

## Projecting Gender Identity: Women's Portrayal in Indonesian Female Directors' Films

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### ***Abstract***

*This paper aims to assess the role of female filmmakers in the contemporary Indonesian film industries. Throughout the history, the presence of women in Indonesian film industry brings many effects to the way woman is depicted on screen. As the portrayal of women in Indonesian films tend to be homogenous, many female filmmakers strive to give another image of women on screen and work against the stereotype of women in the earlier Indonesian movies. Hence, this study argues that Indonesian female filmmakers challenge the depiction of women in the contemporary Indonesian film industry. This research uses qualitative methodology, particularly textual analysis to have a deep understanding in what way the Indonesian female filmmakers contribute to the depiction of women in film. By selecting two recent films produced by women, the research gives portrayal of women through its cinematic elements. The finding in this research demonstrates that Indonesian women filmmakers contribute to a different portrayal of women on screen and adding more discussion about how the female filmmakers speak about the issue of women through their productions. Furthermore, the character of women in the selected film has a strong correlation with the local culture which is embedded in social life of Indonesian. Hence, it can be concluded that the Indonesian female directors contribute not only to the depiction of women but also the discourse of women in Indonesian films.*

### ***Keywords:***

*Gender, Film, Female Filmmaker, Representation, Indonesian Film Industry*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Understanding the place of women in cinema have to be started from the position of film as a cultural product. Since the development of films, many films portray women in various characters. It then encourages many scholars to think deeper about the portrayal of the women in

the movie specifically its relation to the social formation and the representation of women on film. Previously, women were always be featured as powerless and passive while men were powerful and active (Wahyuni and Adnan, 2022). The problem of how the portrayal of women on screen and the impact of the representation of women rise a question about whether

the problem would be the same if the films are made by the women.

In the 1980s, where the number of female filmmakers was increasing, the question about the role of women in cinema is not only limited to the portrayal and their representation but also about women's position as a maker and a spectator of the films. De Lauretis (1987) argues that women cinema plays a significant role as an alternative cinema where it conveys a social issue about women, placed in specific location or area. Furthermore, she argues that there is a shift in understanding the involvement of women in film making. Therefore, the term of 'women's film' and 'feminist filmmakers' are always mentioned when researching about women in cinema. Those terms contain a wide range of meaning and in this research those terms will be explained in the context of Indonesian film industry as the main object of this research.

Historically, Indonesian film industry has been affected by the dynamics of social politics as the national government controlled the national film industry, particularly in New Order regime (1966-1998). The government's law affected the content of Indonesian films where Indonesian films aimed to support national agenda and education. As the movie is a cultural product, Ulum et al., (2021) states that the Indonesian film industry was constructed by some distinctive features, particularly the social culture of Indonesian itself. The patriarchy system does exist among the Indonesian citizens. A rigid hierarchy

between man and woman affected the representation of woman in Indonesian film, especially when it comes to the relationship and interaction between male and female. Widyarningsih (2022) argue that the involvement of women in Indonesian film industry had a close relation with the representation of woman on screen.

Since the first national film production, women in Indonesian film industry were appreciated as 'content' or a part of film narration as Garland (2021) argues that it is common to see how women are represented in film only to please the male society. In addition, the idea of 'good women' was constructed by male perspective where it was coherent with male's domination in the film production. Women in films are considered as subservient and submissive as the dominance exerted is based on a maternal motif, creating a stereotype of mothers or wives to save her child or loved ones (Gilpatric, 2010). The concept of '*ibuism*' or motherhood which originally came from the New Order is portrayed Indonesian women's character in traditional notion of femininity as dutiful housewife and mother (Hyunanda et al, 2021). As a result, the women representation in earlier Indonesian films tends to be homogenous and build a particular stereotype.

Women as filmmakers seemed to be neglected as there was only a small number of literatures that explain about women's role as the filmmakers in Indonesia. In fact, in the 1950s, women film directors who

actively produced movies, for instance, Sofia W.D, Ratna Asmara, Citra Dewi and Ida Farida. Those women filmmakers started to create their movie in the middle of men directors' domination. Some of their movies were critically successful in international film festivals.

During the New Order regime (1966-1998), the Indonesian film industry was in difficult condition due national circumstances (Barker, 2019). Politics under Soeharto's leadership focused on modernisation and economic growth, and this led to the massive number of imported films from Hollywood. The national film distribution was also interfered by the American Cinema Group 21 with its large Cineplex buildings which mainly screened imported films (Heeren, 2012). These unfavourable conditions make Indonesian movie directors decided to switch their production to television drama production (*sinetron*) where they could earn a better living. Hence, it led to a significant decline of film production in Indonesia.

