

Representation of Women in the film “Women From Rote Island”

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the representation of women in the film *Women from Rote Island* through John Fiske’s television semiotics framework. The film presents the struggles of women living in a patriarchal culture, facing sexual violence and social stigma within traditional Rote Island communities. The research adopts a qualitative descriptive method and applies semiotic analysis across three levels: reality, representation, and ideology. The focus of analysis includes the main female characters—Martha, Orpa, Bertha, and Oma.

Findings indicate that the film depicts women in multiple dimensions: as victims of sexual trauma, as authoritative maternal figures, and as collective agents of social resistance. The narrative highlights a conflict between customary norms and women's pursuit of justice through formal legal systems. Scenes depicting rape, marginalization, and protest emphasize women's resistance against structural oppression.

The representations align with radical feminist theory, which critiques entrenched gender-based power imbalances. This research contributes to the fields of communication, culture, and gender studies by demonstrating how film can function as a platform for social advocacy and a site for challenging patriarchal ideologies.

Keywords: *film, semiotics, sexual violence, Rote culture, women’s representation.*

INTRODUCTION

In the field of communication studies, media serves not only as a source of entertainment but also as a powerful cultural text that reflects and constructs social norms and ideologies. One of the persistent concerns in media studies is how women are represented across various formats, particularly in film. These representations often reflect patriarchal ideologies that relegate women to subordinate roles, either as passive domestic caretakers or as objects of male desire and control (Palulungan et al., 2020; Rokhmansyah, 2016).

In the Indonesian context, where patriarchal values remain embedded in both social and cultural systems, the representation of women in media often reinforces gender

stereotypes and social inequality. Women are frequently depicted as emotionally fragile, dependent on men, or confined to domestic spaces. This representation is not limited to entertainment media but extends into news, advertisements, and even political communication. As Handayani (2016) explains, such portrayals are deeply rooted in historical and structural power imbalances that diminish the agency and subjectivity of women in public life.

Indonesia, as a multicultural country, still adheres to deeply rooted patriarchal norms. Within this system, women are often seen as the “property” of male figures such as fathers or husbands. Fitriani and Wahyuni (2022) explain that such perspectives result in structural gender discrimination that limits women's autonomy—especially over their bodies and sexuality. This loss of bodily autonomy is exacerbated by a societal system that normalizes male dominance and control in both public and private spheres (Fujiati, 2016).

The prevalence of sexual violence further reveals the structural gender inequality in Indonesia. National statistics show that 70% of victims of sexual violence know the perpetrators personally (DetikBali, 2025). This underscores how violence is not only perpetuated by strangers but often embedded within the social fabric of family and community life. As gender-based violence becomes normalized, it undermines the capacity of victims to seek justice, particularly in rural and conservative regions.

The film *Women from Rote Island* (2023) addresses these issues head-on. Set in a rural community in East Nusa Tenggara, the film presents the realities faced by women who endure sexual violence, social exclusion, and patriarchal judgment while attempting to assert their rights. Inspired by real-life events, the film offers a compelling narrative about gender-based oppression and female agency in a context governed by rigid cultural traditions. With national and international recognition—including awards at the Festival Film Indonesia and nominations at the New York Asian Film Festival and Academy Awards—the film exemplifies how media can be used as a form of social critique and feminist resistance.

Through characters such as Martha, Orpa, and Bertha, the film not only dramatizes the trauma of sexual violence but also highlights women's capacity for resistance and solidarity. These women challenge societal norms, confront the silence surrounding abuse, and demand legal justice despite cultural taboos. This intersection between gender, law, and local tradition provides a rich field for academic analysis, particularly from a feminist communication perspective.

Previous research by Viona Margareta in 2022 from Buddhi Dharma University, titled “Representation of Women in Patriarchal Culture in the Film Yuni,” explored how women are portrayed within patriarchal culture through film, utilizing Roland Barthes’ semiotic method. Another study titled “Representation of Women in the Film ‘Before Now & Then’ (Nana)” conducted by Ilya Rani from Sultan Syarif Kasim State Islamic University in 2023, discussed similar themes. The findings of these studies indicated that female characters in films often experience various forms of gender injustice, characterized by exploitation, power dynamics,

patriarchy, and gender discrimination, analyzed through descriptive qualitative methods with Sara Mills' critical discourse analysis techniques.

This study employs John Fiske's television semiotics to analyze the multilayered meanings in the film. Fiske's framework—comprising reality codes, representation codes, and ideological codes—enables an in-depth reading of how meaning is constructed and communicated through visual and narrative elements. By applying this approach, the study investigates how the film negotiates between oppressive cultural ideologies and feminist resistance, offering alternative representations of women as active social agents rather than passive victims.

