

Representation of the Exploitation of Women in Religious Institutions in the Film “Maharaj”

Sindi Artika¹ , Fakhrur Rozi² 

¹Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

²Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

The exploitation of women within religious institutions is driven by patriarchy and the manipulation of religion, resulting in sexual violence, discrimination, and systemic gender injustice. This study discusses the film Maharaj as a medium that reveals the exploitation of women and critiques patriarchal religious institutions. This research uses a qualitative descriptive method with semiotic analysis. Data collection was carried out through observation and documentation. Triangulation of techniques and time was used to ensure data validity. Research findings show that the film Maharaj reveals the exploitation of women in religious institutions through visual symbolism, body gestures, and rituals such as Charan Seva, which reflect patriarchal and spiritual domination legitimized by culture. The representation of submissive and silent women becomes a marker of systemic oppression. A cultural feminist approach is used to highlight the courage of women to resist this structure. The spiral of silence theory explains the victims' silence as a result of social and religious stigma. Karsandas Mulji appears as a symbol of resistance, opening space for discourse through media. This film acts as a form of social criticism that calls for critical awareness, justice, and gender equality. Conclusion: The film highlights the exploitation of women in religion and presents resistance as a form of social critique for gender equality.

Keywords:

Exploitation of Women, Film, Maharaj, Patriarchy, Gender

Copyright © 2025 Sindi Artika; Fakhrur Rozi

Citation: Artika, S., & Rozi, F. (2025). Representation of the exploitation of women in religious institutions in the film *Maharaj*. *Syiar: Jurnal Komunikasi dan Penyiaran Islam*, 5(1), 47–62. <https://doi.org/10.54150/syiar.v5i1.638>

Correspondence:

Sindi Artika,
sindi0603211019@uinsu.ac.id

Received: January 9, 2025

Accepted: May 26, 2025

Published: June 24, 2025

A. INTRODUCTION

The exploitation of women occurs in both social life and religious institutions as a result of patriarchal culture and gender constructions legitimized by religion and the state (Pebriaisyah et al., 2022; Iswara & Moerdisuroso, 2024). Exploitation of women, including sexual harassment, injustice, and discrimination within religious and educational institutions, reflects the strength of patriarchy and the abuse of power by specific individuals (Maulida,



2021; Radja & Sunjaya, 2024). This exploitation manifests in various forms, such as sexual exploitation through trafficking for prostitution, forced marriage, and child pornography (Turner, 2016; van Niekerk, 2018). Economic exploitation includes unpaid domestic labor and the commodification of human breast milk for nutritional and biomedical purposes (Cheng, 2022; Steele & Hernandez-Salazar, 2020).

The main factors behind such exploitation are structural gender inequality and intersectional vulnerability, especially among migrant women who face weak regulations and restricted rights in various employment sectors (Cameron et al., 2023; Giammarinaro, 2022). The impacts of exploitation include both psychological and physical harm due to gender-based violence, as well as significant economic consequences, including healthcare and legal costs (Dedieu et al., 2021; Guaita-Fernández et al., 2024). Sexual abuse often occurs within religious institutions such as Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). For example, one case involved sexual violence against 26 students at a boarding school in Ogan Ilir Regency, South Sumatra, resulting in severe physical and psychological trauma. Another case involved the head of a boarding school in Pinrang Regency, who was reported to have sexually assaulted students by kissing various parts of their bodies.

In Islam, women hold equal status with men regarding values, personal obligations, and civil, political, and spiritual rights, with mutually protective roles (Kanzunnudin, 2022). However, exploitation within religious institutions, such as sexual abuse by religious leaders, has serious psychological consequences for victims and is exacerbated by hierarchical structures and clericalism (Ramos & de Almeida, 2024; Hermann, Höffner & Keupp, 2019; McGraw, Lichter & Booth, 2019). Religious fear, spiritual pressure, and unhealthy hierarchical relationships often hinder the reporting of violence, damage individual dignity, and fuel digital movements demanding accountability (Spraitz & Bowen, 2021; Sory, 2023; Kasstan, 2022). The exploitative impact of religious institutions extends into social, economic, legal, and ethical domains, creating moral dilemmas and the potential misuse of religious protection (Caple & Roddy, 2023; Shorten, 2017).

The Qur'an affirms the equality of men and women in terms of rights and responsibilities, emphasizing humane treatment and honoring individuals based on piety rather than race, gender, or origin (QS. An-Nisa: 4, 19; Al-Hujurat: 13). In popular culture, the exploitation of women is often portrayed in films and music, either as a form of social critique or as a reflection of reality. For instance, the film *Sang Penari* (2011), adapted from Ahmad Tohari's novel *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*, highlights sexual exploitation and gender-based violence in 1960s rural Indonesia. Meanwhile, *Enola Holmes 2*, directed by Harry Bradbeer, portrays the struggle for women workers' equality in the 1800s through a strong and independent female character (Amanda et al., 2024).

