

The Evolution of Women's Representation in Indonesian Film: A Narrative Review

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ABSTRACT

The representation of women as the main characters in the film has a significant inequality with the male characters. Women are often portrayed as passive characters and become sexually objectified. The portrayal is inseparable from the patriarchal culture that has taken root in Indonesia. This kind of representation will affect how women, especially teenagers, think, identify, and make decisions.

The purpose of this study is to examine the evolution of women's representation in Indonesian films across the Old Order, New Order, and contemporary periods.

Materials and methods. The author used a narrative review research design, which allows describing what is known about a topic while conducting a subjective examination and critique of the entire literature. This type aims to identify and summarize previously published articles, avoid duplication of research, and explore new, under-researched areas of study.

Results. The findings in this study are three phases of film development in Indonesia, namely the Old Order phase (1950-1965), where women are underrepresented; the New Order phase (1966-1998), where we would find commodification of women's sensuality; and the Contemporary phase (1998-present), where women are trying to cope with the patriarchal culture.

Conclusions. Feminist ideology in films has emerged since the fall of the Soeharto regime, showcasing a diverse range of female characters and their struggles against patriarchal culture. However, the film industry remains male-dominated, and the lack of women behind the scenes certainly impacts how women's voices are heard.

Keywords: women's representation, feminism, patriarchal culture, Indonesian films, narrative review

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INTRODUCTION

The representation of women as main characters in films significantly differs from that of male characters. Women are often portrayed as passive characters, often rescued and led (Murray, 2019). Regarding leadership, films rarely depict women as leaders, even if they do, they are primarily in the domestic sphere, reinforcing the stereotype of women as caregivers and men as family heads (Pasinringi, 2020). According to The State of the World's Girls Report (2019), only 27 per cent of stories featured women as leaders, compared to 42 per cent that featured men. What these films explore about the role of female leaders is not their performance—in fact, their portrayal is not as compelling as that of male leaders—but rather their sexual objectification (The State of the World's Girls Report, 2019). Women are more often depicted in revealing clothing (30%) than men (7%), and are even shown half-naked twice as often as male leaders. Similarly, in superhero films, a study by the University of Missouri found that female superheroes are often oversexualised, creating a specific image of them, they must always be sexy and beautiful according to the beauty industry's definition (Adam, 2017).

The representation of women in films significantly influences women, especially teenagers, in their thinking patterns, self-identification, and decision-making. According to Budiana (2024), the

representation of women can reinforce and perpetuate existing gender norms and power dynamics in society. Also, it plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of gender roles, further embedding these values into the cultural fabric and potentially influencing how women are treated and viewed in real life. Therefore, female screenwriters, directors, and producers have risen to produce a series of films aimed at achieving equality. Globally, Xia's (2024) research demonstrates the transition from passive to active portrayals of women in film and examines the evolving social conflicts that shape and hinder women's empowerment at different times.

The problem of female representation in film is not only global, but also occurs in Indonesia. Several previous studies on women and film in Indonesia have highlighted stereotypes of women within a patriarchal culture, emphasizing appearance (Sazudda et al., 2024), dependence on men (Budiana, 2024), and domestic roles (Chusna et al., 2023). Budiana's (2024) study of female characters in three popular Indonesian films revealed that women are often portrayed as "dependent objects," while men remain powerfully portrayed as breadwinners. Sazudda et al. (2024) further emphasized the lack of inclusivity and diversity in how women's physical appearance is portrayed, with women depicted as beautiful, often with traits such as thin bodies and fair skin. Chusna et al. (2023) analyze a transition in the representation of women in the Kartini films produced in 1982 and 2017. The former portrayed ideal women as feminine and maternal, while the latter portrayed them as productive and creative. Lastly, research by Andriani (2024) examined the representation of women in Indonesian films; although efforts were made to challenge stereotypes, they were still dominated by traditional gender stereotypes.

While these three studies examine women's representation, they do not examine the evolution of women's representation in Indonesian films across three eras. In Indonesia itself, according to Arivia & Subono (2018), feminist thought has developed in three phases. The first phase saw the development of ideas on marriage law and the right to education, along with the emergence of progressive grassroots organizations during the Sukarno era (Gerwani). The second phase was the movement, which was paralyzed by the dominance of state authorities (the New Order regime), and state discourse on feminism was produced. The third phase, the contemporary phase, is characterized by various discourses and critical research produced by women's organizations. In Indonesia, the emergence of many feminist films in recent years, such as *Yuni*, which captured public attention at the end of last year, with its idea of liberating oneself from the shackles of patriarchal culture. Based on this, the author conducted a narrative review of the evolution of female representation in Indonesian films and how it has changed across the Old Order, New Order, and contemporary eras. Through this understanding, the author hopes to map the progressive development of the feminist movement in cinema.