By situating the film within this method of study contributes to the broader field of media and gender studies in Indonesia. It reveals how media, particularly film, can act as a space for feminist advocacy, cultural resistance, and the articulation of marginalized voices. The intersection of film analysis, feminist theory, and local cultural critique offers new pathways for understanding how communication shapes and is shaped by gendered power dynamics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Film as Mass Communication

Film is an audiovisual medium that serves as both entertainment and a reflection of social life. According to McQuail (2010), film can act as a mirror of society, shaped by the perspective of its creators. Through messages delivered via visual, narrative, and symbolic codes, film functions not only as an art form but also as a persuasive and ideological tool. Krissandy (2014) highlights that film, as a form of mass communication, can present complex representations of human life, family structures, and cultural realities.

Women in Media

Women are social beings whose roles are shaped by historical, political, and cultural systems. Fakhri (2004) argues that society has long tied women's roles to their reproductive functions. Stellarosa and Silaban (2019) emphasize that in many patriarchal societies, women are positioned as subordinate to men and expected to conform to norms of obedience and dependence. These traditional roles are deeply embedded in social expectations and influence how women are portrayed in media.

Women's roles have historically been confined to domestic spheres. However, over time, women have increasingly taken on public roles in education, economy, and politics. Aulia (2017) notes that women are capable of being both homemakers and contributors to public life. Despite this progress, patriarchal culture still limits their independence and voice.

Rahmawati (2018) argues that women's leadership is often diminished or obstructed by patriarchal systems, making their access to decision-making roles difficult.

In the media industry, the representation of women remains a contested space. Media often portrays women as secondary characters, sexual objects, or emotional dependents. Siregar (in Jiyantoro, 2010) observes that women in media are frequently shown as beautiful, passive, and emotionally fragile. Handayani (2016) reinforces that this portrayal reduces women to symbols of desire rather than intellectual or autonomous figures.

Baria (2005) and Christandi (2013) argue that media outlets in Indonesia frequently present women through stereotypical lenses. Women are often not given the opportunity to express agency or act as decision-makers in narratives. Instead, they are placed in subordinate roles or positioned as victims who rely on male characters for resolution or salvation.

Although Indonesian cinema has begun to feature more female protagonists, their roles often remain confined by beauty standards or emotional vulnerability. Gauntlett (2008) explains that many female characters, even in contemporary films, are still expected to be attractive and morally virtuous. Female protagonists are rarely written with the same depth, complexity, or autonomy as their male counterparts.

Patriarchy

Patriarchy is a cultural and social system that places men in dominant positions of power and authority, while subordinating women. According to Hooks (1984) and Bressler (2007), patriarchy is not just about individual behavior but a structured system that influences institutions, relationships, and societal values.

In Indonesian society, patriarchal values are deeply rooted in familial and cultural practices. Fujiati (2016) asserts that women are often treated as the property of male family members, and their movements, choices, and expressions are subject to male approval. Susanto (2015) adds that this control extends to how women are educated, represented, and protected—or not—by legal and social institutions.

Feminism

Feminism is both a theoretical and political framework that challenges gender-based discrimination and advocates for gender equality. According to Tong (2018), feminism is concerned with exposing and opposing systemic power imbalances that oppress women and marginalize their contributions. Feminist theory critiques the ways in which cultural, political, and media structures reproduce patriarchy.

In Indonesia, early feminist advocacy is often attributed to R.A. Kartini, who championed women's education and equality during Dutch colonial rule, laying foundational ideas for later feminist movements in the country. Various feminist theories further enrich the discourse: Liberal feminism advocates for equal rights through legal reforms and equal opportunities; radical feminism calls for dismantling patriarchal systems entirely, emphasizing systemic cultural and structural change (Tong, 2018; Hooks, 2014). Marxist and

socialist feminism analyze the intersections of capitalism and class with gender oppression (Fraser, 2013), while intersectional feminism (Crenshaw, 1989) highlights the compounded nature of multiple identities in shaping oppression. Postmodern feminism, as articulated by Butler (1990), rejects fixed definitions of womanhood, viewing gender as a fluid social construct. Together, these waves and theoretical perspectives illustrate the dynamic and multifaceted nature of feminism as it continues to evolve and respond to changing social realities.

Representation

Representation is the process by which meaning is constructed and communicated through signs, symbols, and images. According to Hall (1997), media does not merely reflect reality—it constructs it. Media representations shape public perception and can either reinforce or challenge dominant ideologies. When applied to gender, representation theory helps explain how cultural values influence the portrayal of women in media texts.

