlina takes an extreme action of poisoning the men. She also decapitates the leader of the group when he tries to rape her. Logically, her

**Figure 4.** Marlina on her way to the police station, holding the head of the rapist.



**Figure 5.** Rahayu (left) and her friend, Dina (right).



situation is helpless, but the film presents this situation as an opportunity for her to claim power over the patriarchy. Afterward, she sets on a journey through unfamiliar landscapes, intent on bringing the bandit's head to the police station and obtaining justice.

The scene shown in Figure 4 is a direct metaphor for a female holding the patriarchal power in her hands, and her ability to use her domestic skills to overcome the dominating males who expect to be fed by a submissive female victim who will surrender to the situation.

Marlina's journey to get justice is an allegorical journey of women living in a patriarchal world. On the way to the police station, she is chased by a gang member who wants to take revenge. Even when she arrives at the police station, she is not taken seriously by the officers and leaves in frustration, **signifying** the way women are seen in the eyes of the law. Upon her return home, she tries to save Novi, **a pregnant woman she has recently met, and lets herself get raped by a gang member instead.** This benevolent act represents women's struggle to find justice on their own when the circumstances cannot help them.

In the context of women reclaiming power, Marlina embodies women's struggle within a strong patriarchal society. Her stoic, brave, and independent character clearly does not follow the traditional portrayal of women on film. She independently seeks justice for herself without asking help from any men, and when she does not get it from the authorities, she takes the matters into her own hands. Her willingness to sacrifice herself to help a woman she barely knows is a brave and empowering act, but Novi repays her by decapitating the rapist, thus highlighting the feminist message of this film. Moreover, although the film also shows that the patriarchal power tends to see women's bodies as objects, women literally cut off the heads of men that objectify them.

The last film in this analysis is Anwar's *Impetigore* or *Perempuan Tanah Jahanam* (Anwar, 2019). The Indonesian title features the word *perempuan* (women) as an indication of their importance in the storyline. Despite being a horror film, its plot revolves around the issues of family, fertility, and children that connect to the traditional role of women. The final girl, Rahayu (played by Tara Basro), is an orphan living in Jakarta. To survive, she performs different jobs, ranging from being a toll-gate attendant to selling women's clothing. In parallel with the other protagonists mentioned earlier, Rahayu is portrayed as an independent, hardworking, and resilient woman. She remembers little about her childhood but recalls that she was sent by her parents from a remote village to the city accompanied by her *mbok* (domestic helper). She also remembers that her parents had a property in the village that is hers to claim. Thus, trying to change her fortune, Rahayu and her friend Dini take a long trip to the village only to discover that its inhabitants are cursed, as every newborn is born skinless. Thus, to ease their suffering, the head of the village, Ki Donowongso, who is Rahayu's biological father, drowns the babies not long after they are born. Through a twisted plot, it is revealed that the curse is created by Rahayu's grandmother Nyi Misni (played by Christine Hakim), the matriarch of the village. She does that because Rahayu's non-biological father raped her and also sacrificed three local children to ward off the curse of Nyi Misni on his daughter Rahayu.

There are two dominant female characters in **13** film—Rahayu and her grandmother, Nyi Misni. Although Ki Donowongso is depicted as the head of the village, **the real powerful figure is his mother, Nyi Misni.** She is the one who controls her son. Being resilient and independent, Rahayu manages to overcome the obstacles she faces, and although near the end she is hung upside down helplessly and is about to be slaughtered by her own father, she beats the odds with the help from a local young woman and the three children spirits. For long, the villagers have believed that Rahayu was **13** cause of the curse because she was born skinless. However, her non-biological father skinned **three local girls, and turned their skin into a wayang** (leather puppet) after which Rahayu magically grew her skin. As Nyi Misni's curse on the village started the moment Rahayu grew skin on her body, the villagers believed that the curse would be lifted if Rahayu was skinned. To save Rahayu, her parents sent her to the city accompanied by her *mbok*. As the film unravels, Rahayu manages to figure out the mystery of

the curse and breaks it. In the climax, Ki Donowongso slits his own throat as he feels guilty for killing Dini and all the skinless babies. Witnessing her son die tragically, Nyi Misni hysterically slits her own throat. However, Nyi Misni's story does not end there; she possessed supernatural powers when she was alive, when she died, she transformed into a baby-eating monster that haunts the village. The film ends with a hysterical scream of a pregnant woman whose baby is taken and eaten by Nyi Misni. Nyi Misni's role challenges the social construction of a mother who is expected to protect and care for her children (Larasati & Adiprasetyo, 2022). This strengthens the idea of the non-normative portrayal of women in the film (Figure 5).

In the film, Rahayu almost single-handedly reclaims women's power by breaking the curse and escaping from the village. She is supported by other female figures like the local young woman Ratih and the spirits of the three girls. The other strong female character, Nyi Misni, is a powerful matriarch and her subsequent portrayal as a typical monstrous feminine is a proof of her domination over the men in the village. This message is strengthened further by the fact that she is defeated by her own granddaughter rather than a powerful patriarch. The similarity between Nyi Misni and Dara in *Macabre* and Sri Sukma in *Kuntilanak* is apparent as they all embody power that strikes fear into their male counterparts and are defeated by fellow female characters.

