

UNVEILING JAVANESE WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN INDONESIAN CINEMA: SEMIOTIC INSIGHTS FROM BUDI PEKERTI

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Abstract: This study investigates the representation of Javanese women in Indonesian cinema through a semiotic analysis of Bu Prani, one of the central characters in *Budi Pekerti*. By examining mise-en-scène elements, the research seeks to reveal how the film constructs the image of modern Javanese women and how their identities are negotiated within cultural and social contexts. Particular attention is given to the dual roles women embody, as they are simultaneously situated within the private domestic sphere and the public professional domain. The analysis is guided by Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, which unpacks meaning on three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. At the denotative level, the study identifies how the film presents visual and narrative elements; at the connotative level, it interprets the cultural codes and ideological messages underlying these depictions; and at the mythic level, it situates the representations within broader discourses of tradition, gender, and modernity. This methodological approach provides a comprehensive understanding of how cultural and gender identities are mediated through cinematic texts. Findings reveal that traditional Javanese values continue to influence expectations of women, particularly regarding their appearance, demeanor, and moral conduct. Yet, the narrative also highlights tensions brought by modernity and the digital era, in which women face increasing demands for independence, professional achievement, and active social participation. These overlapping pressures demonstrate how Javanese women must continuously navigate between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to contemporary realities. The study concludes that modern Javanese women occupy a space of negotiation where tradition and modernity intersect. By analyzing Bu Prani as a case study, this research underscores the nuanced ways gender and culture are represented in Indonesian film and offers broader insights into the politics of representation in Southeast Asian media.

Keywords: representation, semiotics, feminism, Javanese women, budi pekerti

Introduction

In the modern era, film has become a cultural medium that is widely accepted by the general public. As a cultural medium, film is considered significantly effective in influencing and reflecting social values in society, including understanding of gender identity and roles. In Indonesia, the national film industry has undergone significant changes in disseminating cultural views and values within society. Besides being used as a medium for spreading cultural values, film also reflects the culture of its viewers. This is supported by Samovar et al. (2010), who state that culture is an accumulation of knowledge, values, and beliefs held

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by a particular group and maintained to be passed down to their generations. Film has become an effective dissemination medium because modern society is more interested in watching than reading. Filmmakers and cultural figures see film as an alternative pathway to spread their values and views on current world problems. Film can be an effective medium in influencing society's perspective in understanding and responding to social phenomena and problems in their surroundings.

Although Indonesia has various types of cultural issues that can be raised, researchers feel that filmmakers still struggle to package them into creative works. Not infrequently, there are films containing inappropriate content that harm certain parties just to fulfill the filmmakers' desires. This can happen because filmmakers or cultural figures often struggle to present these issues in a cultural medium like film. Kori'ah et al. (2024) argue that the film industry has undergone a change in roles. This shift in roles has occurred particularly in the social and political landscape since the 1950s. Regarding women's roles often depicted in films, audiences frequently notice content that tends to demean women. Quoted from Harvard Political Review (2015), feminism is no longer considered just a Western movement but represents a global movement. This concept, which can be interpreted as modern feminism, which understood as the recognition that discrimination in the modern era is not only about gender but also intersects with several other aspects. These views have led women to have different perspectives on men's roles in their lives.

Previous studies, such as Windiyarti (2017), highlight how cultural media like films and novels often position women as objects of male gaze, reinforcing gendered power relations that hinder women's social advancement. Similarly, Herlambang et al. (2023) emphasize the persistent struggles of Javanese women, who must negotiate economic pressures while managing domestic responsibilities, reflecting the burden of role duality. However, most existing research on Indonesian cinema has primarily examined broad feminist themes without delving into the nuanced cultural dimensions of gender representation. In particular, contemporary films like *Budi Pekerti* (2023), which portray Javanese women through layered perspectives and subtle negotiations between tradition and modernity, remain underexplored within the semiotic tradition. This gap provides an opportunity to investigate how gender and culture intersect in recent Indonesian films, offering a more contextualized understanding of women's representation.

