

Unveiling Catholic nun identity in Indonesian cinema: Analyzing *Ave Maryam* (2018)

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Abstrakt

Studi ini mengeksplorasi representasi biarawati Katolik dalam film *Ave Maryam* (2018) melalui perspektif stilistika feminis Sara Mills (1995). Meskipun sinema global kerap menghadirkan karakter biarawati, representasi biarawati Katolik dalam film-film Asia, khususnya di Indonesia, masih sangat jarang. *Ave Maryam* menjadi pengecualian signifikan dalam lanskap sinema Indonesia yang didominasi oleh tema-tema Islam. Disutradarai oleh Ertanto Robby Soediskam, film ini mengisahkan cinta terlarang antara seorang biarawati Katolik dan seorang pendeta, menawarkan narasi yang kompleks tentang feminitas, pengorbanan, dan identitas religius. Studi ini menganalisis bagaimana feminitas dan identitas biarawati Katolik dikonstruksikan dalam konteks budaya Indonesia serta bagaimana film ini merefleksikan persinggungan antara tradisi lokal dan keberagaman agama. Temuan dalam penelitian ini memberikan wawasan lebih dalam mengenai dinamika budaya dan agama dalam sinema Indonesia, khususnya dalam penggambaran perempuan dalam institusi keagamaan.

Keywords: *Ave Maryam*; Catholic nun; film analysis; religious identity; Indonesia; gender equality (SDG 5), peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16)

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Abstract

This study explores the discourse surrounding Catholic nuns in the film *Ave Maryam* (2018) through the lens of Sara Mills' (1995) feminist stylistics. While global cinema frequently portrays nuns, representations of Catholic nuns in Asian films are exceptionally rare. *Ave Maryam* stands out as a significant exception within Indonesian cinema, which predominantly showcases Islamic religious themes. Directed by Ertanto Robby Soediskam, the film narrates a poignant tale of forbidden love between a Catholic nun and a priest. This study examines how femininity and the identity of Catholic nuns are constructed and conveyed in the Indonesian context. It also highlights the intersection of Indonesian culture and religious diversity in these depictions. The analysis offers insights into the representation of nun femininity in Indonesian film, shedding light on broader cultural and religious dynamics.

Keywords: *Ave Maryam*, Catholic nun, film analysis, religious identity, Indonesia, gender equality (SDG 5), peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16)

Introduction

Cinema has evolved into a multifaceted medium, global industry, and significant art form, with film theory and criticism becoming an academic discipline. More than just a collection of films, cinema encompasses organizations, rules, conventions, interests, expectations, and social functions (Rajala et al., 2020; Wejbert-Wąsiewicz, 2020). Its significance lies in its 'power,' focusing on sense-making, reality-building, and interpretation (Rajala et al., 2020). In this context, cinema can be understood as the broader art form, industry, and cultural influence of filmmaking, including the institutions and social practices that surround it. By contrast, film refers to individual works within this system, each capable of evoking deep emotional and intellectual responses. Indeed, the power of film lies in its ability to transcend the ordinary, guiding viewers to identify the sacred and arouse mystery around life (Bird, 1982; Lindvall, 2004). The representation of minorities, gender, and religious characters in cinema is now expanding, including Catholic nuns, who have shaped perceptions and contributed to the global cinematic landscape (Stachowiak, 2023; Sullivan, 2000).

The late 1950s and early 1960s saw the height of pop culture's infatuation with nuns thanks to films like *The Nun's Story*, *The Singing Nun*, *The Sound of Music*, and *The Trouble with Angels*. This coincided with the modernizing church reforms of Vatican II, alongside second-wave feminism and the sexual revolution. Rodriguez-Plate, a Professor of Religion and Film at Hamilton College in her interview with ELLE (Alessandrini, 2022) emphasized that a woman's independent choices about her body and beliefs can be a bold feminist statement. Filmmakers can experiment with symbolism when they use nuns as recurring characters in comedies and horror films. This focus on Catholic nuns in Western media prompts an intriguing area of inquiry, especially when compared to the cinematic representations found in Asia, where Catholicism exists as a religious minority in several regions (Brown & Chambon, 2022).

Most cinematic portrayals of Catholic nuns come from Western media. In Southeast Asia, a significant portion of such portrayals comes from the Philippines. In Indonesia, however, nuns in film are a rarity. This makes the story about Catholic nuns a film that is different from the others. Given cinema's status as a product of popular culture, the representation of minority groups and their narratives holds immense significance. According to Storey (2010, p.4), popular culture is "an arena of struggle and negotiation between the interests of dominant groups and the interests of subordinate groups." This shows that most popular culture represents things that are usually more favorable and commercialized than the balance of representation itself. As Kondo (2018, p.12) argues, theatre, film, and

other cultural domains grant public existence, making visibility within them essential for being recognized as a fully human and social being. This includes embracing diverse perspectives and experiences, as marginalized populations often lack role models. This emphasis on diverse representation in popular culture challenges the traditional view of neoliberalism, which sees it mainly as an economic idea favoring free-market principles over state control in the global marketplace (Cooper, 2019).