Semiotics of John Fiske

Semiotics is the study of signs and how they produce meaning. In media studies, semiotics analyzes how visuals, sounds, and narratives create layered interpretations. Fiske (2007) emphasizes that media is a cultural code system, and meaning arises through the interaction between texts and audiences. Understanding semiotics allows researchers to uncover hidden ideologies and symbolic power in media content.

John Fiske developed a three-layer framework for analyzing television and film that helps unpack how meaning is constructed through various elements. The first layer, Reality Codes, includes aspects such as dress, language, behavior, and settings that simulate everyday life, grounding the narrative in recognizable social contexts. The second layer, Representation Codes, involves technical components like lighting, camera angles, editing, and genre conventions that shape how the story is visually and stylistically presented. Finally, the third layer, Ideological Codes, refers to the deep-seated values and assumptions about society—such as class, gender, and power—that are communicated implicitly or explicitly through the text.

Fiske's framework is particularly valuable in analyzing films like *Women from Rote Island*, as it allows viewers to see how the film constructs its meaning by layering the harsh realities of violence and resistance within the cinematic language of cultural tradition and ideology. Through this lens, the film's portrayal of social issues is not only a reflection of lived experience but also a commentary shaped by broader societal norms and power structures embedded in the narrative style and visual representation.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze the representation of women in the film *Women from Rote Island* (2023) through John Fiske's television semiotics theory. This method is suitable for interpreting cultural texts and understanding how visual and narrative codes convey social and ideological messages about gender and patriarchy. The film, directed by Jeremias Nyangoen, depicts women in Rote Ndao facing patriarchal oppression, sexual violence, and stigma. The analysis focuses on key characters—Martha, Orpa, Bertha, and Oma—who represent different aspects of gender identity, power, and resistance.

Data collection involved repeated viewing and detailed observation of scenes, dialogues, character behavior, and cinematic techniques such as lighting and camera work. These were documented through transcripts, screenshots, and notes, then organized for analysis. The study applies Fiske's three-level semiotic framework: reality codes (appearance, behavior, setting), representation codes (technical film elements), and ideological codes (underlying societal values like patriarchy). This layered analysis reveals how the film constructs meanings around gender oppression and resistance.

The researcher serves as the primary instrument, interpreting signs and symbols with theoretical insight while minimizing subjectivity through consistent methods and triangulation. This qualitative design combined with semiotic analysis provides a nuanced understanding of how *Women from Rote Island* communicates social and ideological messages about women's lived experiences in a specific cultural context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The representation of women in the film *Women from Rote Island* is analyzed using John Fiske's television semiotics theory, which consists of three levels: reality codes, representation codes, and ideological codes. The analysis focuses on selected scenes and main characters such as Martha, Orpa, Bertha, and Oma, who each represent different aspects of women's experiences in a patriarchal society.

Women Who Are Firm in Making Family Decision

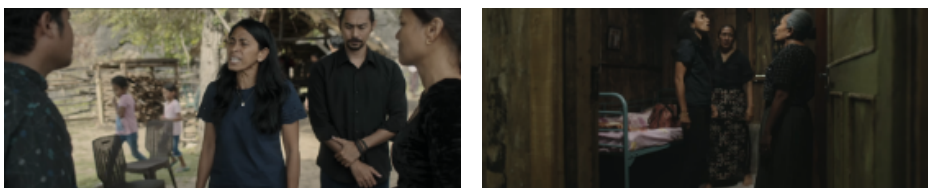


Figure 1 Women Who Are Assertive in Making Family Decision-Making

Source : Shakira, R. (Producer), & Nyangoen, J (Director). (2023). *Women from Rote Island* [Bintang Cahaya Sinema & Langit Terang Sinema]

The film's opening scene presents Orpa's firm refusal to bury her husband Abraham until their daughter Martha returns, establishing her resolute character and the film's focus on family, tradition, and resistance. The use of dark mourning attire symbolizes authority and strength, reinforcing the women's dominant roles (Schloss, 2012). Orpa's posture and gestures—such as upright sitting and furrowed brows—convey determination and control, signaling her defiance of customary pressure (Fiske, 1987).

Abraham's burial is delayed beyond the traditional three-day period in Rote culture, highlighting the tension between cultural norms and Orpa's personal conviction (Indonesian Minister of Women's Empowerment, 2014). Orpa's repeated affirmation that Martha "will definitely come back" uses repetition to emphasize her steadfast hope and firmness (Sulistijani, 2021). Her confrontation with her brother Habel over Martha's illegal migrant status is marked by assertive body language—raising her head and slamming her hand—expressing anger and dominance (Pease & Pease, 2004; Navarro, 2008). The film's cinematography, shifting from medium shots to close-ups, intensifies viewers' connection to Orpa's emotional struggle.