The objective of this research is to analyze the film *Budi Pekerti* (international title *Andragogy*), directed by Wregas Bhanuteja and released in 2023, as a cultural text that reflects society's perception of Javanese women. The film centers on the character Bu Prani, a school guidance counselor whose role is closely tied to the enforcement of etiquette and manners, yet who becomes the subject of public scrutiny that also extends its consequences to her family. This study seeks to examine how Bu Prani's character embodies the complexities of gender identity in contemporary Javanese society, particularly through the lens of semiotic analysis. By focusing on symbols, visual metaphors, and narrative strategies employed in the film, the research aims to uncover how the filmmaker represents the tensions between traditional expectations and modern realities faced by Javanese women.

Ultimately, this analysis intends to provide a deeper understanding of how Indonesian cinema constructs and negotiates women's roles within cultural, social, and familial contexts using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. This research is expected to provide insights into the character and culture embraced by Javanese women. The general public can gain a deeper understanding of the culture that will be discussed in this

research. This study can contribute to the development of film in Indonesia, particularly in representing gender.

Methodology

In conducting this research, the researcher uses the semiotic analysis method developed by Roland Barthes to analyze the representation of Javanese women in the *Budi Pekerti* film. The research object is the character of Bu Prani who represents Javanese women in the “Budi Pekerti” film. This method was chosen because it is believed to help researchers uncover hidden meanings within the research object. The researcher uses Roland Barthes' semiotic tradition because his theory not only identifies signs visually and narratively but can also help researchers explore further the meanings produced from circulating socio-cultural aspects, particularly in Javanese culture. Based on the qualitative approach used, the analytical process in this research focuses on scenes featuring the character of Bu Prani in the “Budi Pekerti” film. The researcher focuses on scenes that represent the identity and roles of Javanese women in the modern era, both in domestic and public contexts. Scene selection was conducted by considering elements contained in the *mise-en-scène* as explained by Lewis (2014). These elements include setting, costume, makeup, player movement, and lighting that form the visual representation of Bu Prani's character.

In the context of data collection, the researchers use documentation methods and comprehensive observation of the *Budi Pekerti* film focused on the character of Bu Prani. Additionally, the researcher uses shooting scripts as a data collection tool to record specific visual elements, dialogues, and other cinematic features related to the research focus. In its analysis process, this research is conducted in three stages based on Barthes' semiotic theory. The first stage is denotative analysis, in which the researcher identifies and describes the visual and narrative signs present in the character of Bu Prani in the “Budi Pekerti” film. The second stage is connotative analysis, which encourages the researcher to interpret the meanings produced or expressed. Then, the third stage of Barthes' semiotic theory is myth analysis. At this stage, the researcher examines how these meanings connect to broader values and ideologies in Javanese society, particularly in views toward Javanese women.

Findings And Discussion

In this section, the researcher analyzes the representation of Javanese women through the character of Bu Prani in the film “Budi Pekerti.” The analysis involves examining scenes from the film that highlight Bu Prani and interpreting them based on the levels of meaning proposed in Barthes' semiotic method: denotation, connotation, and myth. To maintain the focus of this study, the researcher categorizes the representation of Javanese women in the film into two aspects: the construction of the image of Javanese women in public spaces and the duality of roles of modern Javanese women. This categorization is based on the theories discussed in the previous section.

A. Construction of the Image of Javanese Women in Public Space

In relation to the analysis of the representation of Javanese women in the *Budi Pekerti* film through the character of Bu Prani, the researcher identified several layers of meaning that highlight the role of Javanese women in public spaces. This is prominently evident in the costumes and dialogues, particularly as they relate to elements of *mise-en-scène*.