Indonesia's predominantly Islamic demographic has historically led to the production of a significant corpus of films that primarily focus on Islamic religious narratives. The Muslim majority's influence on the film industry has often resulted in an emphasis on Islam's dominance over other faiths in cinematic narratives, reflecting market dynamics and societal demographics.

Ave Maryam (2018) explores the lives of Catholic nuns in Indonesia, a predominantly Muslim country where Catholicism constitutes a religious minority. The rich tapestry of Indonesian traditions, beliefs, and values plays a pivotal role in shaping the cinematic representation of Catholic nuns, providing an opportunity to dissect the intricate relationship between religion and culture in this specific context. As the singular film in Indonesia that explores the cloistered existence of Catholic nuns, *Ave Maryam* offers viewers an unfamiliar and enriching cinematic experience, shedding light on a narrative rarely explored in mainstream cinema. Directed by Ertanto Robby Soediskam, a Muslim, *Ave Maryam* presents a narrative that defies the conventional cinematic narratives of religious devotion.

It is crucial to investigate the identities of Catholic nuns in Indonesian cinema as it adds a great deal to the fields of gender studies, film studies, religious studies, and cultural studies in Indonesia. We may better understand the nuances of religious, gender, and cultural representations thanks to this research, which also creates a forum for more extensive conversations about the role of film in promoting tolerance, equality, and inclusivity in diverse societies.

The cinematic representation of Catholic nuns in global cinema

Christian-themed films, particularly those featuring Catholic nuns, have long been prominent in the film industry, especially in Hollywood. Numerous films such as *The Song of Bernadette* (1943), *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945), *Black Narcissus* (1947), *The Nun's Story* (1959), *The Sound of Music* (1965), and even the horror film *The Nun* (2019) depict the lives of nuns and explore various aspects of their daily existence. Although many nun-themed films originate from Western countries, it is crucial to note that Catholicism extends beyond the Western world.

The cinematic representation of Catholic nuns has deep historical roots that extend back to the early days of film. The portrayal of religious life, including the lives of nuns, has been a recurring theme since the silent film era. However, it was in the post-World War II era that Catholic nuns began to gain prominence as central characters in films. Hollywood produced several films that explored the challenges and dilemmas faced by nuns in their commitment to a life of faith. *The Nun's Story* (1959), starring Audrey Hepburn, stands as a quintessential example of this era, delving into the struggles of a young nun as she grapples with her vocation.

Films like *Sister Act* (1992) and its sequel, as well as *The Sound of Music* (1965), are often cited as examples that contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypes regarding Catholic nuns. In *Sister Act* (Ardolino, 1992), the nuns are portrayed as cute and fond of singing, while in *The Sound of Music* (Wise, 1965), the character of Maria encourages her foster children to sing frequently. These examples demonstrate how films often offer limited portrayals of Catholic nuns, oversimplifying the complexities of their lives and identities.

Moreover, films such as *The Nun* (2019) have contributed to depicting nuns in a horror and sinister light. However, it is important to acknowledge that this portrayal of scary and terrible nuns has been present in the film industry for a long time. For instance, *The Devil* (Russell, 1971), set in 18th-century France, tells the story of Sister Jeanne, a nun who experiences sexual repression and develops a secret love for the priest Grandier. She accuses Grandier of practicing witchcraft, leading to his torture and ultimate execution by burning at the hands of ecclesiastical authorities. Film like *The Devils* present nuns as distorted characters, reinforcing the image of horror and sinisterness. Nonetheless, it is crucial to remember that these films are fictional works and do not accurately represent the overall reality of life as a nun.

The preponderance of nuns in horror is because women, particularly when in positions of authority, often evoke fear due to the potential they possess. In films like *The Conjuring* (2013) franchise, *Agnes* (2021), *Bad Nun* (2018), and *The Devil's Light* (2022), nuns are portrayed as terrifying figures, wielding power over both the sacred and the profane. Alternatively, in the realm of comedy, characters like Whoopi Goldberg's Deloris Van Cartier from *Sister Act* have become iconic, reflecting a more humorous take on nuns.

Today, the fascination with women in positions of sacred and impenetrable power endures among filmmakers and audiences. Nuns are increasingly featured in genres beyond comedy, horror, and erotica—they are also in genres such as science fiction, fantasy, and action. Works like *Mrs.*

Davis (Hernandez et al, 2023) and the second season of *Warrior Nun* (Barry et al, 2020) aim to reshape the stereotype of nuns as distant and enigmatic figures, capitalizing on portrayals of intrigue. Even so, nuns are consistently portrayed as being in opposition to the world around them, whether it's against technological advancements, like in *Mrs. Davis*, or a patriarchal society, as in *Warrior Nun*. The conflict makes them both threatening and captivating characters.