A debate between Orpa and Oma reveals generational and ideological conflicts. Both women use raised heads as nonverbal signals of confidence and dominance in their verbal confrontation (Pease & Pease, 2004). Orpa insists on honoring Abraham's last wish by waiting for Martha, despite social pressures to proceed with the burial. Oma prioritizes social conformity, underscoring the clash between individual agency and communal expectations. This firmness in decision-making reflects women's independence and courage in assuming responsibility (Kusumaningrum & Astuti, 2018).

Orpa's determination extends beyond the burial issue. After Martha returns with mental illness and faces repeated sexual harassment, Orpa and Bertha struggle to manage the family's burdens but neglect Martha's vulnerability, leading to tragic consequences. Martha's victimization underscores the devastating effects of social stigma and familial neglect, highlighting the complex challenges women face within patriarchal and traditional structures



Figure 2 Women Who Are Assertive in Making Family Decision-Making

Source : Shakira, R. (Producer), & Nyangoen, J (Director). (2023). *Women from Rote Island* [Bintang Cahaya Sinema & Langit Terang Sinema]

The scene depicts Orpa's firm response to the revelation that her brother Habel raped Martha. Despite Habel and Yanti's pleas to handle the matter privately, Orpa insists on involving legal authorities, repeatedly condemning their actions with phrases like "You are indeed barbaric!" and "You must deal with the police!" This repetition underscores her unwavering stance and courage in confronting the issue, consistent with Sulistijani's (2021) view that repetition strengthens firmness in expression. Orpa's authoritative demeanor leaves no room for negotiation, emphasizing her commitment to justice.

The film shows how such cases are often initially dealt with within families. Habel and Yanti attempt to apologize by digging up Habel's mother's grave, a traditional act of contrition, hoping to avoid police involvement. However, Orpa rejects this, prioritizing the protection of potential victims over family privacy. She clearly states that while she does not hate them, the case must be reported to prevent future harm, reflecting her firm boundary-setting and protective attitude.

This narrative mirrors real social issues in East Nusa Tenggara, where many sexual violence cases remain unreported or resolved within families due to stigma, with perpetrators often being relatives (Kompas.id, 2023). Orpa's firmness exemplifies a stance against such norms, demonstrating that firmness involves both verbal assertiveness and a principled attitude to uphold justice and social order.

Position of Women in Sexuality Issues



Figure 3 Position of Women in Sexuality Issues

Source : Shakira, R. (Producer), & Nyangoen, J (Director). (2023). *Women from Rote Island* [Bintang Cahaya Sinema & Langit Terang Sinema]

The film portrays Martha as a vulnerable woman traumatized by sexual violence experienced as an undocumented migrant worker in Malaysia. This vulnerability is exploited by men, exemplified by Marco's inappropriate behavior, reflecting how women are often objectified and subjected to harassment (Ayyasi Rindang, 2020). The setting contrasts Martha's innocence with the harsh reality of patriarchal dominance.

In Rote society, men hold primary authority within a patrilineal-patrilocal system, controlling lineage and family power (Tulle, K. E. D. 2016). Women are often viewed as

subordinate and as property of men, limiting their freedom and rights (Konde.co, 2022; Sari, 2019). This patriarchal view legitimizes acts like Marco's deliberate touching of Martha without apology.

Such perceptions of women as weak contribute to the prevalence of sexual violence. Dewi Aulia Paraswati (2021) notes that cultural values positioning women as weak facilitate these abuses. Despite legal efforts, victims face obstacles including criminalization and delays, with lasting psychological harm (Komnas Perempuan, 2024; Tayama Jose, 2021). The film's depiction of Martha's victimization reflects these societal issues, highlighting the intersection of vulnerability, patriarchal control, and sexual violence.



Figure 4 Position of Women in Sexuality Issues

Source : Shakira, R. (Producer), & Nyangoen, J (Director). (2023). *Women from Rote Island* [Bintang Cahaya Sinema & Langit Terang Sinema]

The two images depict Martha's sexual assault within the confined, chained bedroom, emphasizing her vulnerability and the somber atmosphere through dark lighting and simple attire worn by Martha and Orpa. Martha's trauma symbolizes broader patriarchal power imbalances where women often suffer oppression in both private and public spheres (MAMPU Program, 2023). Cinematic techniques like Long Shot and Close-Up intensify the tension and sense of entrapment, as explained by Bordwell and Thompson (2008).