The film *Maharaj*, produced in 2024, directed by Siddhart P. Malhotra, and produced by YRF Entertainment, portrays the exploitation of women by a religious figure who abuses his power. This film is chosen as a representation of exploitation within religious institutions, reflecting the social reality in India, where women's rights are suppressed through patriarchal dominance. *Maharaj* shows how women are vulnerable to systemic exploitation in India's patriarchal culture, where religion is manipulated to legitimize male authority, silence women, and reinforce the dominance of religious leaders as symbols of social power. The film depicts how culture can become a system of oppression if not critically examined, encouraging society

to dismantle power structures that oppress women through religion. Inspired by an actual case in India, the film promotes religious institutional reform free from exploitation (Hendra, 2019).

This study aims to reveal the representation of women’s exploitation in the film *Maharaj* through semiotic analysis and to understand how the media communicates social critique toward gender-based power. The impact of this research is to raise public awareness about gender inequality within religious institutions and the importance of creating space for women to speak out against oppression. The findings show that the film strongly represents patriarchal and spiritual domination while also portraying symbols of female resistance, making it a medium for moral communication and a call for social reflection.

B. RESEARCH METHODS

The object of this research is the film *Maharaj*, analyzed using a qualitative descriptive method. This method was chosen because it emphasizes deep textual interpretation over the quantification of data categories (Sholichah et al., 2023). The research examines various elements in the film related to theme, dialogue, and visuals. Data collection was conducted through documentation by capturing screenshots of key scenes in the film. In addition, observation was carried out by closely analyzing each event within scenes to gain a comprehensive contextual understanding. The data analysis process followed these stages:

Stage of Analysis	Description
Data Selection	Observing film scenes and capturing screenshots of key moments
Data Classification	Categorizing the screenshots based on the research topic
Data Analysis	Analyzing the scenes using Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiotic theory
Data Interpretation	Explaining the meaning of the screenshots about the research topic
Conclusion	Interpreting meaning through the concepts of the <i>signifier</i> and the <i>signified</i> based on the screenshots

To ensure data validity, this research applied triangulation of techniques by combining two data sources: observation and documentation. This combination aimed to complement and reinforce the research findings. Additionally, time triangulation was employed by repeatedly verifying observation and documentation data at different times and under varying conditions. This was done to ensure the data collected was consistent, valid, and trustworthy.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Semiotic Analysis of Ferdinand de Saussure in the Film *Maharaj*

Semiotics studies systems of signs, symbols, and codes within society to understand meaning and communication in specific cultural contexts (Wati et al., 2023; Kasim, 2022; Kanzunnudin, 2022). Ferdinand de Saussure, a linguist and pioneer of structuralism, developed a method of semiotic analysis through the concept of the sign, which is divided into the signifier and the signified (Radja & Sunjaya, 2024; Iswara & Moerdisuroso, 2024). A sign consists of a signifier and a signified that are interrelated, where the signifier refers to the physical form, and the signified refers to the meaning, which cannot be separated (Hamzah, 2019). In semiotics, images as visual signifiers represent visible forms, while the meaning they convey is called the signified or the intent behind the symbol (Rajagukguk &



Pattipelohy, 2018). Thus, in the analysis of the film *Maharaj*, the author uses images from several scenes that present elements of the exploitation of women, including a scene of a woman touching the feet of the Maharaj, as shown in the following image:



Figure 1. A Woman Touches the Feet of the Maharaj
(Source: *Maharaj* Film, May 1, 2025, YRF Entertainment).

Signifier: A girl kneels and touches a man's feet seated on a luxurious throne, with hands clasped and warm lighting that creates a sacred atmosphere within this traditional ritual of devotion. **Signified:** The image depicts an act of submission by a woman to a religious leader, with her bowed posture indicating an unequal power relationship. The man seated on a higher throne symbolizes spiritual authority as the Maharaj, a divine representative. The woman's gesture of touching him reflects a claim over her body within the *Chava Seva* ritual, which is culturally and religiously accepted, though it constitutes a form of abuse. **Meaning:** According to Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic analysis, the meaning in this image is formed by the relationship between the visual signifier (gesture, body posture, clothing) and the socio-cultural signified (submission, domination, exploitation). This image semiotically demonstrates that women are made into objects of devotion within a patriarchal structure that is normalized through religious legitimacy. This is the most significant critique presented in the film *Maharaj*.

Next is a scene where the *Maharaj* forces a woman to drink water as part of the *Chava Seva* ritual, as depicted in the following image:



Figure 2. The Initial Stage of the *Chava Seva* Ritual
(Source: *Maharaj* Film, May 1, 2025, YRF Entertainment).