In Southeast Asia, the Philippines is one of the leading producers of films with nun themes. The Philippines has produced several films featuring nuns, across genres from historical drama to supernatural horror, and themes from personal faith to social critique. *Aparisyon* [Apparition] (Sandoval, 2012) explores the quiet yet turbulent lives of nuns in a remote convent during the political unrest of 1971, focusing on themes of faith, guilt, and forgiveness. The film received international acclaim, winning awards at festivals such as the Deauville Asian Film Festival and the Hawaii International Film Festival. *Eerie* (Red, 2019), a supernatural horror film, centers on the mysterious and violent death of a student at a Catholic school, with the guidance of a counselor who uncovers dark secrets about the institution. *Poon* [The Image] (Benaid, 2018) tells the harrowing story of Claudia, whose life takes a dark turn after acquiring a mysterious statue that seems to trigger a series of deaths in her parish. *Seklusyon* [Seclusion] (Matti, 2016), another horror film, explores the exile of nearly ordained deacons who confront evil forces in their convent, blending religious themes with supernatural elements. *Divine Mercy sa Buhay ni Sister Faustina* [Divine Mercy in the Life of Sister Faustina] (Yalung, 1993) presents the biographical story of Sister Faustina, whose vision of Jesus Christ led her to spread the message of Divine Mercy throughout the world, despite initial skepticism from those around her. *Haw-Ang* (Ramos & Bernardo, 2007) is a moving indie film that advocates for children's education and women's empowerment, set in the Ifugao rice fields and following Sister Adel's mission to build a schoolhouse. *Kasalanan Ba ang Umibig?: The Myrna Rivas Story* [Is it a Sin to Love?: The Myrna Rivas Story] (Colindres & Reyes, 2013) is a drama that highlights the emotional and moral struggles of a nun, Myrna, who unexpectedly falls in love with Efren, a priest who becomes her spiritual director. The narrative explores the complexities of their illicit relationship, as Myrna grapples with her dedication to the Church and her growing romantic feelings. Eventually, Myrna becomes pregnant, prompting Efren to leave the parish to support Myrna and their child. Despite leaving their formal roles in the Church, they continue to serve their faith and community in other capacities. These stories depict the profound personal dilemmas and social judgments faced

by those with a religious vocation as they confront human passion and vulnerability.

While Indonesian and Filipino films about Catholic nuns address similar themes of faith and personal struggles, their narrative approaches and social contexts differ, offering unique insights into the religious and cultural landscapes of their respective countries. Filipino films frequently include political and social themes and present a more critical view of religious institutions against the backdrop of a primarily Catholic society (79.5% of the country's population, or 85.7 million Catholics, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority in Darmawan, 2024). In contrast, personal and emotional themes within the context of being a religious minority are more prevalent in Indonesian films, even though Catholics make up only 3.06% (8.5 million) of the nation's population (Rizaty, 2023).

In the realm of critique and scholarship, numerous studies, articles, and essays have been dedicated to exploring the depiction of nuns in films (Aughtry, 2017; Buerkle, 2018; Krockner, 2005; Sabine, 2013; Sister Julie, 2008). According to the literature, nuns are often depicted as comical figures who enjoy singing, rigid individuals who enforce discipline with a ruler, or even angelic or demonic figures. However, some studies, like Krockner's (2005) analysis of Hollywood nun films, take a feminist perspective to examine revolutionary changes and historical influences in the portrayal of nuns. Krockner argues that the depiction of nuns can shift between positive and negative portrayals, influenced by the prevailing views of women during a specific period and the film's setting. Buerkle (2018) studies *The Nun's Story* in novel and film and argues that the story serves as a frame for the contradictory 1950s, calling for a rethinking of relevant histories and theories about cinematic depictions of queer female desire and ambition amidst institutions that deny both. Most studies have focused on Catholic nuns in films from Western countries—limited scholarly work has specifically examined nun-themed films from non-Western countries.

This study delves deeper into the representation of Catholic nuns in films from non-Western regions in order to address this gap. This includes examining films produced in countries where Catholicism is present as a minority religion, such as Indonesia. By exploring the depiction of nuns in Indonesian films, researchers can shed light on how religious identity, cultural nuances, and societal dynamics intersect and influence the portrayal of Catholic nuns within this unique context. Unfortunately, in Indonesia, there is only one film, *Ave Maryam*, that explores church life from a nun's perspective. This makes the film a unique contribution to the genre, but understanding it means exploring the larger context of which it

is part. The next section situates the film in the history of the representation of Catholicism in Indonesia.

Catholic nuns portrayal in Indonesian cinema before *Ave Maryam*

In the context of Indonesian cinema, which tends to prioritize commercially successful genres such as horror, comedy, and drama (CNN Indonesia, 2022), the representation of Catholicism is relatively limited compared to Islam, reflecting the country's majority Muslim population. While there are examples of Catholic characters in films like *Tanda Tanya* [Question Mark] (2011) and *3 Hati, 2 Dunia, 1 Cinta* [3 Hearts, 2 Worlds, 1 Love] (2010) their portrayals are often tied to specific narratives or conflicts related to religion. The only film that covers a Catholic Nun figure is *Merpati Tak Pernah Ingkar Janji* [Pigeons Never Break Their Promises] (Umbuh, 1985), adapted from a novel by Mira Widjaja a renowned Indonesian romance novelist. Although the film ultimately focuses on the main character's journey to becoming a Catholic nun, it does not delve into her life as a nun. Instead, it explores Maria's upbringing by her Catholic father, who guides her towards becoming a nun. It is later revealed that her father is a former friar who married her mother, a former Catholic nun, and they wanted their daughter to serve God. The film also depicts Maria's struggle with her father's strict upbringing, which restricts her freedom and leads to her desire for independence. These films offer nuanced portrayals of Catholicism, addressing themes of nationalism, religious devotion, and the complexities of family dynamics within the Catholic context, specifically within Indonesian society.