Non-verbal interactions in the second image—Habel's intrusion and Martha's fearful resistance—highlight violations of personal space and social norms governing behavior. Martha's expressions and movements reveal deep helplessness, reflecting the physical and psychological trauma victims endure. This aligns with findings that sexual violence causes lasting wounds and challenges in recovery and justice (Komnas Perempuan, 2024).



Figure 5 Position of Women in Sexuality Issues

Source : Shakira, R. (Producer), & Nyangoen, J (Director). (2023). *Women from Rote Island* [Bintang Cahaya Sinema & Langit Terang Sinema]

The film powerfully depicts Orpa's experience of sexual harassment when a teenage boy presses his genitals against her in a busy market, highlighting the objectification and sexualization of women in public spaces (Ayyasi Rindang, 2020). Close-up shots of Orpa's face capture her exhaustion and psychological distress, emphasizing the emotional toll such violations inflict. Orpa openly condemns the act, expressing anger and frustration, which underscores her resilience despite the trauma (World Health Organization, 2017). However, instead of receiving support, Orpa faces blame from her own family for breaking cultural mourning customs by leaving the house before her husband's burial—a period when family members are traditionally expected to stay indoors as a sign of respect (Indonesian Ministry of Women's Empowerment, 2014). This blame reflects a pervasive victim-blaming culture, where women are held responsible for the violence inflicted upon them due to perceived breaches of social norms or behavior (Goodstats.id, 2024).

Such attitudes are deeply rooted in patriarchal values that dominate many Indonesian communities, including Rote society, where men hold primary authority and women's roles are restricted (Konde.co, 2022). The family's reaction illustrates how cultural norms can be manipulated to justify sexual violence, shifting accountability away from perpetrators and onto victims. This dynamic not only silences women but also perpetuates cycles of abuse by discouraging victims from seeking justice or support. The film further explores these systemic issues through Martha's return and subsequent pregnancy, symbolizing the ongoing vulnerability of women to sexual violence within these patriarchal structures.

By portraying these incidents, the film critiques the intersection of cultural tradition, gender inequality, and sexual violence, urging viewers to recognize the harmful effects of victim-blaming and the urgent need for societal change.



Figure 6 Position of Women in Sexuality Issues

Source : Shakira, R. (Producer), & Nyangoen, J (Director). (2023). *Women from Rote Island* [Bintang Cahaya Sinema & Langit Terang Sinema]

The film scene shows a community discussion sparked by the police report of Martha's rape, revealing deeply ingrained stereotypes that women must protect themselves from such violence. Women including Orpa, Koba, Yani, and Bertha express frustration over the slow police response and question the possibility of catching the perpetrator, reflecting real challenges victims face, such as criminalization and delays in justice (Komnas Perempuan, 2024). Their conversation also exposes societal expectations that women

maintain appearances to keep husbands faithful, with harsh remarks about punishing unfaithful men, yet acknowledging ongoing sexual violence and ineffective interventions.

This dialogue illustrates victim-blaming attitudes prevalent in the community, where responsibility is shifted onto women to guard themselves against violence, effectively portraying them as provocateurs rather than victims (Nurhadi, 2021). Phrases like “daughters must be guarded” and “not just daughters, sons too” reveal internalized beliefs that women’s behavior or presence invites abuse. This reflects persistent patriarchal norms that complicate responses to sexual violence and perpetuate gender inequality.

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Women Who Fights for Freedom from Sexual Violence



Figure 7 Women Who Fights for Freedom from Sexual Violence

Source : Shakira, R. (Producer), & Nyangoen, J (Director). (2023). *Women from Rote Island* [Bintang Cahaya Sinema & Langit Terang Sinema]

The scene portrays Martha's determined effort to protect bird eggs, symbolizing her fight for freedom amid sexual violence. She encounters Om Ezra, who rapes her, intensifying her isolation and vulnerability in an unfamiliar, oppressive environment. The dark visuals and natural setting emphasize this, while Martha's green dress symbolizes fragile hope and life (Fiske, 1987). Birds, culturally seen as symbols of freedom and spirituality in Indonesia and Rote Island folklore, deepen this metaphor (Detik.com, 2023).

Martha's empathy for the bird's eggs—expressed through gentle dialogue and calm demeanor—reflects her inner strength despite trauma. Fiske (1987) notes that body language and facial expressions communicate social meaning; here, close-up shots link Martha and the bird as symbols of vulnerability and resilience. Martha's struggle for freedom parallels the bird's fragility, highlighting her fight not only for herself but also for hope and life.

Tragically, after Martha's escape, the bird is crushed, symbolizing the suppression of hope and freedom. This poignant imagery encapsulates the ongoing battle women face against sexual violence and societal constraints.

