

Women and Violence in Popular Culture: A Portrayal of Social Construction and Media Commodification

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The portrayal of women and violence is not something new in the world of literature and popular culture. The stories of witches and evil queens who are hungry for power in various fairy tales such as the story of *Cinderella* or *Bawang Putih dan Bawang Merah* have long been constructed in soap operas or television dramas in various parts of the world, including Indonesia. Here, although times and generations have changed, women's identity and violence remains and have always been an interesting theme for filmmakers. So not surprisingly, the representation of binary opposition, good women against evil woman in various versions and genres of soap operas still exists from generation to generation. Using the Stuart Hall's theory of Representation and historiography approach, the study found that, in addition to a black-and-white portrait by two female figures considered to have a small risk by industry, the construction of the 'classic fairy tale' was always subconsciously acceptable to the audience despite to the gender bias.

Keywords: women, violence, identity, soap operas, gender bias

1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, women in the world of entertainment have been the center of objects in various media. Women as villain figures or antagonists in various shows, have been going on for hundreds of years, with various versions and variations. For centuries, people have been familiar with Hera's narrative in grumpy and vengeful Greek mythology, granny witches and evil queen figures in children's stories and fairy tales such as Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, and the Middle Ages' antagonistic figures, like Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare, who is famous for sadism and bad influence. In some ways, those narratives have inspired novelists and filmmakers in placing women as figures who are close to violence.

Since film and television industry was founded and developed in the late 19th or early 20th centuries, the similar portrayals about women were also represented in many shows. In Hollywood industry for example, women involvement in this industry have been started since Nickelodeons to full-length feature films and from silent films to talkies, as writers, directors, actors, and audience members. Female stardom was an essential component of the rise of the industry, though many of these women were sometimes perceived more for their physical appearances rather than their qualities.

In Indonesia television industry, the portrayal of Indonesian cinema especially on television (soap operas) seems to change since drama series from South America such as Venezuela and Mexico called telenovela were popular in the 1990s. Various types of telenovela with the same story and genre such as Maria Mercedes, Rosalinda, Esmeralda and others began to dominate Indonesian television at that time. This phenomenon was also in line with the rise of films and soap operas from India, which mostly focused on complex relationships in the family. In many aspects, this representation inspired Indonesian film makers to produce soap operas with the same theme and genre. This soap opera genre is

usually centered on female characters with two sides, a binary opposition, black and white, 'good and evil' with the same strong proportions.

Hence, over the next two decades, a variety of soap operas or sinetron were produced regularly, such as Tersanjung (1998), Doaku Harapanku (1998) Cinta Fitri (2007) until the millennium era such as Anak Jalanan (2017) and Cinta untuk Cinta (2019). Here, the audience is presented with the themes that revolve around the struggle for love and wealth between two or more female figures who direct the storyline. The production of this sinetron is also quite extraordinary, with a fairly long screen duration. For instance, Tersanjung was screened from 1998 to 2005 which was made up to seven sessions. Similarly, Cinta Fitri reached more than 1000 episodes from 2007 to 2010. Thus, it is not surprising that since that decade, types of stripping sinetron are getting popular, in which the quality of the plot of the story is no longer essential. In the last five years, although the trend of sinetron then have been shifting to young people consumption, with the emergence stripping sinetron like Anak Jalanan (2017), Anak Langit (2018) or Cinta Suci (2018), with a more complex storyline and characters, female antagonistic characters are always the focus of the story.

The most interesting thing of these sinetrons which also the focus of this research is the role of antagonists characters who are generally played by women. In some of these sinetrons, reality is described as a black and white world, a two-sided confrontation, good and bad, which directs the storyline. And in the end, the good character will be the winner. However, the way of characterizing the antagonist is interesting. Similar with the adapted telenovela stories, the characteristic of the antagonist (female) shown here are usually vengeful, violent, cunning or even sadistic woman, with an explosive temperament and sometimes unstable. Even in the sinetron of what so called religious (sinetron religi), a certain characteristic of the evil is almost similar with that of the non-religious one. For example, in sinetron Khadijah and Khalifah (2011) and Hareem (2011), the antagonist characters appears in hijab, conduct praying or fasting, but they are still evils in many ways. Here, the religious symbol is only seen in physical appearance. Through a relatively long series sequel, the issues presented in those stories cannot be separated from revenge, conspiracy, or strategies to hurt other characters (main characters) who are also women. So it is not surprising that by seeing these sinetron, the audience will see many scenes of crying, insulting, or suffering the female (main) characters that are caused by the female (antagonist) figures as well.