Through their portrayal of Catholic figures and themes, these films contribute to a richer understanding of Indonesia's social, cultural, and religious tapestry, reflecting the complexities and nuances of the nation's history and identity.

Research Method

The film *Ave Maryam* will be analyzed using Sara Mills' (1995) discourse analysis (1995), often used to examine how women are portrayed in films. In studies done by Indonesian scholars using Mills' method, women have been seen to be depicted as obedient, motherly, and friendly (Sulistiyani, 2021); rejecting patriarchal culture (Sumakud & Septyana, 2020); strong, brave, and tough but culturally inferior (Ramadhani & Adiprabowo, 2023); intelligent, beautiful, and independent (Adriani et al., 2020); and marginalized Javanese women who fight against oppression (Nurkaolin & Putri, 2019). This study takes after scholarship like this, adding to the existing literature that examines women's representation in Indonesian film.

Mills' discourse analysis is useful because it allows us to analyze similarities across texts as products of a series of power/knowledge relations, for example with media texts, films, and popular culture (Mills, 2004). The analysis of images and texts depicting gender differences allows us to trace the choices available to the subject in terms of constructing the subject's position or role. Mills highlights the development of female characters in films as an important factor in understanding the film's attitude towards women's issues (Sulistiyani, 2021).

The position of gender as a subject or object also contains a certain ideological content (Eriyanto, 2001) while the position of the audience who receives the text also transacts with the text. The transaction is divided into mediation by identifying characters or those presented in the text and cultural codes, several pieces of information that are believed and recognized together (Eriyanto, 2001; Mills, 1992). The use of Mills' feminist stylistics in this study will help reveal the femininity of Catholic nuns, especially in Indonesia.

The unit of analysis for this film includes various scenes that are considered gendered according to Mills' (1995) categories and Sulistiyani's (2021) items: character/role, fragmentation, focalization, and schemata. Characters are constructed from words, which are arranged by readers into ideological messages based on their knowledge of textual conventions and societal views on gender (Mills, 1995). These characters often rely on social conventions and stereotypes, such as visualization of clothing or facial features (Sulistiyani, 2021). The fragmentation of women is associated with male focalization—women are depicted as objects for the male gaze (Mills, 1995). This is related to how women are visualized (Sulistiyani, 2021).

Point of view and focalization concern the position of the audience relative to the story and the level of persistence. Focalization can be external or internal to the story (Mills, 1995). It can also be manifested through dialogue or a character's inner thoughts, indicating their position (Sulistiyani, 2021). After considering the focalization of characters as a gender framework, a larger discursive framework is formed. This framework operates across texts to produce different visions of men and women, referred to as schemas (Mills, 1995). This becomes a social framework that makes female stereotypes familiar and logical, which is described as the discursive framework of the dominant truth logic or scheme (Sulistiyani, 2021). Through the analysis of these concepts, female identity in the context of Catholic nuns in Indonesia can be understood.

Results and Discussion

This section examines *Ave Maryam* in terms of the four elements mentioned by Mills (1995): political economy; the interplay of character and fragmentation in the construction of identities; and focalization and schemata, or how audiences are positioned and their social construction in the film.

***Ave Maryam* and the political economy of Indonesia**

Ave Maryam was released in 2018, screened in Indonesian cinemas in April 2019, and broadcast on the Netflix platform on September 3, 2020. The film also received recognition on the international stage, being featured at prestigious film festivals like the Hanoi International Film Festival, the Hong Kong Asian Film Festival, and the Cape Town International Film Market and Festival (Reily, 2019). It also featured in a local festival such as Jogja-Netpac Asian Film Festival and Plaza Indonesia Film Indonesia. In Indonesia, the film enjoyed a successful theatrical run for approximately one year, starting on April 11, 2019, and managed to attract an audience of 80,000 despite being released concurrently with the blockbuster *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) (Liputan6.com, 2019).

Director Ertanto Robby intended for the film to answer many people's questions about living in a monastery and how nuns or priests may remain faithful to their vows (Setuningsih, 2019). Sister Bertha, the Head Sister at Mitra Sepuh, also granted her consent, indicating that the director employed various means to secure support from Catholic priests and nuns in Indonesia (Kumparan, 2019).

Simultaneously, *Ave Maryam*, in its release, was a representation of Soediskam's discontent with the prevailing favoritism towards one majority faith in Indonesian cinema, which is meant to embrace Bhinneka Tunggal Ika/ Unity in Diversity (Rura, 2019). Regrettably, the film encountered censorship challenges within Indonesia, leading to a shortened duration and the removal of specific scenes considered contentious. As a result, its original 85-minute runtime was reduced to 73 minutes for the audience category of 21 years and older, as decided by the Indonesian Censorship Institute (Rura, 2019).