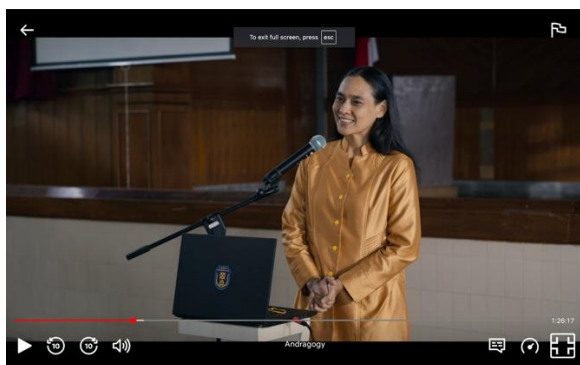


Figure 1: Mrs. Prani is wearing formal clothes

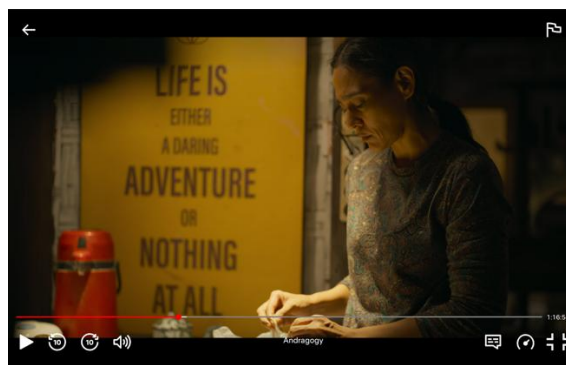


Figure 2: Mrs. Prani is wearing casual home attire

Based on the above image, Bu Prani's role as a guidance and counseling teacher can be seen from her attire. This is marked by the use of formal attire consisting of a shirt paired with a long skirt. Additionally, her hair is neatly tied back. The choice of costume in the context of denotation is interpreted as that of an educator and represents traditional values. Besides attire, the gestures performed by Bu Prani's character indicate characteristics of Javanese women, such as polite demeanor, gentle voice, and controlled body movements. Bu Prani's professional role as a counselor not only reflects her intellectual capability but also underscores her contribution to the family's economic stability. This situates her within the figure of the modern Javanese woman who, unlike her rural predecessors tied mainly to informal trading, navigates a professional career while still managing domestic responsibilities.

Meanwhile, in the context of connotation, the choice of attire and gestures performed by Bu Prani's character conveys the meaning of social expectations placed on Javanese women by society. Javanese women are expected to balance traditional identity applied in society alongside professional demands in their careers. The formal attire worn by Bu Prani's character symbolizes this balance. Furthermore, the neatly tied hair and polite demeanor represent the Javanese cultural concept of 3M (masak, macak, manak), particularly *macak*. *Macak* in the context of 3M can be interpreted as women's obligation to be skilled in self-care, such as grooming or dressing up (Pirus & Nurahmawati, 2020). Javanese women are expected to always maintain a good appearance in society, as Bu Prani's character tries to show in the film, but in a more modern context as part of her identity as a teacher. Moreover, controlled body language reflects the internalization of Javanese values, namely *unggah-ungguh* or etiquette in Indonesian (Kumparan, 2024).



Figure 3: Incident of Mrs. Prani reprimanding another customer

In the context of myth, the representation of Javanese women portrayed by Bu Prani in the “Budi Pekerti” film can be observed in the incident involving her character. The incident when Bu Prani goes viral for challenging the traditional myth of Javanese women, who are expected to always maintain politeness and decorum in speech and behavior. Specifically, Bu Prani is depicted expressing her emotions toward a customer at the market who cuts in line, raising her voice and reprimanding the individual. In Javanese culture, women are traditionally expected to exhibit composure and embody the characteristic of *nrimo*, a trait that implies accepting and enduring circumstances without complaint, even when such situations are disadvantageous to them.

Although Bu Prani’s act of reprimanding the market customer is portrayed as controversial and leads to social backlash, it can also be interpreted as a moment of empowerment. By voicing her dissatisfaction publicly, Bu Prani challenges the expectation that Javanese women must remain silent and passive. In this sense, the film not only depicts her as a victim of digital shaming but also as a woman who dares to assert her agency in the public sphere.

Furthermore, *Budi Pekerti* can be regarded as a trendsetter in the representation of Javanese women in Indonesian cinema. Few films before it have dared to depict an urban middle-class Javanese woman who experiences a “fall” in the public sphere as a consequence of digital culture and social media virality. Through the character of Bu Prani, the film demonstrates how the image of Javanese women, long associated with the myths of politeness, *unggah-ungguh* (etiquette), and *nrimo* (acceptance) is challenged in a modern context. The urban setting of Yogyakarta as an educational city provides a distinctive nuance, positioning Bu Prani not as a rural traditional woman but as a member of an urban society exposed to harsher public scrutiny. In this way, the film does more than represent Javanese women as individuals; it also shifts Indonesian cinematic discourse on Javanese women toward more contemporary and urban-centered issues.

The depiction of Bu Prani in the *Budi Pekerti* film illustrates that the image of Javanese women in public spaces has undergone significant changes in the digital era. While traditional aspects, such as attire and demeanor, are still upheld as symbols of cultural identity, new challenges emerge with the

increased public scrutiny facilitated by social media. The film effectively portrays the complexities faced by contemporary Javanese women, who must balance the upholding of traditional values with meeting modern societal expectations, all while maintaining their personal and professional dignity.