After the national movement happened to resist the dictatorship of New Order regime in 1998, Indonesian film industry found their momentum to produce more films with the involvement of women. *Kuldesak* (1998, dir. Riri Riza, Rizal Mantovani, Mira Lesmana and Nan T. Achnas) as one of outstanding Indonesian movies was a collaboration between male and female directors. Furthermore, this film was well-known as the new wave of Indonesian film as it offered anti-mainstream theme about the rebellion of

youngster in Jakarta. Yngvesson (2015) argues that *Kuldesak* was a 'bridge' of the old style of Indonesian filmmaking to the contemporary one.

The rapid development of national film industry in early 2000 was also marked by the increasing number of female film directors and feature film production. The national films started to spread into public theatres. Since the early of 2000 Indonesian film industry showed the accelerated number of film production since early, where it was a positive development for the national film industry (Ulum, et al., 2020). The emergence of new ideas, more diverse theme and the growing number of young generation of filmmakers were the turning point of Indonesian film industry. Some rising female directors started to exhibit their films, for example: Nia Dinata, Nan T. Achnas, Upi Avianto and many more. Those women filmmakers show different perspective in movie making where some of them are focusing on women empowerment.

After the New Order regime (post-1998), there were two important developments in Indonesian film industry which were the increasing of female filmmakers and the development of film industry in Indonesia. As a result, the study about women plays a significant role in the film spread in Indonesia and became an important issue. The new perspective about the involvement of women in filmmaking had emerged. It was entirely new and unusual in Indonesia as the film production was dominated by male. The tremendous

changes in the socio-economic affected the status of Indonesian women. Modernisation and the increasing awareness of mass education become the catalyst for the women empowerment. Women started to be employed in private and public sectors, a massive urbanisation where people start to migrate to the bigger city, and the higher education for women supported the increasing number of women film directors in Indonesia. As Sen (1994) argues that some of the women film directors were pursuing their higher education overseas where it led to a diverse perspective in their films particularly about women, feminism and spirit of equality. It is supported by the fact some of the Indonesian women film directors studied overseas.

After 2010, as the number of Indonesian female filmmakers keeps rising, it is interesting to see how these female filmmakers keep contribute to the portrayal of women on screen. Seeing the gaps in the previous research, this piece of writing will opt more contemporary films which produce in 2017 – 2022. Furthermore, in this essay, I will argue that the existence of Indonesian women director affects the portrayal of women on screen through the character of women in their productions. In understanding about the extend character of women in Indonesian films as well as the contribution of female filmmakers, I will focus on films whose director is woman and put a woman as the main character. Hence, I choose Mouly Surya and her film “Marlina Murderder in

Four Acts” (2017) and Kamila Andini in her recent work “Yuni” (2021).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Basically, study about how women is presented in Indonesian films have been emerged and the discussion of about how the women are portrayed in Indonesian cinema through the female character in film appear in many research. Wibowo (2019) argues that in film ‘Siti’ (dir. Eddie Cahyono), the main character showed the effort to go out from patriarchal society. By using semiotic method, it argues that female character was depicted as a victim of poverty as she was striving for a better life. In another film called ‘Imperfect’ (dir. Ernest Prakasa), *Antariksa* (2021) argues that the female character dealt with social issue about women’s body and stereotype about beauty standar among the society. Both researches state that women character in film try to challenge the common portrayal of women in Indonesian film industry. Unfortunately, the research opt a film whose directors are men and only focused on the female character in films. Hence, the role of women as a filmmaker could not be seen in the result.

Specifically, some research also critically conveyed the role of female filmmakers in Indonesian film industries through their films. Imanjaya and Citra (2013) argues that Indonesian female filmmakers reconceptualise the gender roles through their films by showing a different character of woman. The similar result also conveys in Michalik (2015) research that argues that

Indonesian female filmmakers shape a new identity of women in their production and their contribution change the Indonesian film industry in terms of the struggle of censorship. While Eliyanah (n.d) mentions that the increasing women's cinema in Indonesia has substantially challenge the domination of male both in its industry and topic of the films. Those previous research opt films before in the time year 2001 – 2013 in order to analyze the change in women representation and female film makers role in shaping Indonesian film industry in post-authoritarian era.