The decision to cut the film's duration was influenced by two scenes (Studio Antelope, 2019). First, the depiction of Maryam's Muslim background was deemed sensitive. Secondly, a nude scene involving Maryam and Yosef on the beach was also excised. Remarkably, these removed scenes remain the subject of discussions in various media outlets, highlighting their significant contribution to the overall narrative. Photographic evidence of Maryam's Muslim heritage continues to circulate, underscoring the importance of the

omitted scene (CNN Indonesia, 2019; Pangesti, 2020; Sindie, 2019; Utomo, 2020; Widia, 2019).

Throughout the film, the most frequently heard terms are “suster” and “romo.” In Indonesia, nuns are typically called “suster,” derived from the Dutch word “zuster,” meaning “sister.” This usage originated from the arrival of Dutch missionaries in Indonesia, who established churches, particularly Catholic ones, staffed by priests and nuns. “Romo,” on the other hand, is a term used for male Catholic priests. In Javanese, “Romo” means “father” or is an honorary title given to Catholic priests in certain regions of Indonesia. These two terms alone highlight the gender and hierarchical differences between the characters. While “suster” means “sister” and implies an equal or peer, “Romo” means “father” and denotes a higher hierarchical status. These titles alone reflect the status of the characters in the film. Another term used is “cakep,” which means “attractive” and can be gender-neutral, applicable to both women and men. Apart from that, Monic also described Yosef as “gagah.” Additionally, the term “gagah,” or in English “gallant,” meaning “large,” “upright,” and “strong,” is usually used to describe men.

In the Indonesian context, Soediskam includes dialogue typically spoken by Muslims. For example, Maryam says “Alhamdulillah,” meaning “Praise to the Lord,” when interacting with Dinda, a Muslim milk delivery girl identifiable by her headscarf. In another scene, Maryam walks past high school girls wearing hijabs in front of a mosque. Although their clothing colors are the same, their religions are different. These facets also serve as symbolic artifacts illustrating the harmonious coexistence of diverse religious lives in Semarang, where these two religious traditions coalesce. Additionally, Maryam’s background as a former Muslim is used to enhance the film’s appeal and marketability to the Indonesian audience, which is sensitive to issues of religious conversion. Such elements are likely to attract viewers and encourage them to share their impressions through word of mouth or social media comments. Ultimately, this is a political-economic strategy employed by the director.

Ave Maryam: The interplay of character and fragmentation

This part will explain the character and fragmentation in the film of *Ave Maryam*. Specifically, this part focuses on Maryam, Mila, Rebecca, and Anna, who are all nuns in the convent. Aside from Maryam, the other characters appear to conduct their activities in the convent without confusion or inner turmoil. They fulfill their duties diligently, including adhering to their vows. The presence of several older nuns serves as a symbol of celibacy and Maryam’s struggle with it.

Set in a convent, *Ave Maryam* features many female characters in the roles of nuns, offering a unique perspective on the representation of women. As Sullivan (2005) posits, nuns, due to their clear affiliation with another institutional order beyond secular society, are well-suited to convey meanings about gender and religion that together have the potential to challenge the status quo directly. As McDannell (1989) argues, religion is assigned values and purposes typically associated with women, such as obedience, emotionalism, and nurturing. Nun films, books, music, or television shows are almost always labeled as part of so-called women's culture, produced to appeal to female audiences by promoting lead female characters. They reassert feminine values in ways that undermine a potentially radical message of feminist independence. The film uses formal language, which is understandable given its setting in a convent. As nuns, the characters speak only as necessary. The central character, Maryam, is a strict nun who communicates through highly rigorous, formal, and high-context verbal language.

For the remainder of this discussion part, I will separate the identities that emerge from several scenes in *Ave Maryam*, focusing on Maryam: The Intersection of Devotion and Desire, Monic the Struggled Maternal Figure, and Domestic Roles and Gender Hierarchies of Catholic Nuns

Maryam: The intersection of devotion and desire

In *Ave Maryam*, Maryam's character development appears gradual and limited, reflecting the reality of the difficulties experienced by nuns in balancing their vows of chastity and humanity. She grows closer to Pastor Yosef, revealing her inner turmoil and, ultimately, feelings of love.

In the end, Maryam reveals her inner turmoil by admitting her sins and feelings towards Father Yosef. Maryam's experience of erotic love is shown in stages. In contrast to characters who immediately break their oath of chastity, Maryam initially resists temptation. Her internal conflict is visible in her tears, doubts, and the way she avoids looking Yosef in the eye after their meeting on the beach. In the end, when Sister Monic learns of Maryam's situation and gives her advice, Maryam's perspective changes. She feels a sense of belonging and forgiveness from her community, even though she still struggles with her emotions. Maryam's internal conflict and self-examination highlight the complexity of human emotions, especially in the context of religious life and vows of chastity. This depiction aligns with the traditional expectations of nuns, who are meant to love Christ as their spouse, remaining chaste and devoted (Gregory, 2007).

Maryam here appears as a fighter for erotic love or romantic love during agape love or God's love as the embodiment of the vows she holds, like the

conflicts that usually appear in nun film stories (Sabine, 2013). The vow of chastity is the basic rule for nuns to maintain their chastity while in the monastery. An example of this vow is the prohibition on marriage (Jamin, 2021). This definition is intended so that nuns have a complete sense of love for God and each other.