Signifier: The touch on the chin, the woman's anxious expression, and her passive body posture indicate male dominance in a private, ritualistic setting marked by soft curtains and dim lighting. **Signified:** The act of the *Maharaj* holding the woman's chin signifies physical and psychological domination. The woman appears forced, submissive, and powerless. The luxurious, intimate room reflects spiritual authority that disguises exploitation as devotion. The woman is portrayed as an object of cultural ritual, not as an

individual with autonomy over her body. **Meaning:** This image represents how religious institutions can symbolically control and exploit women's bodies. It reinforces the message of *Maharaj* that spiritual power can masquerade as truth, while in reality, it contains elements of gender oppression.

Next is a scene where a man approaches his fiancée, as shown in the following image:



Figure 3. Karsandas Mulji Visits His Fiancée
(Source: *Maharaj* Film, May 1, 2025, YRF Entertainment).

Signifier: This image shows the beginning of resistance against oppression in the name of religion. Karsandas Mulji's serious expression, religiously symbolic lighting, and the wound on his temple emphasize symbols of courage and resolute conviction. **Signified:** The dialogue is not merely a critique of Kishori, but also a challenge to the belief system that cloaks violence and exploitation. Karsandas represents bravery and rationality in a situation where most choose silence. The visuals and dialogue show how faith can legitimize immoral actions. **Meaning:** The relationship between the visual sign of the angry, bloodied male character and the verbal critique of faith forms an ideological meaning: religion can become a tool of power if not tempered by reason and conscience. Using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic approach, this sign reflects the film *Maharaj*'s critique of patriarchy and dogma that silences victims.



Figure 4. Legitimizing Power Through Cultural Symbols
(Source: *Maharaj* Film, May 1, 2025, YRF Entertainment).

Signifier: The dialogue "this is not just service, it is tradition" shows how language is used to legitimize cultural symbols. The visuals of *Maharaj* wearing a *tilaka*, gold jewelry, a convincing expression, and standing in a luxurious room reinforce this meaning. **Signified:** This statement reveals how power is veiled in the guise of culture or ancestral beliefs. *Maharaj* disguises acts of exploitation as a mandatory ritual. The word "tradition" becomes a manipulative tool, adapted for the perpetrator's benefit. **Meaning:** This image illustrates how systems of power create false signs that appear sacred but are, in fact, instruments of domination. Tradition is manipulated to conceal structural violence, showing that meaning is not fixed and can be reversed through discourse and symbols..



Figure 5. Touching a Girl's Hand
(Source: *Maharaj* Film, May 1, 2025, YRF Entertainment).

Signifier: A man dressed in luxurious clothing and adorned with gold jewelry holds the hand of a visibly weak and anxious girl. The on-screen text reads: “*Excuse me, JJ. She is not feeling well.*” **Signified:** The man, a religious or sect leader, symbolizes social status and authority. The girl's unease stems not just from physical illness but from emotional pressure or trauma, indicating suppressed power dynamics, oppression masked in gentleness. **Meaning:** This scene strengthens the film's narrative that spiritual oppression and abuse can occur subtly, wrapped in ritual, reverence, and symbols of religious authority. It highlights how language and gestures are used not only to communicate meaning, but also to control.



Figure 6. Followers *Demonstrating* Power Relations
(Source: *Maharaj* Film, May 1, 2025, YRF Entertainment)

Signifier: A group of men bow down, placing their hands and heads on the ground to serve as a walkway for *the Maharaj*, accompanied by a red carpet and scattered white roses, enhancing the sacred atmosphere. **Signified:** This scene represents an extreme form of reverence, physical and symbolic submission to a sacred figure. The feet symbolize domination, while kissing them indicates an internalized acceptance of spiritual authority. **Meaning:** The relationship between the signifier and the signified reflects how religious ideology shapes hierarchical social structures. In this semiotic system, *Maharaj* is a spiritual leader and a symbol of superiority. Saussure emphasizes that meaning comes from the sign system; the film underscores how unquestioning acceptance of spiritual authority is normalized..



Figure 7. A Woman Who Committed Suicide
(Source: *Maharaj* film, May 1, 2025, YRF Entertainment)

Signifier: A lifeless woman hangs in a well, her face pale, body limp, watched by passive onlookers who show no reaction. **Signified:** The woman symbolizes a victim of a repressive patriarchal social structure. Her body is rendered valueless, and the apathy of the surrounding people reflects the internalization of cultural and religious authority that silences women. **Meaning:** This image represents a sign system of both symbolic and physical oppression. The hanging body and the crowd's indifference signify violence legitimized by tradition. According to Saussure, meaning is constructed through the relationship between the signifier and the signified. In this case, visual language builds a narrative of power that normalizes the oppression of women..



Figure 8. *Women Covering Their Faces*
(Source: *Maharaj* film, May 1, 2025, YRF Entertainment).