METHOD

To examine the evolution of female representation in Indonesian films during the Old Order, New Order, and contemporary eras, the author employed a narrative review research design, which allows for a description of what is known about a topic while conducting a subjective examination and critique of the entire literature (Sukhera, 2022). This type of review aims to identify and summarize previously published articles, avoid duplication of research, and explore new, under-researched areas of study (Ferrari, 2015). The study type used as the primary criterion for the literature review was qualitative research employing semiotic analysis. Other research on Indonesian films served as supplementary literature. The author synthesized several studies by searching for keywords such as "women's representation," "feminism in Indonesian films," and "women in Indonesian films." In terms of literature criteria, the films studied were iconic films from each phase of development. The films were then integrated into three evolutionary phases, using the three phases of feminist development outlined by Arivia & Subono (2018). The majority of the films selected were from the Old and

Order periods, as identified by Riyanto & Herlina (2015). Other supporting data was obtained from journals and books with a similar focus, namely, "women in film."

At each evolutionary phase, the authors synthesized the films using John Fiske's three levels of semiotics: reality, representation, and ideology (Hauzan & Nuraeni, 2022). At the level of reality,

social codes are based on what is visible, including appearance, costume, environment, gestures, speech, expressions, and behavior. At the level of representation, technical codes (editing, camera, lighting, music, and sound), narrative, conflict, characters, dialogue, setting, and so on are discussed. Meanwhile, at the ideological level, the film's ideology is explained, for example, feminism, capitalism, liberalism, and so on.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Significant developments in women's representation in Indonesian films are evident across John Fiske's three levels of semiotics, as shown in Table 1. At the level of reality, women's appearances in film are increasingly diverse. The definition of "beauty" has shifted from being viewed solely in physical terms to encompassing "inner beauty." Women's presence in films is no longer merely commodified for profit. In the Old Order period, there were differences in the appearance of urban and rural women, with urban women identified with the upper middle class while rural women were identified with the lower middle class. Most female characters from cities or the upper middle class are depicted wearing dresses or skirts, wearing makeup, long hair, earrings, with graceful gestures and soft voices. Meanwhile, those from rural areas and the lower middle class wore traditional clothing (kebaya and sarongs), without makeup, and with their hair tied up in a bun. In the New Order period, emphasizing women's physical appearance, such as wearing skimpy clothing, showing off their curves, and showing cleavage. Meanwhile, films during the contemporary era varied greatly in their depictions of women. However, the depiction of a "beautiful woman" was still defined by the same criteria: white skin, dark hair, and an ideal body. Although, films began to emerge depicting women as strong leaders, brave, and capable decision-makers.

Table 1. Women's Representation in Indonesian Films

Period	Reality	Representation	Ideology
The Old Order Period (1950-1965)	Urban or the upper middle class: wearing dresses or skirts, wearing makeup, long hair, earrings, with graceful gestures and soft voices. Rural areas and the lower middle class: wore traditional clothing (kebaya and sarongs), without makeup, and with their hair tied up in a bun.	The narratives of female characters portrayed them as companions or partners to male protagonists, and women could not live without men (dependent objects). Women were passive objects, with conflicts centering on infidelity, abandonment by their husbands (death, war, and so on).	Ideology was dominated by nationalism. Nationalism was portrayed as something masculine, like war.
New Order Period (1966-1998)	Emphasized women's physical appearance, such as wearing skimpy clothing, showing off their curves, and showing cleavage. "Beautiful woman" was defined as fair skin, dark hair, and an ideal body. Speech patterns also appeared spoiled, shy, and breathy.	Women were portrayed as "entertainers" for men. The narrative of female domesticity also grew stronger, with women portrayed as housewives while men worked. Intimate and sensual scenes dominated this period, such as kissing, hugging, and even sexual intercourse.	Patriarchal ideology dominates, with scenes subordinating and objectifying women. The ideology of "motherism" is also obvious, positioning women as "konco wingking"
Contemporary Phase (1998 - present)	Varied greatly in their depictions of women. "Beautiful woman" is still defined by the same criteria: white skin, dark hair, and an ideal body (in this era also meant straight hair). Emerged depicting women as strong leaders, brave, and capable decision-makers. Meanwhile, in the horror genre, the commodification of the female body was still present through the depiction of sexy clothing.	The narratives of the stories also began to diversify, as did the camera angles, which no longer favored the male gaze as in the previous era. Stories featuring women as protagonists who challenge patriarchal culture are increasingly emerging (e.g., "Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts," "Penyalin Cahaya," etc.). Issues raised include sexual harassment, early marriage, and female leadership.	Liberal ideology upholds individual freedom. Furthermore, feminist ideology has flourished in recent years, countering conservative ideology in religious films.