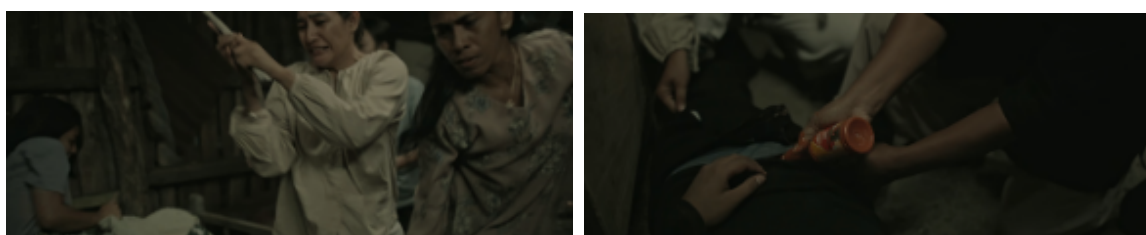


Figure 8 Women Who Fights for Freedom from Sexual Violence

Source : Shakira, R. (Producer), & Nyangoen, J (Director). (2023). *Women from Rote Island* [Bintang Cahaya Sinema & Langit Terang Sinema]

The film's dark, minimally lit wooden room creates a tense, mysterious atmosphere that mirrors the characters' anger and frustration. Their shocked expressions and aggressive movements toward the rapist reveal instinctive reactions to the threat. The heated dialogue among Orpa, Koba, Oma, and others reflects cultural norms of seeking justice through customary law, embodying resistance to sexual violence (Sari & Wulandari, 2021).

Ambient sounds like shouting and insect chirping heighten the emotional tension, while camera techniques such as Medium Close-Up and tracking shots emphasize facial expressions and narrative depth (Thayer, 2000). The family's united effort to capture the rapist symbolizes solidarity and a collective fight against impunity, challenging social norms that often silence victims.

The film also highlights the importance of collective action beyond the family, showing women joining demonstrations at the police station to advocate for rights and safety. This synergy among individuals, groups, and institutions is vital for strengthening efforts to end sexual violence and create a safer environment (CARE Indonesia, 2025). The portrayal

aligns with broader themes of gender dynamics, victim-blaming, and women's empowerment explored in film analysis and gender studies



Figure 9 Women Who Fights for Freedom from Sexual Violence

Source : Shakira, R. (Producer), & Nyangoen, J (Director). (2023). *Women from Rote Island* [Bintang Cahaya Sinema & Langit Terang Sinema]

The film's vibrant afternoon visuals, featuring Rote women in colorful batik dresses, symbolize cultural identity, vitality, and communal solidarity (Hall, 1966). Their courageous facial expressions and synchronized actions—striking kitchen utensils and shouting—demonstrate collective bravery and unity, reinforcing their shared struggle against sexual violence (Turner, 1969). The repeated chant “Rise up!” serves as a powerful call for justice and gender equality, reflecting ongoing community dialogues that foster women's rights and social change.

The energetic sounds and creative use of household items as percussion heighten tension and urgency, aligning with Thayer's (2000) insights on music's role in emphasizing emotional dynamics. Camera techniques like Bird's Eye View and Medium Close-Up Tracking, combined with sunlight contrasts, intensify the emotional impact by highlighting the tension between the bright setting and serious issues (Bordwell & Thompson, 2008). This demonstration embodies values of justice, equality, and solidarity, as the women demand thorough investigations into harassment, underscoring their commitment to protecting women's rights (Park, 2005).

Historically seen as passive, the women's active fight for freedom from sexual violence in the film symbolizes a broader Indonesian women's movement, marking a shift toward empowerment and advocacy

Data Interpretation

Women from Rote Island describes the social reality of Rote women constructed through customs in the whirlpool of gender conflict. From a communication science perspective, this film serves as a medium of representation conveying social messages about gender inequality, patriarchy dominance, and women's struggles. These messages are expressed through visual symbols, strong character narratives, and touching dramatic

atmospheres. In line with McQuail (2010), film not only reflects society but also actively shapes the construction of social meaning, influencing public views on certain issues, including gender issues.

The female characters in the film, such as Orpa, Martha, and Bertha, are represented not merely as victims of violence or social subordination but as subjects aware of their positions within the system and striving for resistance. The struggle of women against all forms of sexual violence and their assertiveness in facing issues of oppression by men within the culture is a demonstrated form of resistance. This film shows that Rote women, despite living in a strongly patriarchal and structured customary system, do not resign or fully submit. They are depicted with courage, social awareness, and distinctive leadership, blending feminine values with personal power. As stated in the journal, radical feminism "challenges us to change the social systems we consider normal in order to achieve true justice and freedom for women" (Rizki, 2025).