The findings that emerged from the analyses presented above show the diminishing or belittling role of male characters, the reduction of the traditional concept of family (that consists of a father, a mother, and children), and the emergence of independent, resourceful, and brave female characters as protagonists. None of the five films analyzed here feature an overwhelmingly dominant father or male figure. In fact, the male characters are often victimized and objectified. In *Kuntilanak*, Sam almost kills her boyfriend with her power to summon *kuntilanak*, in *Air Terjun Pengantin* and *Rumah Dara/Macabre*, all the male characters die in the end. In *Marlina*, all the evil male characters are killed, and in *Impetigore*, the most dominant male character commits suicide. The findings also show depiction of powerful matriarchs as antagonists. On the one hand, their portrayal confirms the demonization of women as a dangerous threat to stability and order, but the fact that they possess supernatural powers is a challenge to the dominant patriarchal culture.

These contemporary horror films have also given a platform for young actresses to showcase their talent. For example, Julie Estelle, who is a model, played many roles in martial arts and horror films such as *Kuntilanak 2*, *Kuntilanak 3*, *Firegate*, *Foxtrot Six*, *The Raid 2*, *Headshot*, and *The Night Comes for Us*. Another rising star is Tara Basro, also a model, who is cast as a major female character in films such as *3 Srikandi*, *Pendekar Tongkat Mas*, *Gundala*, *A Copy of My Mind*, and *Pengabdian Setan*. Likewise, Chelsea Islan plays a major role in *3 Srikandi*, *Headshot*, *Sebelum Iblis Menjemput*, and *Sebelum Iblis Menjemput Ayat 2*.

### 3. Discussion

The analysis of the five films that are representative of their respective horror sub-genres shows a shift in gender relations in the portrayal of female characters, which were traditionally victimized, sexualized, or demonized in the Indonesian horror genre. However, modern films have become an arena for these strong female characters to reclaim their position within the society that still upholds the patriarchal system. Even though female characters are still depicted as monsters or mere sexual objects, the portrayal of dominant and non-normative female characters as independent and resourceful challenges the traditional concept of femininity and patriarchal power. Four of the five "final girls" are single, indicating that they do not need men to save or protect them. Likewise, the major female characters are only sexualized in *Air Terjun Pengantin*, but this is balanced by Tiara's ability to defeat the powerful shaman. The film *Marlina* portrays a widow who does not succumb to sadness or helplessness after the death of her husband; instead, she keeps her dignity and honor when she kills the men trying to rob and rape her. The main findings yielded by this analysis are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Summary of the findings yielded by the analysis of five horror films**

No.	Film	Female characters	Status and age group	Non-normative characteristics	Traditional characteristics
1.	Kuntikanak	Samantha Sri Sukma	Single, young Widow, adult	Rebellious, Resourceful, Independent Powerful matriarch	Unintentionally possessing supernatural power to summon Kuntikanak Making alliance with the devil to possess wealth (control over Kuntikanak)
2.	Rumah Dara/Macabre	Ladya Dara	Single, young Widow, adult	Independent, resourceful, mentally strong Powerful matriarch	- Making alliance with the devil to possess power (immortality) Sexualized portrayal
3.	Air Terjun Pengantin	Tiara	Single, adult	Independent, resourceful	-
4.	Marlina: Murder in Four Acts	Marlina	Widow, adult	Independent, brave, stoic	-
5.	Perempuan Tanah Jahanam/ Impetigore	Maya Nyji Misri	Single, young Widow, old	Independent, hardworking, resilient Powerful matriarch	- Making alliance with the devil to fulfill a vengeance

Table 1 shows that the female protagonists in all five films are portrayed as independent individuals, marking a departure from the pre-2000s horror films. Most of them are single young women, as this further strengthens their power, given that being married is a desirable social achievement according to the prevailing Indonesian sociocultural standards (Himawan et al., 2018). In particular, "In Indonesia, a woman should be attached to a man, by marriage; she should only have sex with that man, within marriage; and she should bear children within marriage" (Parker & Creese, 2016). Interestingly, all female antagonists in the analyzed films are widows, making them "vulnerable because of their uncertain marital status" (Parker & Creese, 2016). In Indonesian society, widows are stigmatized as powerless, dependent, and economically struggling, and this image is challenged by these films.

Although all female characters are independent, given the absence of men or their inability to take care women, they are not masculinized, as they still exhibit the traditionally feminine caring nature. For example, Ladya in *Macabre* and Tiara in *Air Terjun Pengantin* save their niece, Marlina in *Murder in Four Acts* helps Novi, a pregnant woman she meets, and Maya in *Impetigore* helps the pregnant women whose deformed newborns are drowned. Likewise, most of the female protagonists become emotional when facing their adversaries.

This research also expands the narrow definition of the "final girl" as merely the last surviving young woman. Indeed, two of the analyzed films have an adult female protagonist (Tiara and Marlina) and the survival is not restricted to the physical domain, but also includes the mental capacity to overcome all adversities. In this light, the five female protagonists literally and metaphorically have managed to survive the unthinkable ordeals while reclaiming their right to be independent and self-reliant.

Another interesting aspect that emerged from this analysis is that three of the five films have powerful female antagonists—Sri Sukma, Dara, and Nyi Misni. Although they are portrayed as monstrous feminine and thus conform to the notion of female characters as dangerous and mysterious, they can also be perceived as figures that challenge the patriarchy. The female superiority is further signified through the final battles between female characters in the three films.

### 8 Conclusion

The popularity of the "final girl" concept among Indonesian audiences suggests that this horror genre is not solely seen as a form of entertainment, but also as a platform for normalizing the non-normative characteristics of female protagonists. As a result, these films can help change societal perceptions, allowing women of all ages and backgrounds to overcome the normative barriers of gender in a patriarchal society. This transition is already taking place, as evident from the growing number of films depicting diverse types of women as the protagonists that offer a new normal in the context of a patriarchal society.

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# The final girls in contemporary Indonesian horror films: reclaiming women's power

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