Based on Table 1, at the level of representation, the narrative of women as “konco wingking” (a sidekick) is beginning to erode. Before, the narratives of female characters portrayed them as companions or partners to male protagonists, and dependent objects. Then, women were portrayed as “entertainers” with intimate and sexual scenes. Only when entering the contemporary period, women are represented more diversely. Films promoting gender equality are emerging. In the case of the ideology, “nationalism” during the Old Order period is being replaced by “ibuisim”. prevalent during the New Order era. Feminist ideology has flourished in recent years in the contemporary phase countering conservative ideology which also unfolds in this period.

The Old Order Period (1950-1965): Where Were Women's Voices?

Besides marking the first Indonesian film to imbue national consciousness, 1950 marked the beginning of a strong, progressive, and large-member women's movement organization, the Indonesian Women's Movement (Gerwani). At that time, Gerwani was called Gerwis (Gerakan Wanita Sedar), and its members were selected. They were highly educated and politically conscious. When its membership reached 80,000 women, Gerwis expanded the movement to include grassroots women (Arivia, 2017). Despite the emergence of a progressive women's movement, films with a feminist bent had yet to appear. Key films from this period include *Darah dan Doa*/The Long March (Usmar Ismail, 1950), *Si Pintjang* (Sukardi, 1951), *Lewat Djam Malam* (Usmar Ismail, 1954), and *Turang* (Bachtar Siagian, 1957). Then there is another Best Picture winner at the 1955 Indonesian Film Festival, *Tarmina* (Lilik Sudjio, 1954). All five films were directed by men, with *The Long March* and *Lewat Djam Malam* directed by Usmar Ismail, the father of Indonesian cinema. Four of the main characters are also men, all three of whom have backgrounds as independence fighters. Only *Tarmina* has a female lead character. (Riyanto & Herlina, 2015)

The Long March, *Si Pintjang*, *Lewat Djam Malam*, and *Turang* all display potent symbols of nationalism (Hans, 2017). Indeed, Indonesia was in the euphoria of independence at the time. From 1949 to 1951, Indonesia was in transition following the Dutch withdrawal from the country. Nationalism was portrayed as masculine, with male dominance in films, and embodied in the role of the independence hero. For example, in the film *The Long March*, the main character, Sudarto, is questioned about his nationalism as he struggles to balance his struggle and love. Similarly, *Lewat Djam Malam* tells the story of a former fighter, Iskandar, who tries to live an everyday life. *Lalu Turang* tells the story of a guerrilla fighter named Rusli fighting against colonial rule in Sumatra. *Si Pintjang* is a children's film about Gimani, also a man separated from his family by war. In all three films, women are portrayed as lovers of the fighters, lacking control over important decisions. Women are portrayed as passive objects. Men are depicted as complex figures who embark on romantic adventures despite being married. In *The Long March*, Captain Sudarto, who is married, has relationships with two women: Connie, who is of Indo-German descent, and Widya, a nurse. For example, when Sudarto decides to end his relationship with Connie, Connie is shown crying with sadness.

The film *Tarmina*, although centered on a female protagonist, is portrayed as materialistic. Poverty drives *Tarmina* to leave her husband and child. She then remarries and divorces, and so on, until *Tarmina* lives in hardship and chooses to end her life. The depiction of women in this film reinforces the narrative that women cannot live without men, women as ‘dependent objects’. The symbol of a woman's success is based on marriage, the status, and wealth of the man who becomes her husband. The film also offers no other options for women to overcome the poverty that plagues their families. The subsequent phase of the New Order government influenced the Indonesian film industry. Left-wing films produced by members of Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat (LEKRA) or those with leftist ideologies were also eliminated. Some films were destroyed, which is why there is very little research on these films in the pre-New Order era. However, the few films that exist show that women were still underrepresented during the Old Order period.