Interestingly, this type of sinetron has a significant audience, which is characterized by high attention of television viewers (rating), full of 'commercial breaks', served at prime time airtime, and produced in many sequels. That is why, for market reasons, the television industry does not seem to stop producing such type of sinetron for the next two decades. Certain stations like RCTI, SCTV and Indosiar for instances, have already had 'loyal' audiences for this type of sinetron

However, for certain reasons, the antagonistic woman depicted here is certainly far from being a motherly woman or a good woman in general. Some female antagonists, such as in Cinta Fitri, act more individually, but in some other sinetron such as Tersanjung and Doaku dan Harapanku, the antagonists were described collaborating, two figures, between mother and daughter or son, wife and husband, aunt and nieces and so on. This is also found in sinetron such as Anak Jalanan (2017) or Cinta untuk Cinta (2019)

Based on the above phenomenon, the question arises why women? Here, the representation of women in the similar characteristics from time to time, which even across generations in various productions is not only seen misleading but also gender biased. It is true that film or soap opera is actually about an industry. In this case, market reasons will usually be the main problem argued by the producer. But when the audience also has the right

to get a qualified show, and not all viewers have the same taste, this form of representation must be evaluated or corrected.

2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE INDONESIAN SOAP OPERA

In Indonesian television industry, the soap operas, telenovela, sinetron, TV film, has received a public attention since the 1980s of TVRI. Starting from the adaptation of literary works such as Siti Nurbaya, Salah Asuhan, to contemporary popular themes at that time such as Losmen, Jendela Rumah Kita, Aku Cinta Indonesia, etc., the audience then got familiar with the type of serial films or so-called soap operas. Furthermore, this type of industry gets its space when the era of private television (RCTI, SCTV, Indosiar, ANTV etc) develops. One of the people behind this is Raam Punjabi with his Multivision Tripar. For 20 years, this production house has continued to produce various soap operas with various genres such as comedy, sitcoms such as Gara-Gara, Warkop DKI, Jin and Jun and dramas such as Tersanjung, Janjiku, Doaku Harapanku and others. These types of sinetron really get public attention.

Along with the global era, the character of Indonesian soap operas was heavily influenced by external forms of telenovela such as South America namely Maria Mercedes, Rosalinda, Esmeralda, Ugly Beatty, or and some from India, Japanese and Korean film series. Many soap operas then adapted the same theme, including ways of exploring characters and directing the story line. However, even though this industry continues to develop and produces various soap operas every year, the representation of women on that screen is more or less the same, in terms of story and character.

Most of these sinetrons are imitations of films or dramas that have been popular before both inside and outside the country. If one sinetron gets good reception from the audiences, it will then be followed by other similar sinetron with the similar representation. This imitation is not only for the film genre, but also for the entire presentation such as the title, plot, exploring characters, and even the title. For example, after the film *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* received a good reception and got public attention, various production houses later produced films with a religious theme, both for the big screen and television. A similar case also occurred when Ramadhan or fasting month comes, various religious sinetrons served during Ramadan, have been common in many channels. Even for regular sinetron such as *Cinta Fitri*, was adapted to Ramadan session

In the past twenty years, the type of Indonesian sinetron has not changed significantly, though many of them then shifts the target audience to the young people, like *Anak Jalanan* (2017) and *Cinta untuk Cinta* (2019). It is a fact that not all Indonesian sinetron are poor in the story. Some films are phenomenal and get a lot of attention from the audience like *Si Dul Anak Sekolah* and *Para Pencari Tuhan*. In addition, some channels also prefer to produce types of comedy genres such as *Opera van Java*, *Extravaganza*, because they are more entertaining and have different perspectives.

3. REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN ON TELEVISION

Film or sinetron is a media representation. What we see on television or in cinema is actually not reality, but someone else's version of that reality. Sinetron or film is also a series of long and detailed scenes based on the perspective of the director, screenwriter or people behind the scenes, and each has their own interpretation of the images, sounds or words to convey.

The concept of how someone or something is represented becomes very essential because the people behind the scenes have a power to determine or construct the messages

and the purpose of the film. This shows that film is not just an art, but a complex product. Thus, it is interesting to reveal the reason behind why the portrayal of women is almost the same from years to years,

Film and also sinetron are actually closely related to the construction model by the people behind the scenes. According to Stuart Hall (2003: 17), representation here is related to how to give meaning to something described. Representation here is not a total reflection of a particular situation or situation in society, but rather a combination of ideas or different elements. Referring to Barker (2003: 4) in every representation there is a combination of various things including the opinions of people who make representations, individual reactions to the results of a representation and the context of the community. In this case, the design, the messages delivered, and the power of the people behind the scenes about how and why something is represented, actually has a very intensive and broad impact.