Signifier: A woman walks through a crowded temple, covering her face with a sari cloth. Surrounding her are luxurious buildings and people in traditional attire. **Signified:** The woman symbolizes a culture that demands facial covering as a form of obedience to patriarchal norms. This act represents symbolic oppression, where a family's honor is burdened upon the female body. A child's question in the scene introduces critical awareness toward this cultural construction. **Meaning:** This image signifies how patriarchal social systems are institutionalized through cultural and religious symbols. In Saussure's framework, the relationship between signifier and signified reveals how cultural visualizations shape and reproduce meanings that normalize the subordination of women.



Figure 9. *Ritual Worship of the Maharaj*
(Source: *Maharaj* film, May 1, 2025, YRF Entertainment)

Signifier: A Maharaj dressed in regal clothing hands a yellow cloth to a young girl dressed in white, amidst a crowd of people participating in a ritual, all wearing white garments. **Signified:** This scene symbolizes the compliance of a young widow within conservative Hindu tradition. The yellow cloth represents social isolation and obedience to the religious authority, which embodies control over women's bodies and roles. With her head bowed in silence, the girl illustrates a passive and powerless social position. **Meaning:** This image highlights how ritual symbols such as cloth, chanting, and offerings serve as instruments of patriarchal power. From Saussure's perspective, meaning arises from a

system of signs that legitimizes the oppression of women in the name of culture and religion. A child's innocent question opens a crack for deconstructing such meaning..



Figure 10. A Tense Situation
(Source: *Maharaj* film, May 1, 2025, YRF Entertainment).

Signifier: A man with an emotional and serious expression stands in the rain, accompanied by dramatic lighting. The line reads: “It is not against religion, but against those who exploit it.” **Signified:** The man represents a moral struggle against the misuse of religion. The rain and emotional tone reflect internal and social conflict. The statement clarifies that the critique is directed not at religion but those manipulating it for power. **Meaning:** This sign conveys a message of resistance against deviant religious authority, without rejecting spiritual values. In Saussure's framework, the meaning of the signified is shaped by social convention and cultural context. The critique of religious exploitation is historically and socially relevant in an ideologically tense society..



Figure 11. The Courtroom
(Source: *Maharaj* film, May 1, 2025, YRF Entertainment).

Signifier: A group of people sits solemnly in a courtroom. A spotlight highlights a woman who appears sad and distressed. The text reads: “That the Maharaj must sleep with a wife before her husband?” **Signified:** This scene exposes the helplessness of women in a religious system that normalizes sexual exploitation under a doctrinal guise. The line reveals a religious leader's use of women's bodies as “spiritual entitlement.” **Meaning:** The visual and textual signs critique religious power abuse within a patriarchal framework. According to Saussure, meaning arises from the relationship between the signifier and the signified, shaped by social convention. Here, the film visualizes how sacred institutions are manipulated to silence and objectify women, making them systemic victims of moral and spiritual authority..



Figure 12. A Woman Giving Testimony
(Source: *Maharaj* film, May 1, 2025, YRF Entertainment).

Signifier: A woman in a sari cries emotionally while testifying in court. The text reads: “Some women spoke out without fear.” **Signified:** Her tears represent emotional wounds and trauma, while speaking out publicly reflects resistance to fear and social repression. It marks a transformation from passive object to active subject seeking justice. **Meaning:** This image symbolizes resistance against patriarchal and spiritual power structures that silence women. In Saussurean semiotics, this sign conveys an ideological message of social change from silence to courage, from victimhood to agency. The visual and textual elements combine to represent women’s liberation from oppressive social constructs.



Figure 13. Outside the Courthouse
(Source: *Maharaj* film, May 1, 2025, YRF Entertainment)

Signifier: A colonial-style courthouse stands with thousands gathered in front. The crowd, dressed in white and red, creates a dense and monumental atmosphere. The text reads: “Due to the defamation case against Maharaj, services like prayer gatherings are now banned.” **Signified:** The courthouse symbolizes legal and judicial authority, while the crowd represents societal pressure surrounding the high-profile case. The ban on gatherings reflects state intervention in deviant religious practices. Once a dominant figure, Maharaj begins to lose his spiritual and social influence. **Meaning:** This sign marks a turning point in Maharaj’s authority and highlights legal implications affecting religious and social structures. From a Saussurean perspective, the relationship between signifier and signified reveals shifts in religious legitimacy. The colonial courthouse symbolizes secular authority as a liberating force against local oppression. The film critiques the exploitation of women in religious institutions, especially in the practice of *Charan Seva*, the ritual of serving the Maharaj’s feet in the name of faith. Through visual contrasts, the director emphasizes social and moral critique: Maharaj is in bright lighting, and the women victims are in dark spaces. The silence of women reflects the “spiral of silence,” underscoring the importance of creating spaces for voice. The courtroom scene reinforces that truth must be scrutinized, echoing a true 19th-century story.

2. Representation of Women’s Exploitation in the Film *Maharaj*

Representation theory explains how symbols, images, and signs shape identity, perception, and social relations in society and how mass media influences and sustains those meanings through selective narratives (Hamdani, 2017; Julianti et al., 2022). Stuart Hall argues that media constructs social reality through the processes of encoding and decoding, where messages are encoded by producers and interpreted by audiences. Meaning is generated through mental representations and constructing meaning via language

(Nurhidayah et al., 2023; Arliani & Adiyanto, 2023).