New Order Period (1966-1998): The Commodification of Women's Sensuality

Gerwani, which at the time had 1.5 million members, was destroyed by the New Order government due to its ideological closeness to Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI). Since then, progressive women's organizations have disappeared from the political landscape of the Indonesian women's movement, replaced by the New Order (Orba) organization, Pemberdayaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga (PKK). This organization clearly lacked feminist ideas and practices. Its activities were subordinated to the male-dominated state, as reflected in its structure and leadership, which required the wives of government officials (Arivia, 2017). During this period, the women's movement experienced significant setbacks. Patriarchal culture was propagated. The New Order even mapped out women's identity in the Five Principles of Women, which included: Women as Wives Companions to Their Husbands; Women as Housewives; Women as Successors and Educators of Children; Women as Additional Income-Widers; and Women as Citizens and Members of Society. The New Order relegated women to a supporting role, while men remained at the forefront as protectors (Akbar, 2021). To this day, the Panca Dharma Wanita (Women's Five Principles) still resonates within the PKK Mother's Association, and its perspective persists as ideal.

Given the socio-political climate at the time, film producers were forced to produce films that aligned with the ruling class's ideology. According to Nugroho & Herlina (2015), some popular films from this period include *Kampus Biru* (1976), *Ranjang Siang Ranjang Malam* (1976), *Darah Muda* (1977), *Ali Topan Anak Jalanan* (1977), *Inem Pelayan Seksi* (1976, 1977), *Badai Pasti Berlalu* (1977), *Sundel Bolong* (1981), *Catatan Si Boy* (1987), and the *Warkop DKI* film series featuring *Dono*, *Kasino*, and *Indro*. Additionally, high-quality films from this period included "Pengemis dan Tukang Becak" (1978), "Si Mamad" (1973), and "Dua Tanda Mata" (1984). Compared to the previous phase, the genres featured were more diverse. Beyond social films, there were dramas, artistic films, satirical comedies, action films, and even horror films.

The New Order's dominance, which repressed political expression, led to catharsis. As a form of catharsis, many sexually charged works emerged and sold well. In the 1970s, censorship was indeed more open to sexual scenes (Riyanto & Herlina, 2015). Most films produced during this period exhibited signs of representations of female subordination. The evidence in film posters tends to exploit and commodify women's bodies. Films with such posters include "Kugadaikan Cintaku: Catatan Si Boy," "Suzanna," and "Maju Kena, Mundur Kena." For example, in the horror film "Suzanna," two-thirds of the poster depicts the exploitation of women's bodies. The film seems to promote eroticism rather than its horror content (Akbar, 2021). Not only horror films, but comedies also frequently feature sexy women. *Warkop DKI*, despite its socio-political critique, consistently featured sexy women in its films. Not only during the New Order era, but the *Warkop DKI Reborn* series, which began airing in 2016, also retains these same elements. Women are depicted as having fair skin, dark hair, ideal bodies, and revealing clothing.

The presence of women in these films is highlighted by the focus on body parts and movements that convey female sensuality (Elsha & Yuwono, 2020). This focus is inextricably linked to the male gaze, where camera angles focus on women's bodies. *Eva Arnaz*, the actress who became a *Warkop DKI* icon at the time, often wore skimpy clothing, and her scenes involved intimate physical contact with her co-stars. These scenes are evident in the films "Manusia 6 Juta Dolar" (1981), "Maju Kena Mundur Kena" (1983), and "Oke Beres" (1983). In one scene in *Maju Kena Mundur Kena*, *Dono* kisses *Eva Arnaz*'s cheek repeatedly, and in the volleyball scene, *Dono* hugs and holds the buttocks of several extras as an expression of celebrating victory (Elsha & Yuwono, 2020).

Contemporary Phase (1998 - present): Liberation from the Shackles of Patriarchy

Feminist ideas experienced a resurgence since the mid-1990s, peaking in 1998. At that time, the feminist organization *Yayasan Jurnal Perempuan*, along with several activists, organized the *Suara Ibu Peduli* (SIP) movement. This feminist movement camouflaged itself by using the word "mother" as a strategy due to the regime at the time. Unfortunately, in history textbooks, this strategic feminist movement is depicted only as mothers' inability to buy milk due to the monetary

crisis. In contrast, in other literature, it is portrayed as an effort to empower mothers (Arivia & Subono, 2017).