Clark (2000) argues that before the rapid development of Indonesian film industry, the majority of Indonesian films 'considered that the dominance of men had been treated as the norm'. The female character in every Indonesian film was only a complementary and subsidiary role. Hence, the women's images are small, and their representation does not affect the whole narrative. As a result, the women representation in Indonesian films tends to be positioned below the men's power. The similar argument delivered by Hughes-Freeland (2011) who state that women's role in Indonesian film industry had a close relation with the representation of woman on screen. Before the reformation, films which told the story about men only adopt the domestication of women as part of the concept of femininity. In contrast, after the reformation, as the opportunity of women to be a filmmaker had risen, the portrayal of women became more complex. Those studies show that there is

a correlation between women as a filmmaker and the depiction of women on screen.

## THEORY

The study about how women are being portrayed in films includes a long discussion of the position of women as filmmakers. Previously, the function of films who were made by the women was to break down masculinity or the domination of men's perspective in representing women by showing its gaps. The effort on how to construct women in its relation to other objects and subjects of vision and to formulate the conditions of representability of another social subject. De Lauretis's (1987) argues that it is not only about women representation as a positive figure but also in reconceptualise that women's cinema as the cinema made by and for women. Women cinema 'defines all points of identification (with character, image, camera) as female, feminine, or feminist' (De Lauretis, 1987, cited in Chaudhuri, 2006, p.68). From this perspective, the women cinema could be articulate as a cinema that made by and for women, contains a particular women issue which is delivered by a different perspective, that is coherent with the feminism value.

However, in Indonesian context, the term of women cinema is not used as common as in western countries. The question about the definition of 'women cinema' arises in Michalik's research in 2015. She argues that the term of women cinema in

Indonesian context could not be defined clearly as Indonesian female filmmakers identify their presence in filmmaking in various ways. Also, for the term of feminist filmmaker, it could not be identified in western perspective as this term is sensitive topic due to the national politics propaganda regarding woman portrayal in Indonesia. Kurnia (2013) shows that Indonesian female filmmakers do not use term of 'feminist' in telling the stories about women, even though, they adopt women perspective in their films. It should be noted here that historical and cultural aspect play an important role for Indonesian female filmmakers in seeing their productions in the film industry.

Michalik (2015) mentioned that women's position in filmmaking and the way women are portrayed in Indonesian film industry has changed since post-New Order. As the number of female filmmakers increase, films with woman as the main character become varied as Mantziari (2014) argues that the female filmmakers contribute to the creation of woman's image on screen. Furthermore, she argues that female directors also help enrich cultural representations by offering alternative viewpoints, by using variable national, racial, gender and social class identity. As this research focuses on the contribution of female filmmakers in Indonesian contemporary film industry this theory will be mainly deployed to look closely to what extent those female directors give an impact to the Indonesian film industry.

## RESEARCH METHODS

In conducting the research, the author realise that it is very important to understand the film and its element in meaning-making process. As this research has an objective to analyse woman's portrayal and how the female filmmakers contribute to its representation, the qualitative research method will be deployed.

In analysing the film, Bainbridge et al., (2015) argue that films are media texts that consist of many elements. Hence a particular method will be used to focus on the film text itself which is textual analysis. This method carefully investigates the film text as it also considers the context of the text including the socio-cultural background to gain deeper understanding. Baxter (2019) argues that textual analysis requires observing and questioning all the elements that create meaning within the piece, both cinematic and non-cinematic codes such as acting, directing, lighting, cinematography, and mise-en-scene. As films contains many cinematic elements, this piece of writing will choose four film elements: mise-en-scene, cinematography, film sound and film dialogue on selected sequences from each film.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Marlina: The Murderer in Four Acts (2017), director: Mouly Surya

Marlina is a woman who live in Sumba, an island in East Nusa Tenggara. She is a young widow and live alone in a house far

from her neighbours. One night, she is robbed and raped by a gang led by Markus. Feeling threatened, Marlina decided to kill all men in two ways: giving poisons to the gang and particularly for Markus, as he is the one who rape Marlina, he is decapitated.

The scene moves from night to morning, where the shot used is an extralong shot to show the background of the location. Marlina is seen walking from a distance with hasty steps. Using traditional sarong, loose shirt, sandal, and hair tied, Marlina keeps walking. The camera stays still until Marlina is seen approaching. In the next scene using a close up shot, Marlina's legs are seen complete with the object she is holding, which is Markus' head. Marlina then put Markus' head down. The scene then returns to use an extralong shot and Marlina is seen standing alone waiting for something. The sound of wind is heard. Next, the shot type then switches to the medium shot and someone calls Marlina. Here, the camera keeps focus on Marina and the women at the back is blur. Feeling uncomfortable, Marlina looks away and moves away. But the figure kept running closer. When she managed to approach Marlina, the figure looked surprised by the object that was held by Marlina.