The exploitation of women in religious institutions includes restrictions on freedom, prohibitions on leadership, and the suppression of women's rights to participate socially, politically, and spiritually (Saniyah, 2022). The film *Maharaj*(2024), directed by Siddharth P. Malhotra and produced by YRF Entertainment, tells the story of Karsandas Mulji, a journalist and social reformer who exposes sexual abuse committed by the religious leader Jadunath Maharaj through the ritual of *Charan Seva*. The film strongly critiques women's exploitation and the abuse of authority within religious institutions (Apriliani, 2022). In society, the tradition of *Charan Seva* is viewed as a great honor for young girls and a blessing from elders (Bydi, 2022).

Maharaj constructs its critique through the interplay between visual signifiers and socio-cultural signifieds, revealing how patriarchal structures and religious legitimacy are utilized to perpetuate the exploitation of women. Through symbolic gestures, body positioning, and ritual attributes, the film challenges how religious institutions mask gender oppression as tradition and spiritual duty. Representations of submissive, coerced, and objectified women reflect domination legitimized by culture and religious dogma. At the same time, characters who resist patriarchal systems embody a struggle for liberation through reason and moral courage.

The film asserts that signs derive meaning contextually, shaped by social systems involving power, symbolic manipulation, and ideological control. Its critique of religious exploitation does not reject spiritual values, but rather highlights the need for critical consciousness in confronting abuse masked as ritual and tradition. The courtroom scenes symbolize moral and social resistance, emphasizing the courtroom as a space for public truth, justice, and women's liberation from repressive patriarchal systems.

The tradition of *Charan Seva* involves preparing sweet offerings in the home of a chosen girl as a form of celebration. However, due to a lack of sexual education, many girls are unaware that the ritual constitutes abuse. Viraaaj, played by Sharvari, realizes this injustice and flees. The ritual, devised by Jadunath Maharaj, becomes a condition for religious pilgrimage and is exploited for sexual gratification. In Scene 18:28, a servant of the Maharaj demands 11 rupees to witness what is labeled a sacred ritual, underscoring the commodification of spiritual practice.

Maharaj highlights how patriarchy becomes institutionalized in religion through symbols and practices that subordinate women. Female characters maintain moral integrity and spirituality and demonstrate inner strength. From a cultural feminist perspective, the film emphasizes the importance of women's experiences and solidarity in resisting patriarchal injustice disguised as faith. Cultural feminism rejects masculine domination by elevating women's values, celebrating gender differences, and viewing women's lived experience as a powerful force for creating a more just society (Madhona, 2022; Tulloh, 2022).

This cultural feminist lens is visible in *Maharaj* through portrayals of women who, despite their subordination, exhibit moral strength, loyalty to spiritual values, and courage to oppose religious patriarchy. They are both victims of *Charan Seva* and symbols of purity and spirituality. Their resistance is not violent, but takes the form of testimony and solidarity. In Scene 01:26:26, Viraaaj recounts her experience as a victim since age 16 and

admits that not all women survive such trauma. She upholds her dignity and humanity, showing that feminist resistance in the film is built on empathy, integrity, and resilience.

Women's silence in the film symbolizes patriarchal dominance, in line with Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence theory, which explains women's fear of voicing suffering due to the threat of social exclusion. Public opinion often aligns with expressions that avoid isolation, and the Spiral of Silence reveals how media and communication shape societal consensus (Melati, 2024; Novia, 2023).

3. Culture of Silence and Social Exclusion: The Spiral of Silence in *Maharaj*

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence theory explains how individuals often refrain from expressing their opinions due to fear of social isolation. Mass media play a critical role in disseminating dominant public opinion, thereby shaping what is perceived as socially acceptable discourse (Chaniago, 2020; Amalia, 2024). In the film *Maharaj*, women who are victims of the *Charan Seva* ritual remain silent and passive, not because of ignorance, but due to fear of ostracism from their religious community. Speaking out would risk them being labeled disobedient to religious and cultural norms or sinners.

The Spiral of Silence describes how the fear of social rejection influences individuals' willingness to speak, especially when their views conflict with the perceived majority opinion (Kasim et al., 2022). Humans naturally need to belong, prompting them to observe their environment to assess whether their opinions are accepted. If they sense they are in the minority, they are more likely to remain silent to avoid stigma and rejection (Bayu, 2025).

In *Maharaj*, women's compliance is not a sign of unawareness, but the result of intense communal pressure from a society that reveres religious leaders like Maharaj. Shame culture, fear of revealing the truth, and the glorification of religious figures seen as sacred and untouchable contribute to the perception that such exploitation is morally justified. This dominant public opinion reinforces a religious patriarchal order, entrapping women in a collective spiral of silence where they feel unsafe to voice their suffering (Nurhidayah et al., 2023).