This film depicts how women actively engage in cultural dynamics through various customary practices, such as home confinement during mourning, Keblai dances, and comfort rituals. However, these customary limitations often restrict their mobility. For instance, Orpa is judged for violating norms by leaving the house before her husband's burial, leading to sexual harassment in the market. Martha, as her daughter, returns traumatized due to the sexual violence experienced while being an illegal migrant worker. Even Orpa's fight for justice regarding the sexual harassment her family faced can be blamed and construed as her failure to care for her child properly. These pressures place women in vulnerable positions, but do not erase their potential for empowerment.

Like other patriarchal cultures, Rote's patriarchal culture places women in subordinate positions and often treats them as objects of male sexuality. The film critically showcases this reality through scenes where Orpa is physically harassed by a boy in the market, Martha is touched without consent by a teenage boy, and Bertha experiences violence. In line with Fujiati (2016), the film illustrates how in a patriarchal system, women's bodies are viewed as symbols of purity and objects of control, making them more vulnerable to gender-based violence. This concrete gender conflict is depicted in the film.

Ironically, one of the film's biggest issues arises when Martha is raped by Habel, Orpa's brother, yet many push to handle this sexual violence through family customary practices instead of legal means. This is evident in the scene where Orpa discusses Martha's act of burning Kobis's house with the Elder and Bapak Maneleo, illustrating the extensive roles of men in the customary structure. This highlights how the strong influence of customs involving patriarchal culture often becomes a barrier to achieving justice. Rape and sexual harassment cases are often resolved through patriarchal-dominant customary law, which frequently disregards the rights of victims. Female victims can only submit to the decisions made, without any discussion on the perpetrator's accountability. Moreover, the victim's family is asked to pay customary fines as a form of settlement, thus positioning the victim as the one who suffers (Kompas.id, 2023; Validnews.id, 2024).

However, the film does not stop at the representation of women as victims. Instead, it presents a narrative of resistance and defiance. The scene of Martha taking a machete to chase the harasser symbolizes a reversal of position—from object to subject. Likewise, Bertha spontaneously defends her sister. These acts of resistance are not merely self-defense but also an affirmation of self-worth and bodily autonomy. As Butler (1990) asserts, women's bodies are political arenas where power relations are negotiated. When women choose to fight back, they dismantle the power structures that have oppressed them.

The resistance of Rote women is also reflected in how they continue to uphold values and act as community movers. Women's leadership in households and communities is exemplified by Orpa leading her family after her husband's death, and Oma as a wise figure in decision-making matters. Though often emotional, their decisions reflect strong interpersonal communication and social intuition typically feminine. In line with Bell Hooks (2000), the film shows that women's leadership need not eliminate femininity—rather, strength and gentleness can coexist in creating authentic and transformative leadership. Thus, the resistance exhibited by women is not merely defensive action but also an affirmation of self-esteem and bodily rights marking efforts to dismantle oppressive patriarchal structures. This is at the heart of radical feminism, which demands systemic and revolutionary change, not merely reform.

Furthermore, the film shows how women lead in public spheres. The scene of the demonstration at the police station led by Orpa and the group of Rote mothers becomes a symbol of collective solidarity and moral courage in pursuing justice. In line with the quote from CARE Indonesia's *Solidaritas Perempuan* (2015), "To encourage and protect groups of women from various forms of violence and sexual harassment cannot be done individually, but needs to be a collaborative effort." Collaborations among groups, organizations, and institutions strengthen their struggles in voicing aspirations and creating safe spaces free from violence.

Women are depicted as weak in the film yet actively seek ways to attain freedom from ongoing oppression. Through the demonstrations that employ domestic symbols, like cooking utensils, they assert that the voices of housewives are valid and important in the public sphere. This emphasizes that women's resistance is not only through physical confrontation but also by reclaiming social spaces and meanings traditionally dominated by males. Hand in hand and united, women's strength becomes far greater than struggling alone. In line with Park (2005), the film shows that community-based women's movements often represent the most authentic form of participatory democracy and social empowerment.

The unity of women in this film is also portrayed several times. Although they often exchange opinions, they maintain high solidarity and full awareness. An example in the film is how Oma and Koba continually encourage Orpa to bring the issue into the legal arena. Bertha and other mothers also ponder the latest news from the police, who have yet to respond. Therefore, they unite to voice the Rote women's hearts for justice and a thorough investigation into the harassment against women.