In addition, related to why and how a character depicted in front of the screen is actually closely related to the dominant power by the people behind the scenes. In this case the film is not just a spectacle, but also the delivery of messages related to ideology, interests, generalizations, stereotypes or even power relations. As stated by Shohat (2010: 5), all films are political, or rather have a political dimension.

Related to the representation of women in films or sinetron above, in many ways each form of representation will certainly be understood differently by everyone. Although the producers may argue that what is displayed is only a mere spectacle or entertainment, but when the same form of representation is then presented repeatedly in various sinetron, this understanding will eventually become knowledge that will be trusted by viewers.

Television is actually a public area because the productions are broadcasted through many layers, local, national or international. Thus, the impact of the production is also enormous. People can argue that what is displayed is not real, virtual, not really exist, or only happens in the soap operas. However, the audience has a right to get a good program which reflect moral values and messages which are free from gender bias. Where people from all generation can easily access and watch what has been presented on that screen, kind of unfair or bias representation must be corrected.

In addition, by displaying almost similar type of the shows, on almost every national television channel, the audience seems to have no choice. Like or not, they have to watch the sinetron in their free time. Based on a survey conducted by Markplus in 2009 for example, the reason people watch sinetron is not just for stories, some are more interested in actresses or actors, and some others because they do not have many choices because most channels display a kind of soap opera.

Moreover, the most serious thing about this repetitive representation is when it inspires the children. Here, violence might be regarded as something normal, everyday shows in their lives. Although there is no specific national research on the impact of soap operas for children, but the problem of imitation of violence of the television shows has occurred among the children several times in this country, such as cases of wrestling, brawl, suicides, and others.

Concerning the image of sadistic mothers and girls as depicted in this soap opera certainly has a terrible impact on children or even teenagers who watch them. Children, for example, can observe terrible concepts one day and imitate them the other day. They understand that other people are 'like me' in actions, behavior, desires, language, and thinking. That is why, a good and enlightening form of representation on the screen is definitely necessary.

In this case, of course there must be a moral movement that every form of misleading representation, both real and virtual, must be stopped. Television is not only for the benefit of

industry, but also for the audience and the public. That is why, critical audience is also very important. They have the right to determine and choose which programs are qualified which has low risk and safe for them and the next generation

In *Film as Religion: Myth, Moral and Ritual* (2003), John Leyden tries to define film as religion. He said that the film is called modern 'myth' and refers to a set of stories that represent Clifford Geertz's two functions "model of" and "model for" of a reality¹. In this case, the viewer can understand that the director is trying to accommodate and adjust what is displayed with this point of view. The 'model of' describes the way we think about the real world, while the 'model for' describes how we want to be.² As a modern myth, the representation of women with violence provides symbols that correspond to the functions of Geertz called 'Model of 'and' Model for' reality. These sinetrons do provide a set of stories that (most likely) represent what is happening in society. In one episode of *Khadijah and khalifah* for example, the conflict was about Khadijah as a migrant worker in Arabia, which seemed to reflect what might have happened in real life. This idea was certainly inspired by many Indonesian migrant workers (women) who had to work as housemaids in Arabia. It is described a tension between Khadijah and her master and people around her. However, the way the antagonists trap, being jealous, hateful and use a lot of harsh words and curses Khadijah (as the protagonist) seems to be irrational and does not reflect what Geertz called 'models of' and (even) 'models for' reality. Similar cases can also be seen in *Cinta Fitri*. A continuous revenge and 'never ending conflict' seems to make the story irrational and boring.

Furthermore, a media portrayal of women, good and bad, is like two opposing poles. Every difference is so dramatized that whatever they do has consequences for the two poles. A good woman is beautiful, obedient to her husband / man, merciful, focus on the home and family or care for others. In films or soap operas they are usually identified as victims, angels, martyrs, and faithful wives³. In contrast, bad or bad women are depicted as having opposite characters, although physically, modern industry prefers to present beautiful women to both images of women. This condition also shows a very black and white life.