Karsandas Mulji, the central character in the film, becomes a symbolic voice for the voiceless, breaking the silence on behalf of the women victims. His courage to expose the exploitation through journalism interrupts this spiral by challenging collective silence and creating a space for public discourse through his newspaper writings. This act becomes a vehicle for public awareness and critical reflection on the abuse of power cloaked in religious ritual (Amanda et al., 2024).

Noelle-Neumann's theory emphasizes that public opinion is not solely concerned with objective truth, but also with individuals' perceptions of their social environment. In *Maharaj*, the spiral does not affect individuals alone it extends to entire communities, where even the majority chooses silence despite being aware of the abuse of authority. This collective silence illustrates the deeply embedded nature of social conformity and the risk associated with dissent in religious and cultural settings.

D. CONCLUSION

The film *Maharaj* deconstructs patriarchal structures and the abuse of religion through visual symbolism, body gestures, and religious rituals such as *Charan Seva*, which serve as covert representations of sexual exploitation against women. Women are portrayed in



submissive and objectified postures, reflecting oppression legitimized by cultural norms and spiritual dogma. Through a cultural feminist approach, the film presents a narrative of female resistance, highlighting women who dare to testify, break the spiral of silence, and voice injustice in the public sphere. The courtroom becomes a symbolic space of moral and social struggle, representing the fight to liberate women from patriarchal dominance that hides behind religious tradition. Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence theory explains how fear of social exclusion compels victims of *Charan Seva* to remain silent, driven by anxiety over religious stigma and communal rejection. However, Karsandas Mulji's courage in publishing his findings disrupts this silence, creating discursive space and raising public awareness of exploitation within religious institutions. *Maharaj* is more than mere entertainment; it is a powerful critique of patriarchal authority within religion, inviting public reflection on power relations and the urgent need to amplify women's voices. The film portrays the resilience and courage of women in resisting institutional exploitation and underscores the vital importance of their voices in exposing injustice and advocating for gender equality.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

With utmost respect, the researcher expresses most profound gratitude to all parties who have supported completing this study titled "*Representation of the Exploitation of Women in Religious Institutions in the Film Maharaj*." Special thanks to the supervising lecturers for their guidance, feedback, and motivation throughout the research process. Appreciation is also given to academic colleagues and friends for their critical discussions that enriched the analysis of gender and power issues. The researcher is profoundly grateful to their family, especially their parents, for their prayers and moral support, which was the primary strength in completing this work. It is hoped that this study will contribute to media, gender, and religious studies and open space for discussions on the role of media in reflecting and transforming social realities.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

- Author 1 : Designed the theoretical framework, conducted semiotic analysis, and compiled the literature review using a cultural feminist approach.
- Author 2 : Developed the background, linked findings with the Spiral of Silence theory, and edited and aligned the manuscript's overall structure.

LITERATURE

- Amalia, Y. (2024). Representasi feminim dan maskulin pada karakter tokoh Iteung dalam film *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas* menurut analisis semiotika Ferdinand de Saussure. *etheses.iainkediri.ac.id*. <https://etheses.iainkediri.ac.id/id/eprint/14148>
- Amanda, V. D., Rahardjo, T., & Widagdo, M. B. (2024). Representasi patriarki dan eksploitasi pada perempuan dalam film *Enola Holmes 2*. *Interaksi Online*, 12(3), 699–712. <https://ejournal3.undip.ac.id/index.php/interaksi-online/article/view/45482>