Each message and portrayal of women in this film is illustrated through John Fiske's television codes. At the reality level, elements such as appearance, costume, and dialogue are found. The representation level shows how cinematographic techniques, lighting, and music play important roles in representing the assertiveness, struggle, and atmosphere of their conversations. Lastly, an analysis at the ideological level successfully reveals the ideologies that emerge and are depicted in this film.

The representation of women in *Women from Rote Island* cannot be read simply as a portrait of victims or mere cultural symbols. Women in this film are shown as complex entities: vulnerable yet strong, submissive to culture yet critical of it, gentle yet capable of taking firm action when needed. They are the guardians of values, social actors, and agents of change. Amid the growing number of violence cases against women in Indonesia—reaching 445,502 cases in 2024, an increase of 9.77 percent from the previous year—the situation has become increasingly alarming (Komnas Perempuan, 2024). In East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), the crisis is even more severe, with 398 cases of sexual violence involving victims aged 2 to 18 years, marking the region as being in a state of emergency regarding sexual abuse (Detikcom, 2024). Furthermore, data reveals that approximately 75 percent of the 3,052 inmates in NTT are perpetrators of sexual crimes, underscoring the high prevalence of such offenses in the province (Kompas.com, 2025). Therefore, this issue is not only relevant to the people of Rote Island but also reflects the broader struggle of Indonesian women in confronting patriarchal systems and striving for gender equality.

CONCLUSION

The film *Women From Rote Island* offers a compelling portrayal of the realities faced by women in Rote Island through various conflicts and social issues embedded in its narrative. These include Abraham's funeral, violations of customary law, illegal labor, sexual harassment, sexual violence, and the determined resistance of women against these challenges. The film conveys powerful social messages about gender inequality, patriarchal dominance, and women's ongoing struggle for empowerment and resistance against social oppression.

Applying John Fiske's semiotic approach at three levels—reality, representation, and ideology—this study finds that the film comprehensively depicts women's fight against sexual violence, gender injustice, and patriarchal control within the local society of Rote Island, East Nusa Tenggara. It challenges the traditional perception of women as weak and powerless, dominated by men, by also portraying women who courageously resist oppression through solidarity and collective action.

At the reality level, women are shown through their appearance, expressions, behaviors, and social environment, reflecting structural limitations they face. Characters such as Martha, Orpa, Bertha, and Oma Martha reveal a spectrum of emotions from trauma and helplessness to active resistance. Cinematic elements like camera angles, lighting, and

narrative structure at the representation level reinforce the visual meaning of women's subordination while simultaneously framing the rise of collective female consciousness confronting oppressive power structures. Scenes of demonstrations and legal decisions made by female characters symbolize courage and intergenerational solidarity within a deeply patriarchal culture.

Ideologically, the film explicitly critiques the patriarchal social system that normalizes violence against women and highlights the importance of female resistance to unequal power relations. The local culture of Rote Island, which tends to subordinate women, is critically examined, yet the film also illustrates social transformation where women no longer remain silent but boldly demand justice. Some scenes reflect a radical feminist ideology, identifying patriarchy and traditional gender roles as the root causes of women's oppression.

For example, the scene where Orpa experiences sexual harassment but is blamed for violating customs by leaving the house before Abraham's burial, and the delayed funeral, illustrates victim-blaming. Similarly, the questioning of who raped Martha and the mothers' remarks about protecting daughters reveal patriarchal pressures on women to maintain appearances and family honor. The dominance of male elders and village heads further underscores patriarchal control.

Overall, *Women From Rote Island* not only portrays women's suffering but also symbolizes their struggle to reclaim authority over their bodies and lives, reflecting radical feminist ideals. It breaks the stereotype of women as weak and possessions of men, portraying them as active agents resisting sexual violence and traditional gender roles. The film serves as an effective medium to convey social messages and provoke critical reflection on women's representation in marginalized communities, especially in eastern Indonesia, which has been underrepresented in mainstream media discourse.

Despite these valuable insights, this study has several limitations. It relies primarily on a single film as a cultural text, which may not fully represent the diverse experiences of women across the broader Rote Island community or other regions. The use of John Fiske's semiotic approach, while effective in analyzing signs and symbols, may not capture the full socio-political complexities or lived realities beyond cinematic representation. Additionally, the analysis lacks direct ethnographic or empirical data from the local community, which could provide deeper contextual understanding and validation of the film's portrayal. The focus on radical feminist ideology might also overlook other intersecting factors such as class, age, or religion that influence women's experiences and forms of resistance. Furthermore, as a constructed narrative, the film may include dramatizations or artistic liberties that shape its representation of social issues, which calls for caution when generalizing the findings. Future research incorporating fieldwork and diverse methodologies would help address these limitations and provide a more comprehensive understanding of gender and power relations in Rote Island society.

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