Maryam's anxiety is not based on the background story of why she was attracted to love with the opposite sex. Becoming a nun in the Catholic religion is a sacred thing, based on God's call and one's willingness to sincerely dedicate oneself to God in the realm of the church with all its stages and guidance. to go through. This process will determine whether someone is worthy of becoming a nun (Karomi et al., 2022).

Apart from the process of becoming a nun being long and not easy, based on research from Aulia (2018), in Indonesia, nuns become nuns because they are inspired by those who have served in their area.

Maryam herself stays at Mitra Kesepuhan, Semarang, which is in the Sister Francis Complex or Gedangan. Previously, the building functioned as an infectious hospital belonging to the VOC which was built in 1732. In 1830, the building functioned as an orphanage (Rasyid & Rohman, 2024). According to Sister Bertha, one of the nuns who lives there, the convent is a school for nuns. The activities of the sisters are to deepen the Catholic religion and serve the community. Bertha herself, who has been a nun since 1989, admitted that she had abandoned all worldly interests to ordain herself as a nun. She left his old job for religious service. Other nuns leave their husbands and so on (Firhannusa, 2023).

Those who become nuns usually know exactly what to do and adhere to their vows. However, this does not separate them from their essence as ordinary human beings capable of sin, as Maryam shows in this film. In Catholicism, becoming a nun is considered sacred. After someone is ordained as a nun, it becomes very difficult for them to resign, as nuns are part of the holy sacraments that are highly guarded. Despite this, many religious figures leave their monastic lives to seek peace outside the monastery (Kristianto & Pramudito, 2021).

Maryam's identity in *Ave Maryam* is defined by a complex intersection of devotion, humanity, cultural background, and personal struggle. As a devoted nun, she grapples with her vows of chastity while experiencing human desires and love. Her identity is further shaped by her Javanese cultural context, which influences her internal conflict and quest for self-discovery. Through her journey, Maryam embodies the struggle for personal fulfillment within the confines of religious duty and cultural expectations.

Monic, the struggled maternal figure

Another character that stands out is Sister Monic. Sister Monic is a representation of a mother figure, a common trope in Indonesian films. She is depicted as having cared for Yosef since he was a child, considering him as her son. In several scenes, it is shown how Monic prefers to be independent, such as when Maryam wants to help her with her clothes. This is further reinforced when Maryam inquires about Monic's background from Martin, revealing that Monic used to care for the nuns at Mitra Sepuh but eventually left because she realized she would also become an elder nun there. This indicates that Monic might also be dealing with her life struggles, trying to fill the void in her life by caring for and raising Yosef within the convent. This is why Monic doesn't want to be looked after by Maryam, she doesn't want to be like a weak woman who must be helped by the younger ones. This was also further strengthened when Monic looked at the nuns' graves while contemplating. Although she appears rigid, she represents an elder nun who has faced many challenges in her life.

Sister Monic's apprehensions regarding Yosef's interactions with Maryam are also indicative of her motherly instincts, as she might subtly suspect that Yosef harbors feelings for Maryam. This underlying suspicion could explain her efforts to distance Maryam from Yosef.

Throughout the film, there is a discernible shift in Sister Monic's attitude towards Maryam. Initially, she appears to harbor animosity or mistrust, but as the narrative reaches its climax, Sister Monic transforms her stance. Furthermore, when an incident occurs between Yosef and Maryam on the beach, Sister Monic refrains from intervening, signifying a change in her approach. In the end, it becomes evident that she softens her stance and even defends Maryam. Her character ultimately reflects the multifaceted nature of relationships and dynamics within the monastic environment.

In sum, Sister Monic's character in *Ave Maryam* serves as an enigmatic and multifaceted presence in the narrative. Her initial disapproval of Maryam, while potentially rooted in religious differences or perceived improprieties, transforms, symbolizing her willingness to understand and accept Maryam. Sister Monic's role as both a motherly figure to Yosef and a representative of the monastic community's guiding influence contributes to the film's exploration of complex interpersonal dynamics within a religious context.

Domestic roles and gender hierarchies of Catholic nuns

Dyer (1982) noted that in advertisements, gender is routinely portrayed according to traditional cultural stereotypes; women are shown as very feminine, as sex objects, as housewives, mothers, homemakers, and men in

positions of authority and dominance over women. This also applies to this film. I will outline some scenes that reveal these aspects, such as performing domestic work.

In the scene setting the background where this story takes place, three nuns are doing domestic work such as sweeping, mopping, and caring for plants. Another two are shown, with one in a wheelchair being cared for by another nun. Another scene shows Maryam bathing one nun, with another bringing clean towels and taking away the dirty ones. The nuns are also depicted washing clothes, being in the kitchen, cooking, and preparing food for both the convent and the church to be given to the priest or sewing. These scenes illustrate that the nuns' activities are domestic, no different from housewives who take care of their families, cook, and clean the convent.

Figure 1
Nuns Doing Domestic Jobs



Note. From *Ave Maryam* [Film], by Soediskam, 2018, 0:14:01.