B. Duality of the Role of Modern Javanese Women

As previously mentioned regarding the dual roles undertaken by Javanese women in the modern era, this section seeks to explore the complexities of these dual roles as exemplified by the character of Bu Prani. By employing Barthes' semiotic analysis, the researcher identifies the dual roles that the filmmaker seeks to convey through the character of Bu Prani in the *Budi Pekerti* film.

In the context of denotation, Bu Prani is portrayed as having dual roles. These roles include being a school counselor (guru BK) as her professional career and a housewife responsible for domestic tasks. In her professional sphere, Bu Prani is depicted as a woman performing administrative duties and providing guidance to her students. Meanwhile, in the domestic sphere, she takes on the role of a housewife, which, in Javanese culture and more broadly, is traditionally characterized as a woman responsible for household chores, such as cooking and taking care of her family. The transition between these dual roles is marked by a change in her attire, shifting from formal clothing to casual homewear.

In the context of connotation, the representation of Javanese women in the *Budi Pekerti* is portrayed through the character of Bu Prani, who embodies the image of a modern Javanese woman. Bu Prani's role as a school counselor signifies a shift in the role of Javanese women, no longer confined to the domestic sphere as housewives but extending into the professional realm of careers. Nevertheless, the domestic role of Javanese women often remains attached to their identity. This is evident in the film, where Bu Prani is shown actively participating in household chores. Her role is not only that of a mother to her children but also as a wife who is expected to serve her husband, reflecting the enduring cultural values of Javanese society. Her assertive demeanor in the school environment contrasts with her more traditional and domestic persona at home, highlighting the adaptability of Javanese women in navigating different social roles.

The dual roles of contemporary Javanese women are further explored in the context of myth. The dual burden carried by Bu Prani in *Budi Pekerti* represents a transformation of the traditional concept of *konco wingking*, which is no longer restricted to the confines of the household. The term *konco wingking*, or "companion in the back," in Javanese culture traditionally refers to women's roles in the kitchen, bedroom, and well (the "three pillars" of traditional domestic life) (Pirus & Nurahmawati, 2020). This evolving understanding of *konco wingking* illustrates how Bu Prani embodies a dual burden in the film, juggling her roles in both the domestic and professional spheres. Bu Prani's role as a school counselor extends beyond administrative duties; it places her in a leadership position, entrusted with guiding the moral and ethical development of students. Her position reflects the growing recognition of women as figures of authority in the public sphere, disrupting older cultural myths that restricted women's influence to the domestic realm.

This situation highlights the roles of women as perceived in society, particularly within Javanese culture. Moreover, it showcases the strength of women in navigating the pressures of modern life. The struggle to balance these dual roles becomes evident when the incident involving Bu Prani at the market becomes widely discussed. The issue not only impacts her professional life as a teacher but also affects her domestic life. This scene demonstrates how the public and private spheres are interconnected in the lives of contemporary Javanese women. The dual challenges faced by Bu Prani are further complicated

as she must uphold her professional reputation as a teacher while maintaining harmony within her family under societal expectations.

Moreover, the film also illustrates how the dual burden of Javanese women is expressed in a particularly urban middle-class context. Unlike the common portrayal of rural women, who are often confined to domestic life, Bu Prani embodies the reality of urban women who must manage professional responsibilities while also maintaining family harmony, all under the added pressure of public expectations amplified by social media. This positions *Budi Pekerti* as one of the films that mark a narrative shift in Indonesian cinema, moving from the rural-traditional image of Javanese women toward an urban-modern depiction with new complexities. Such a transformation shows that the identity of Javanese women can no longer be reduced to the traditional concept of *konco wingking* (“companion in the back”), but has evolved into a more fluid and adaptive identity that responds to contemporary social demands.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis discussed in the previous section, this study found that the film *Budi Pekerti* captures the dynamics of socio-cultural changes faced by modern Javanese women. This suggests that modernity does not entirely erase traditional values but rather creates new layers of complexity in the construction of their identity. However, as this study focuses on a single character in one film, its scope is limited in providing a broader perspective on how Javanese women are portrayed in modern Indonesian cinema. Future research is recommended to expand this focus by incorporating audience perspectives on understanding these representations and examining the social impacts of changes in how Javanese women are depicted in mass media.

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