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3.1 Representation of Binary Opposition

The interest of film industry in describing the black and white world is certainly not new. In children's literature or fairy tales such as *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, to *Bawang Putih and Bawang Merah* in Indonesia, the reader get used to facing witches or evil stepmothers, who deal with beautiful and passive women who are victims, but then get their victory. This type of binary opposition has become the most familiar image in Indonesian soap operas. Bad women will always be bad people from the first episode to the end. In the *Cinta Fitri* soap opera for example, the main focus of this long series is only about the 'battle' between evil (Mischa) and good (Fitri). This tendency then gives a lot of rooms for the director to explore the characteristics of each character. In order to attract the audience's interest, feel emotions, and 'keep in touch' with the character or story presented, the antagonist character is sometimes described as the most evil character on earth, and even only death can stop her

¹ Leyden, John. *Film as religion: Myths, Morals, Rituals*. NYU Press. New York.2003

² Leyden said that in accordance with religious principles, film is also associated with various symbols, both visual and narrative, which are a benchmark or meet certain standards of values in society. Based on Geertz's point, both of these models are a form of certainty or hope and motivation to do the right thing in the eyes of society. [Ibid]

³Julia T. Wood. *Gendered Media: The Influence of Media on Views of Gender*. Journal of the Department of Communication, University of North.Carolina at Chapel Hill

Fairy tales like *Cinderella*, *Sleeping beauty* or *Bawang Putih dan Bawang Merah* always present a binary opposition, innocent female protagonists who are confronted with female antagonists . This phenomenon is then transformed into a spectacle in various soap operas adapted to the presents situation . Here, behind the fairy tales, it is interesting to find how women usually depicted, on an imaginative level of it. In this case, even though fairy tales are considered so trivial and simple, the first 'lesson' received by every child in the world is a tale that continues to be passed on from generation to generation ⁴ In the drama genre, this industry tries to present and entertain the audience through various dramatic events. This world is believed to be a place where good defeats evil. And if a film or soap opera deviates from this convention, many parties or viewers will be irritated or angry. ⁵ In addition, Leyden saw that films were understood and interpreted in the context of actual viewers.

Related to this, the film quality is sometimes not really important for sinetron producers. Most people go to the movies or watch television just to 'run away' from their daily lives. That is why, the world presented here is neater, more orderly, and have a satisfying ending (usually) where evil is punished and virtue is valued, families meet again and couples who love life forever. Even though the narrative presents a complicated and tense conflict, it will be resolved by time. No matter how bad the situation or conditions faced by the main character, at some point viewers believe that the conflict will end and everything will be fine. In this case, they always say that there are always moral values and virtues obtained from each episode, no matter how bad the initial conflict happened to the protagonist, virtue will always win. This is another reason why forms of violence and hatred remain on the screen.

The question that may arise is why should women become antagonistic characters?To answer this question, first of all, we need to realize that films or sinetron are indeed products of capitalist society. In this system, profit orientation is the main concern of producers or people involved in this industry. However, sometimes producers must consider risks in presenting new ideas to the public, including the character selection. By presenting female figures as both protagonists and antagonists, it will be relatively 'safe' for the industry rather than confronting men and women in a frame. Likewise with the audience (mostly women), seeing the contradictions of the two female figures on the screen, are actually related to childhood experiences such as classic fairy tales that are familiar with their daily lives, so it will be considered as a 'normal' one.

3.2 Women's Identity and Power

As explained above, the entertainment industry has massively and arbitrarily displayed the images of women to the public. The broad reach of the media enables it to spread the same image about women to many places and ultimately lead to a common view and community consensus on women's identity. The identity of women and violence in the performing arts and sinetron that we are witnessing today, have not only lasted for a decade or two, but have lasted for hundreds of years, across cultures and generations. Although this construction may be far from the real reality, the identities of women and men in the content presented by media are described differently. Men are depicted as the holders of control over women, as determinants of women's behavior, as aggressive and dominant personalities,

⁴ [https://www.academia.edu/4027547/Eksistensi Tokoh Perempuan Dalam Dongeng Sneewittchen Karya Grimm Bersaudara](https://www.academia.edu/4027547/Eksistensi_Tokoh_Perempuan_Dalam_Dongeng_Sneewittchen_Karya_Grimm_Bersaudara)

⁵ Leyden, John. *Film as religion : Myths, Moral, Rituals*. NYU Press. New York.2003

while women are described as persons who are under control, submissive, easily dominated, and objects of male desire outlet⁶

Referred to the simulation of Jean Baudrillard, in this entertainment industry the sign has become very separated from the object it represents, and the media is pushing this process to the point where nothing is real. At present, we are in the era of simulation, where signs no longer represent but create our reality. Simulations determine who we are and what we do, a sign of building our experience. The media dominates our lives with information that shapes what we feel as genuine experiences, but is omitted from something's natural purpose. Commodity culture is one aspect of the simulation in which we live. A simulated environment tells us what we want. Mostly, a person's values and behavior are then very limited by the reality simulated in the media⁷.