In Javanese culture, many terms position women lower than men. These terms are deeply ingrained in society and accepted without question. For example, in Javanese terms, a wife is referred to as “kanca wingking,” meaning a companion behind, responsible for household affairs, especially children, cooking, washing, etc (Hermawati, 2007; Setiyarini, 2014). Javanese culture has many expectations of women, such as refined speech, calmness, avoiding conflict, prioritizing peace, upholding family values, understanding and empathizing with others, politeness, high self-control, endurance for suffering, economic roles, and high loyalty (Fauziyah, 2008; Handayani & Novianto, 2004; Putri & Nurhajati, 2020).

In the interactions of nuns in the monastery, several things can be seen and represented in this film. This cinematic piece underscores the

significance of cooperation, or “gotong royong,” and solidarity as integral elements of the monastic community. This dynamic distinguishes the nuns’ activities from conventional ones, infused with the unique Indonesian familial identity. In Indonesia, family members are expected to consistently watch out for one another, even if their actions may be discreet and unspoken. This sense of unity within the film is exemplified through the nuns’ unfaltering dedication to the wellbeing of their elderly sisters residing within the convent. Their duties encompass a spectrum of caregiving activities, including bathing, tending to their needs during moments of repose, administering medications, and offering companionship and leisure. Engaging in domestic tasks such as cleaning, plant care, laundry, and communal cooking further emphasizes their unwavering commitment to their daily monastic responsibilities, thereby reinforcing their cooperative spirit.

Figure 2

The Solidarity of Nuns Together



Note. From *Ave Maryam* [Film], by Soediskam, 2018, 0:56:06.

Moreover, *Ave Maryam* underscores the close-knit relationships shared among the nuns, even amidst the oft-practiced silence within the convent. The concept of “*silencium incarnatum*,” reflective of the contemplative lifestyle characteristic of Catholic nuns, is poignantly portrayed. The film unveils moments of togetherness and unity within the nun community, evident in their heartfelt celebration of Maryam’s birthday through a surprise party and synchronized singing, emblematic of their deep affection and mutual care. They also enjoy dancing and joking during certain times, as seen in the scene where Yosef invites them to dance together. They know how to behave appropriately at different times. Their frequent congregational prayers during mass underscore their profound spiritual life and the unity that binds them within the monastic setting. In times of adversity, the film

emphasizes the unyielding solidarity among the nuns. They come together to deliberate and offer verbal support in times of strife, manifesting their unwavering backing for one another.

According to Sister Bertha, who is the head nun in Gedangan (where *Ave Maryam* was filmed), the activities of the sisters are to deepen the Catholic religion and serve the community (Firhannusa, 2023). These activities, from morning to evening prayers, to recreational time and housework, are all portrayed in the film.

Focalization and schemata: Audience perspective in *Ave Maryam*

This part will analyze focalization and schemata discussed by Mills (1995). In this film, the audience is positioned as a third party who knows everything, especially from the perspective of Maryam's heart. We see all of Maryam's movements, such as when she is alone praying in church, when she reads in her room and is about to sleep, and when she dreams of opening the window so a blue butterfly can enter. The audience also sees how Maryam admired Yosef while leading the orchestra. We also observe Maryam exploring Semarang and investigating Sisters Monic and Yosef. The audience knows the secret of their meetings in various places in Semarang, including at the Spiegel Cafe. We also see Maryam's distress over her sin with Yosef and her confusion when looking for Yosef's shadow on the train. Moreover, the audience understands why Maryam likes Yosef, even though several scenes also push the storyline beyond Maryam's personal story.

Maryam is also described as a nun with interests different from her profession. Instead of reading prayer books or scriptures, she reads novels such as *Madame Bovary* and other provocative books, one of which has a cover resembling a woman's womb. This depiction could be considered somewhat sexist, as it raises the question of why a nun could not be depicted reading material of a more spiritual or educational nature. There is an opinion that Maryam's curiosity about sexuality was influenced by her choice of reading.

This makes the audience feel like they are being led to believe that one of the sources of Maryam's curiosity about love and men is because she reads romantic novels and these books. This classic novel, released in 1856, tells the story of Emma, a woman who searches for love and luxury, which ends in infidelity and disappointment. The novel caused controversy at the time because it did not punish the protagonist for her sins, a theme that could have influenced Maryam's perception of love (Sastrayani, 2001). Another thing that might lead the audience to understand Maryam's admiration is Dinda's words that Yosef is "cakep" or handsome. "Handsome" is also a term used mainly for men's attractiveness (Mills, 1995).

The audience is also invited to understand Maryam's turmoil following the incident at the beach with Yosef. Maryam faces inner conflict, and viewers can sense her distress in several scenes, as shown in the images below. This is supported by various observations in articles and comments on Quora, highlighting that Maudy Koesnadi's portrayal of Maryam was commendable, making viewers feel the emotional intensity of sin and suffocation after the beach incident (Fadillah, 2020; Kirana, 2019; Setjaguna, 2019; Wardani, 2019). When Sister Maryam decides to leave the convent and her community, she bears the heavy burden of sin alone. The audience is also presented with a perspective on what happens after Maryam leaves the convent. She boards a train but is very confused when she sees Yosef's shadow. She then gets off the train and searches for Yosef.

In contrast, Yosef seems less affected by their shared mistake. To cope with his stress, Yosef is shown drinking beer and smoking in a café. This reflects the differences in how men and women handle problems. Maryam attempts to be reflective, while Yosef tends to deny that it was a mistake.