The scene contains some dialogues between Marlina and Novi (In the original film, the dialog uses local language and accent)  
(Translation)

Marlina: I want to take this head to the police station. Where are you going?

Novi: To Kodi. Find Umbu.

Marlina: It's almost the labor time?

Novi: Should have been two weeks ago. But, it's a fortune for me. Umbu can not go back here since last month. If I have labour according to the birth schedule, Umbu will not see him. Harvesting during a drought like this is very difficult to give according to the schedule for pregnant women. I'll just wait in the village, meet here. I called him, but it was very difficult to get an answer. My back hurts. Sleeping is not good, on the side is wrong, on the back is also hurt. It's almost ten months. Heh, why don't you come out? While... Umbu is so talkative, wondering whether this child is breech or not. What kind of girl does he think I am? Instead of trying to understand that I am in pain, he even thinks out of nowhere! You understand, don't you?

Marlina: No. I don't. Topan was only 7 months.

Novi: I'm sorry Marlina, I have no intention to offend you.

Marlina: Ok.

Not long after that from a distance seen a car approaching. Marlina and Novi rushed up. By using long shoot, it could be seen Marlina and Novi wants to enter the truck. However, once Marlina enters the car, the driver got out of the car and pulled Marlina down.

Driver: Get out. You can't enter the truck!

Marlina: I want to go the police office! Just drive the truck!

Marlina then pointed her machete at the driver's neck and ordered him to get into the car.

B. Yuni (2021), director: Kamila Andini

Yuni is a high school student who is known to be intelligent in her school. Her dream is to be able to pursue her higher education. One day, Yuni is proposed by an unrecognized man. Feeling doubt, Yuni decided to rejected the proposal and suddenly she becomes the center of attention in her neighbourhood. The second proposal came, Yuni still refused and was more concerned with achieving her goals. However, a myth haunts her that if a woman refuses two proposals, she will never marry forever. The problem becomes more complex as she is proposed by one of her teachers at school, named Pak Damar.

The sequence starts with Yuni who wears purple shirt (her favorite color) lays down with her friends on the grass after swimming time. While lying on the grass and playing with the wild flower, Yuni opens a discussion. The camera uses a medium shot to show the interaction between Yuni and her friends intensely. Yuni put her head on Sarah's belly.

(In the original film, the conversation uses local language and accent)

(Translation)

Yuni: Making love hurts, isn't it?

Sarah: *Astagfirullah* (Islamic verse to seek forgiveness of God) Yuni, why do you ask the question?

Yuni: I'm just asking since we don't know about that.

Tika: It was sore, Yun, really painful. Especially if you do it for the first time. But I was just holding back.

Yuni: Can't you tell your husband that it was hurt?

Tika: If I said so, I felt embarrassed. It was so embarrassed so I hold my laughter. I wanted to say it was hurt, but I was afraid he got angry.

Yuni: It means... you were not orgasm?

Sarah: Hey, Yuni! If people know your statement, you'll get the virginity test first!

Tika: Until now, I didn't understand what orgasm is like. But, people said if you want to know just try to masturbate.

Uung: Hah? Do females do the masturbation? I thought it is only done by men!

Nisa : Girls can do that too!

Uung : How to do it? Tell me, Nis!

All : (laughing)

The camera is still in steady mode then the sequence moves to another scene, using close-up shot, Yuni searched the information online about how to do masturbation.

Based on the result, it could be seen that in both films the directors characterized the women in a distinct way. The first film starts with an intriguing narrative where the main character wants to take revenge to her rapist. In the selected segmentation, Marlina brings two unusual thing that are rare to show in film whose main character



is woman: A person's head and a machete. From the mise-en-scene, the portrayal of Marlina is really strong and tough even though her appearance is still feminine with long hair, wearing traditional sarong and loose shirt, similar with how women dress up in Sumba. Bringing Markus' head all the way to police office also shows how brave Marlina is. While, in Yuni, the main character is portrayed as a teenager who is curious about her identity as a woman and how far this identity affects her life. She does not hesitate to ask about sexuality which is in Indonesia, it is still a taboo topic and could not be discussed in public. Also, as in this segmentation Yuni is reprimanded by her friend for asking a taboo thing, she responds in a very casual way which shows that for her, discussing sexuality is not a sinful thing. Both portrayals show the women is an active individual who can speak and act based on their thoughts.