4. WHY WOMEN AND VIOLENCE?

A study conducted by Markplus Hermawan Kertajaya, in 2009 reported that 1,301 respondents (women) from 8 cities, (Jakarta, Surabaya, Bandung, Semarang, Medan, Makassar, Denpasar, and Palembang) said that their favorite programs on television were soap opera. This shows that soap operas offer something that is interesting for the audience. Among the reasons is the story line. Most serial films or soap operas tend to bind the audience through the story. Some stories reflect the experiences of many people. Soap operas offer dreams which, in Karl Marx's terms, are 'false consciousness, in which classes that dominate economics also dominate fields such as politics, religion, and so on. Referring to Marx, ideology in film and industry is one of the capitalist tools to make people 'forget' or 'escape' from their daily lives.

By presenting or creating this kind of 'world', people will forget the real problem. Richard Allen describes the experience of seeing film as a "projective illusion" experience where we enter our unconscious nature, but influences us to get a deep impression of a reality. Like a conscious fantasy in which we are willing to place ourselves, film offers a "fully realized world" that we can receive through ridiculous tales. Here, Allen is trying to say that the audience can be drawn into a film so he forgets that it isn't real. In this case the audience is never really deceived, but more like daydreaming about something that didn't really happen, but to some extent has implications for his consciousness⁸.

Moreover, complicated conflicts between existing figures are another way to create audience curiosity. If one sinetron gets a high response shown by the viewer share (rating), it usually inspires the other movie makers to produce the similar one. Even though the story seems irrational and repetitive, they need to bind the loyal audience. That is why, in a few decades, serial sinetron only aired once a week (one hour), currently, the stripping sinetron have been served almost every day.

Besides, the film or soap opera industry must have a sale value. One important point here is the actor or actress who plays in the production. Actors or actress qualifications in both the quality of acting and appearance have important roles in determining the film to be accepted by the public. Usually, for this purpose, sometimes all the characters should be beautiful and handsome in every situation.

⁶ <https://www.jurnalperempuan.org/discourse-feminist/objectification-women-by-media-standardization-identity-women-and-male-power-domination>

⁷ Errika Dwi Setya Watie. Women's Representation in Today's Mass Media THE MESSENGER, Volume II, Number 2, July 2010 Edition 3

⁸ Ibid, p 17

Furthermore, films or soap operas in many ways also reflect people's experiences. As Leyden points out, if the viewer witnesses the imagination or irrationality in the story shown, the strength of the film here is not in its ability to eliminate or change the form to the irrationality, but rather in its ability to provide 'temporary escape' space. However, the escape is not only a matter of illusion, but also a construction which has an 'aura of factuality' which in Geertz's terms is associated with religious rituals. In this case, according to Leyden, of course there is some confusion between the two, in the ideal world imagined by film or religion (according to Geertz) represented as a goal in the direction in which empirical reality must be achieved, but also taken as a description of how truth really is. The image that is displayed is not as something in our minds, but as a form of representation of reality because it describes things the way they should be.⁹ In the same way, films offer a nearly perfect world, which is not exactly the reality we experience, but we often believe that what is displayed is the 'model of' (not just a model for) of a reality, as we wish.

5. CONCLUSION

The representation of women in hate on television both verbally and non-verbally is sometimes considered unimportant to many people. This is because what is witnessed only happens on screen, not real, or virtual. However, because a film or soap opera is a set of symbols that reflect people's experiences, the impact of this phenomenon is actually very large, especially for children. In the form of soap operas, violations brought to home are seen as common, which might inspire children to do and think the same.

Presenting women and violence is actually part of business interests. Since one type of soap opera get high profits, high response, high rating and sponsorship, it continues to produce even though the story sometimes irrational and gender biased. Thus, because television is a public media, there must be a moral movement to screen this violation. The audiences have the right to have qualified and enlightening programs at home.

In addition, repetitive forms of representation will actually result to knowledge that reinforces previous stereotypes especially about women. So, it is not surprising that violence by women on the screen sometimes considered 'normal' by the audience or even society. In some ways, for market and profit reasons this portrayal is reproduced in the same frame and discourse, even though it is contrary to existing reality.

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⁹ Ibid, p 19

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