Maryam's departure prompts all the convent residents to hold a meeting with Yosef to discuss the issue. Meanwhile, Yosef can still argue with the nuns and appears unaffected. The senior nuns seem to resent Yosef's behavior but are powerless. Even after that, Yosef represents God in granting Maryam forgiveness during confession. He could have been honest or left the confession room, but he remains God's representative to absolve the sin he committed with Maryam. This reflects the reality in the church, where being a man and a religious leader comes with many privileges, including freedom from moral burdens when making mistakes. This mirrors real events, such as in Indonesia, where some cases involve children becoming victims of church authority abuse. The church's solution is often to transfer the priest to another parish without clear sanctions or reprimands (Adam, 2020). Women tend to be portrayed as wrong and marginalized compared to men (Eriyanto, 2001).

Several scenes show nuns worshipping in the church with the priest leading the mass. This also indicates gender dependency or inequality in the Catholic Church, where the leader must be a male priest. But my question here is, why do they have to worship in the church repeatedly when nuns can pray together without attending mass, which seems to be held daily? This, in our opinion, highlights the unequal relationship between nuns and priests. Men always lead, and women follow.

Additionally, several scenes depict how nuns rely on priests for transportation. In several scenes, only men, such as Yosef and Martin, who are priests, can drive vehicles like cars and bicycles. This use of vehicles signifies masculinity and suggests that women cannot use such vehicles.

Driving is a male specialization. Society's habit of placing men as responsible for women, their stronger physical condition, and men's proficiency in riding or driving motorbikes make men choose to give women a ride instead of the other way around. Furthermore, this societal habit relates to patriarchal culture, where men are considered to play a more important role in society than women, including in riding motorbikes (Setiyarini, 2014). Men are conditioned to be drivers and women to be passengers, to show men's responsibility for women. However, this often goes unnoticed by society because it has become a cultural habit passed down through generations.

In the end, the audience is ultimately given space to imagine what Maryam and Yosef do after Maryam unzips her dress. Viewers are led to believe what might happen next. The fragmented scenes of Maryam reflecting without clothing above her chest make the audience suspect that something taboo has occurred. Furthermore, the audience is invited to imagine the ending of Maryam's story. Although she confesses her sins to Yosef, he does not dare reveal his feelings; instead, he tries to forgive Maryam through penance for their mutual sins. Maryam leaves, and it is unclear where she goes. The audience is left to imagine her destination.

Conclusion

The film *Ave Maryam* offers a nuanced exploration of identity, particularly as it pertains to the roles and perceptions of women within a religious context. In terms of the subject-object position, the identities and representations of characters and their fragmentation in the film present several identities of the nuns. The main character, Maryam, represents the identity of a middle-aged woman who struggles for personal fulfillment within the boundaries of religious duty and cultural expectations. Meanwhile, Monic illustrates that the journey of a nun is not easy; anyone can be confused about their vocation at any time and in any form. Maryam is confused because she has found another form of love, namely love with a man, while Monic is confused because she knows that in the future, she will be a nun who is eventually buried in a convent. In the end, Monic also gives the impression of being a mother to Yosef and a wise senior nun who always reminds Yosef and does not judge Maryam.

Through its depiction of the nuns' daily activities and interactions, the film sheds light on the deeply ingrained cultural stereotypes and societal expectations that shape their identities. The portrayal of nuns performing domestic tasks similar to housewives underscores the traditional gender roles that continue to persist even within the confines of a religious community. This reflects a broader societal tendency to marginalize women and confine them to roles deemed appropriate by patriarchal standards.

The film also highlights the complex gender and hierarchical differences between men and women in the church, illustrating how male religious figures, such as priests, hold authority and privilege that often absolves them from moral accountability. This disparity is poignantly depicted through the contrasting experiences of Sister Maryam and Father Yosef in dealing with their forbidden relationship. While Maryam bears the heavy burden of guilt and sin, Yosef appears relatively unscathed, symbolizing the unequal distribution of moral and social responsibility.

Moreover, the strong sense of community and solidarity among the nuns reflects an alternative aspect of their identity. Despite the constraints imposed by societal and religious norms, the nuns demonstrate resilience, cooperation, and a deep familial bond. Their shared commitment to caring for one another and performing communal duties reinforces their collective identity, grounded in compassion and mutual support.

In terms of the audience position, viewers are given a first-person perspective to try to understand why Maryam is anxious and confused. They are also provided with insight into how Catholicism places an unequal relationship between priests and nuns. The audience is shown the differences in how men and women act, especially when they make mistakes. Additionally, viewers are encouraged to reflect on how, in Indonesian culture, particularly in Java, issues related to women are often considered inferior to those related to men.

As a result, this film becomes a medium for society to see the representation or identity of Catholic nuns in the media, where they can also learn about power relations in Catholicism. Furthermore, the film, with its many philosophical dialogues, invites the audience to think and reflect on themselves.

In essence, *Ave Maryam* challenges traditional notions of identity by presenting a multifaceted portrayal of women who navigate the intersections of gender, culture, and religion. It calls into question the societal constructs that define and limit women's roles while also celebrating the strength and unity that emerge within their community.

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