- Apriliani, P. (2022). Representasi jurnalis perempuan dalam film *Escaping The Madhouse: The Nellie Bly Story* melalui tokoh Nellie Bly (Analisis semiotika Ferdinand de Saussure). *repository.bakrie.ac.id*. <https://repository.bakrie.ac.id/id/eprint/6812>
- Arliani, N., & Adiyanto, W. (2023). Representasi kecemasan dalam lirik lagu “Rehat” Kunto Aji (Analisis semiotika Ferdinand de Saussure). *Innovative: Journal of Social Science Research*, 3(3), 2808–2821. <https://doi.org/10.31004/innovative.v3i3.2052>
- Bayu, M. (2025). Perbedaan gaya komunikasi antar generasi: Tinjauan teoritis tentang interaksi Gen Z dan Baby Boomers dalam konteks sosial dan profesional. *Governance: Jurnal Ilmiah Kajian Politik Lokal dan Pembangunan*, 11(4), 165–174. <https://doi.org/10.56015/gjikplp.v11i4.443>
- Bydi, A. H. (2022). Representasi makna pemimpin dalam film *Omar* (Analisis semiotika Ferdinand de Saussure). *etheses.iainponorogo.ac.id*. <https://etheses.iainponorogo.ac.id/18438/>
- Cameron, E. C., Hemingway, S. L., Tschida, S. L., Heer, R. K., & Jacquin, K. M. (2023). Gender inequality in national laws predicts estimated prevalence of modern slavery victims across countries. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 9(4), 474–490. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2021.1938896>
- Caple, J., & Roddy, S. (2023). The stakes of religious fundraising: Economic transition and religious resurgence in Irish Catholicism and Tibetan Buddhism. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 16(5), 698–715. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2022.2098514>
- Chaniago, P. (2020). Representasi pendidikan karakter dalam film *Surau dan Silek* (Analisis semiotik Ferdinand de Saussure). *Journal of Islamic Education Policy*, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.30984/jiep.v4i2.1284>
- Cheng, H. (2022). Women, domestic labour, and economic imperialism. In *The Oxford handbook of economic imperialism* (pp. 301–322). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197527085.013.49>
- Dedieu, S. D., Ouali, U., Ghachem, R., Karray, H., & Issaoui, I. (2021). Violence against women in the Arab world: Eyes shut wide open. In *Handbook of healthcare in the Arab world* (pp. 207–255). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36811-1_169
- Giammarinaro, M. G. (2022). Understanding severe exploitation requires a human rights and gender-sensitive intersectional approach. *Frontiers in Human Dynamics*, 4, Article 861600. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fhumd.2022.861600>
- Guaita-Fernández, P., Martín Martín, J. M., Ribeiro-Navarrete, S., & Puertas, R. (2024). Analysing the efficiency of public policies on gender-based violence: A literature review. *Sustainable Technology and Entrepreneurship*, 3(3), Article 100066. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stae.2023.100066>
- Hamdani, A. (2017). Eksploitasi perempuan di media massa perspektif Alquran. *Jurnal Harkat: Media Komunikasi Gender*, 13(1), 104–115.
- Hamzah, A. A. (2019). Makna puisi Wiji Thukul dalam film *Istirahatlah Kata-Kata* dengan pendekatan semiotika Ferdinand de Saussure. *Muharrrik: Jurnal Dakwah dan Sosial*, 2(1),

15–31. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3544710>

- Hendra, Y. (2019). *Spiral of Silence Theory* versus perkembangan masyarakat: Suatu penjelasan dan kritik teori. *Jurnal Simbolika: Research and Learning in Communication Study*, 5(2), 106–117. <https://doi.org/10.31289/simbollika.v5i2.2859>
- Hermann, D., Dölling, D., Collong, A., Horten, B., Dreßing, H., Salize, H. J., Kruse, A., Schmitt, E., & Bannenberg, B. (2019). Institutional conditions of sexual abuse of children and adolescents [Institutionelle Bedingungen des sexuellen Missbrauchs von Minderjährigen]. *Monatsschrift für Kriminologie und Strafrechtsreform*, 102(4), 249–261. <https://doi.org/10.1515/mks-2020-2033>
- Iswara, N. R., & Moerdisuroso, I. (2024). Analisis teori representasi Stuart Hall pada *The Old Guitarist* karya Pablo Picasso. *academia.edu*.
- Julianti, A., Ete, E. V., Puspita, E. S. I. M., Sallalu, A. R. H., & Ramadhani, U. E. (2022). Gender dan konstruksi perempuan dalam agama: Pentingnya kesetaraan gender untuk penghapusan sistem patriarki. *Moderasi: Jurnal Kajian Islam Kontemporer*, 1(1). <https://journal.forikami.com/index.php/moderasi/article/view/222>
- Kanzunnudin, M. (2022). Analisis semiotik Roland Barthes pada puisi ‘Ibu’ karya D. Zawawi Imron. *Saweigading*, 28(2), 183–200. <https://doi.org/10.26499/sawer.v28i2.1040>
- Kasim, R. D., Soga, Z., & Mamonto, A. H. (2022). Analisis semiotik Ferdinand de Saussure terhadap nilai-nilai da’wah pada film *Nussa dan Rara*. *Komunida*, 12(2), 196–221. <https://doi.org/10.35905/komunida.v12i2.3370>
- Kasstan, B. (2022). Everyone’s accountable? Peer sexual abuse in religious schools, digital revelations, and denominational contests over protection. *Religions*, 13(6), Article 556. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13060556>
- Madhona, R. H. (2022). Representasi emosional *Joker* sebagai korban kekerasan dalam film *Joker* (2019) (Analisis semiotika Ferdinand de Saussure). *Soetomo Communication and Humanities*, 3(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.25139/sch.v3i1.4475>
- Maulida, H. (2021). Perempuan dalam kajian sosiologi gender: Konstruksi peran sosial, ruang publik, dan teori feminis. *Journal of Politics and Democracy*, 1(1), 71–79. <https://doi.org/10.61183/polikrasi.v1i1.6>
- McGraw, D. M., Ebadi, M., Dalenberg, C., Wu, V., Naish, B., & Nunez, L. (2019). Consequences of abuse by religious authorities: A review. *Traumatology*, 25(4), 242–255. <https://doi.org/10.1037/trm0000183>
- Melati, S. D., Setiadarma, A., & Irawati, A. (2024). Representasi karakteristik generasi milenial pada iklan *Sasa* (MSG “Micin Swag Generation”) di media YouTube (Analisis semiotika Ferdinand de Saussure). *Ikon Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu Komunikasi*, 29(1), 10–21. <https://doi.org/10.37817/ikon.v29i1.3677>
- Novia, N. W. (2023). Representasi feminisme pada lirik lagu “Double Dare Ya” karya *Bikini Kill* (Analisis semiotika Ferdinand de Saussure). *repository.ukri.ac.id*. <https://repository.ukri.ac.id/id/eprint/459>