A very noticeable aspect of post-reform feminism is its infiltration into the policy realm, producing academics who became femocrats. Women's voices were also given a platform by President Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie with the establishment of the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) in 1998. This feminist resurgence drew criticism and condemnation, especially from conservatives. This conservative movement has grown with support from the political scene, such as Islamic political parties that reject issues of sexuality, reproductive rights, and women's equality. The rise of films with polygamy themes is one sign of this, as seen in *Surga yang Tak Dirindukan* (2015), and *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* (2008). However, support continues to flow. The feminist movement is growing stronger with more activists speaking out. Furthermore, technological advances are giving women a voice. The viral #MeToo movement in 2017 became a turning point in the end of women's silence.

Along with the increasing discussion of gender equality, sexual violence, and patriarchal culture, Indonesian films have also changed. Films released after the New Order largely no longer exploited women's bodies in film posters. The number of female screenwriters, directors, and film producers has also increased, creating female main characters who defy gender stereotypes. Gina S. Noer, the screenwriter for *Habibie Ainun* (2012) and *Keluarga Cemara* (2019), stated (in Adam, 2019) that there are still few strong female characters; most tend to be uniform. She strives to showcase the diversity of women's lives because in real life, women do not have to meet just one standard.

One film that showcases liberal feminism is “*Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts*” (2018), which won the 2018 Citra Award for Best Film. It tells the story of Marlina's solitary struggle to seek justice for the actions of robbers who threatened her life, property, and honor. The film seeks to expose the shackles of patriarchy that Marlina faces when she is asked by a man named Markus to have sex with seven men. “So, how many men have you slept with?” Markus's question reinforces the representation of women as mere objects of male lust. Marlina resists by beheading Markus, demonstrating the embodiment of liberal feminism, which views discrimination against women as unfair and that women should have the same opportunities as men to succeed in society (Yustiana & Junaedi, 2019). In this film, Marlina is portrayed as a strong, brave figure, capable of leading and protecting herself (Febryani, 2021). The film also features the character Novi, portrayed as a woman who transcends emotional and irrational influences and becomes a leader for herself and those around her.

In addition to *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* (2018), numerous films with feminist ideology have emerged in the contemporary era. Recent films, *Pangku* (2025), make women the center of the story by showing the struggle of a single mother to become a female servant at ‘kopi pangku’. Another film, such as *Yuni* (2021), about the dreams of a teenage girl shackled by patriarchy, and *Penyalin Cahaya* (2021), about sexual harassment that occurs in college, are also featured. Other films include *Kartini*, *3 Srikandi*, *Athirah*, *Merry Riana*, *Siti*, and many more. Although feminist ideology has emerged in several contemporary period films, the complexity and diversity of women's roles still need to be more fully explored (Sulistiyani, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

Most Indonesian films from the New Order and Old Order eras are about men. According to Sen (1994), Indonesian films are about men and define men's spheres of action, while some female characters serve merely as supporting roles with minor or insignificant roles within the narrative. This narrative has undergone a significant shift since the fall of the Soeharto regime. Feminist films have emerged, showcasing a diverse range of female characters and their struggles against patriarchal culture. Despite this, Indonesia still lacks films featuring women as leaders or superheroes. Young executives, leaders, or company owners are often associated with men. Even when women are present, they are often seen as cottage-industry players.

It is also challenging to see films that perpetuate patriarchal culture, such as male dominance, forced marriage, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and so on. The representation of women in film does not always reflect reality. Film is the product of an active process of selecting and presenting, arranging and shaping, and creating meaning, thus being called a signifying practice. These signs are derived from male desires and fantasies, not from the realities of women's lives (Mulvey, 2004). In reality, the film industry remains male-dominated. For example, of the Citra Award-winning directors in the last ten years, only Mouly Surya is a woman. This lack of women behind the scenes certainly impacts how women's voices are heard.

This research has several limitations, particularly regarding journal and paper data on older films. Supporting research is categorized mainly within the contemporary phase. This limitation requires further data from film industry stakeholders. Further exploration could be conducted by grouping the evolutionary phases of female representation into more specific time periods. Then, a social semiotic analysis of selected films would be conducted to examine differences in feminist symbols and whether their meanings have shifted.

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