In a wider context, those films try to construct the extend identity by showing that women are not a sexual object only. The new portrayal of women that independent, have power, have a sexual desire and able to overcome their issue independently could be seen in those productions. Kurnia (2014) argues that the women filmmakers have challenged the structural domination of men. The representation of women in those productions causes the new construction of women identity on the screen where it tries to break down the domination of male. The existence of two film directors adds more number of film directors who focuses on women's depiction.

Ramanathan (2006) mentions that one of the characteristics of feminist films is the narrative perspective that departs from the thoughts of women which deconstruct the representation of women on screen. These movies are trying to show women opinions and actions that might be taken by the women who never been portrayed in Indonesian earlier films. Both characters in those films rely on themselves to overcome the problems instead of asking help from other people. These films, furthermore, demonstrate the values of feminism that in many stages, women are equal as men.

Mantziari (2014) argues by giving prominent role for women in film production, it will open a greater opportunity for women to offer a diverse range of female characters in film which can be seen clearly in Marlina and Yuni. The directors of film add more exploration in the film production in Indonesia particularly in theme and content. Firstly, those two films portrayed the social issues which convey the social problem towards women. For example, In Sumba (the background place of Marlina) the number of sexual harassment case have increased over the years (BPS, 2019), while in Yuni, the practice of child marriage in Java is explored based on the fact this practice still exists in many areas in Indonesia. These social issues also intertwined with another discourse about women and sexuality. Michalik (2015) argues that Indonesian women filmmakers encourage public discourses to rethink about women and strive for better equality where it could be seen in Mouly Surya dan

Kamila Andini's film. By using female as the main character, they use a cinematic form of language to talk about women and society. In the content aspect, both films have clearly offered the new, anti-mainstream, and thought-provoking character for Indonesian spectators.

Marlina and Yuni are also the portrayal of how Indonesian female filmmakers work and speak about women through the films. It also shows that the interconnectedness between the portrayal of women and local culture. As Marlina and Yuni take place in different location, the sense of local culture is shown in these two films. In Marlina, even though she shows her braveness in doing her revenge, she still shows the local tradition of people in Sumba in the way she communicates with Novi by showing carenes as part of communal society. Also, the head of Markus also depicts a close relation with Sumba culture. Beheading is a tradition which had been carried out hereditary when ethnic war occurred in Sumba. The human head is interpreted as the highest thing of the human body, so a severed head is also a sign of the conquest of something. While in Yuni, the local culture shows in the dialog where Yuni's friend shows how obedient she is towards her husband by hiding off their true feelings about something. Hence, in describing the representation of women in film, it should be noted that there is no homogenous portrayal as women has intersection with other elements such as culture, place and social class (Hughes-Freeland, 2011).

Given the finding, as the research also looks closely at cinematic elements, it could be analyzed that these two films have different stylistic pattern. There is no particular pattern that is adopted consistently in each film, particularly in cinematography and mise-en-scene. Mouly used extralong shoot to show the power and strength of Marlina, deployed diegetic sound, with the background of Sumba. While Kamila Andini use medium shot to show the intimacy among the character. The only similarity only depicts in the dialogue of both films which deploy local language to emphasize the background location of films and the closeness with locality and tradition. Each pattern gives different impression for the spectator as Michalik (2015) mentions that female filmmakers use various cinematic form of language to talk about the needs of women and to show in various ways the circumstances under which women in Indonesia live. The successfulness of both films clearly come from the contribution of female filmmakers to convey and explore about women as a topic which is manifested in its cinematic elements.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout the explanation above, it should be noted that the Indonesian film industry has a long history of women involvement in the national industry in the past decades. In the more contemporary era, the existence of women filmmaker affects the industry in two ways. Firstly, both films contribute to a transformation

of a different representation and portrayal of women. Selected films deliver a great discussion of how women react towards social problems. Secondly, as it also confronts with the social issue in Indonesia that previously could not be explored on screen, both films production offers the new exploration in filmmaking, particularly in content and how close those character of women with local culture in Indonesia. At the same time, it opens a wider chance for Indonesian women cinema to speak up and sharing ideas globally. In the end, the presence of women directors in Indonesian films broaden the public knowledge on women's perspectives: the point of view of women as opposed to the male perspective which has been featured in the modern Indonesian film, the presence of women cinemas shows the development of women's acknowledgement in Indonesian film industry and open a greater opportunity for women to rethink their position not only in the film production but also among the society.

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