- Nurhidayah, I. A., Bakhri, S., & Baharuddin, M. A. (2023). Representasi kekerasan seksual terhadap perempuan dalam film *2037* (Studi analisis semiotika Ferdinand de Saussure). *Jurnal Integrasi dan Harmoni Inovatif Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial*, 3(8), 849–858. <https://doi.org/10.17977/um063v3i8p849-858>
- Pebriaisyah, B. F., Wilodati, W., & Komariah, S. (2022). Kekerasan seksual di lembaga pendidikan keagamaan: Relasi kuasa kyai terhadap santri perempuan di pesantren. *Sosietas: Jurnal Pendidikan Sosiologi*, 12(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.17509/sosietas.v12i1.48063>
- Radja, I. G. S., & Sunjaya, L. R. (2024). Representasi budaya Jember dalam *Jember Fashion Carnival*: Pendekatan teori representasi Stuart Hall. *Wissen: Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Humaniora*, 2(3), 13–20. <https://doi.org/10.62383/wissen.v2i3.160>
- Rajagukguk, C., & Pattipelohy, S. C. (2018). Feminisme kultural dan peran perempuan dalam deradikalisasi di Indonesia. *Journal of International Relations Universitas Diponegoro*, 4(4), 775–783. <https://ejournal3.undip.ac.id/index.php/jihi/article/view/21991>
- Ramos, V., & de Almeida, A. N. (2024). From percentages to narratives: Giving silence a voice in child sexual abuse within the Portuguese Catholic Church, 1950–2022. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 154, Article 106944. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.106944>
- Saniyah, A. (2022). Representasi perempuan dalam novel *Bidadari Berbisik* karya Asma Nadia (Analisis semiotika Ferdinand de Saussure). *eprints.iainu-kebumen.ac.id*. <https://eprints.iainu-kebumen.ac.id/id/eprint/1455>
- Sholichah, I. M., Putri, D. M., & Setiaji, A. F. (2023). Representasi budaya Banyuwangi dalam *Banyuwangi Ethno Carnival*: Pendekatan teori representasi Stuart Hall. *Education: Jurnal Sosial Humaniora dan Pendidikan*, 3(2), 32–42. <https://doi.org/10.51903/education.v3i2.332>
- Shorten, A. (2017). Accommodating religious institutions: Freedom versus domination? *Ethnicities*, 17(2), 242–258. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796817690780>
- Sory, A. (2023). The legal protection of the dignity of the religious in canonical legislation [La protection juridique de la dignité du religieux dans la législation canonique]. *Studia Canonica*, 57(2), 595–635. <https://doi.org/10.2143/STC.57.2.3292794>
- Spraitz, J. D., & Bowen, K. N. (2021). Religious duress and reverential fear in clergy sexual abuse cases: Examination of victims' reports and recommendations for change. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 32(5), 484–500. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0887403420921232>
- Steele, S. L., & Hernandez-Salazar, E. E. (2020). A very lucrative liquid: The emerging trade in human milk as a form of reproductive exploitation and violence against women. *International Journal of Human Rights in Healthcare*, 13(2), 171–183. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJHRH-07-2019-0058>
- Tulloh, F. H. (2022). Representasi tanda kekerasan seksual terhadap perempuan dalam film *The Hunting Ground*: Analisis semiotika Ferdinand de Saussure. *repository.unej.ac.id*. <https://repository.unej.ac.id/handle/123456789/125547>
- Turner, J. (2016). Means of delivery: The trafficking of women into prostitution, harms and human

- rights discourse. In *Prostitution, harm and gender inequality: Theory, research and policy* (pp. 33–52). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315602615-3>
- van Niekerk, C. J. (2018). Interrogating sex trafficking discourses using a feminist approach. *Agenda*, 32(2), 17–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2018.1455294>
- Wati, M. L. K., Rohman, F., & Yuniawan, T. (2023). Analisis semiotika Roland Barthes dan nilai moral dalam film pendek *Tilik* (2018) karya Wahyu Agung Prasetya. *Jurnal Onoma: Pendidikan, Bahasa, dan Sastra*, 9(2), 1306–1315. <https://doi.org/10.30605/onoma.v9i2.3023>