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Reshaping Women's Ambiguity in Indonesian Thriller Novels And Film Of 2000-2020

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Abstract

This study aims to find new forms of ambiguity manifested by female characters in Indonesian thriller novels and films produced in 2000-2020. The data sources in this study are two novels and five Indonesian thriller films and the corpus data is taken from the speech and dialogue of seven female characters who play the role of wives and housewives. This research method is a qualitative method with observation and note-taking techniques. The data was analyzed using Althusser's ideological theory of the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and the Ideology State Apparatus (ISA). The findings of this study found that the ambivalence carried out by the female characters in this film is not merely an attitude that arises because of despair as a result of the pressure of the patriarchal system. On the contrary, ambivalence is also a survival mechanism and further, a mechanism to improve the position of women in the patriarchal system by optimizing strength and intelligence in seeing the defects of the patriarchal system.

1. Introduction

The discourse surrounding women and the masculinity exhibit in Indonesia has long been a topic of discussion. Women express themselves not only through femininity—often associated with their physical appearance (Budiana D., 2024:684)—but also by embodying traits traditionally categorized as masculine, such as strength and power. Situations in which women become the breadwinners, fight for child custody, or endure polygamous marriages to preserve family integrity exemplify the display of female masculinity (Jamillah, J.A., 2023:5). However, this is often misinterpreted as moral ambiguity in female characters navigating a patriarchal system.

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From this standpoint, various concepts of gender-based ambivalence have emerged, rooted in power relations that objectify women as products of shifting power dynamics in Indonesia (Fatmawati et al., 2022:11). This narrative often legitimizes and perpetuates male dominance over women in society (Nisar, 2021:93), frequently maintained through violence (Menegatti, 2022:2) which becoming a global phenomenon (Gutierezz, 2024:877)

This phenomenon has been portrayed by Indonesian novelists and filmmakers in their female characters of their works. Female masculinity, evolving alongside societal changes, has reshaped how literary writers present female characters and masculine traits (Eklund, L. et al., 2024:18). As time progresses, female masculinity is depicted in new ways, dismantling the previously fixed image of women. For instance, Virginia Woolf challenged conventional femininity by advocating for female autonomy and self-expression (Yasin, 2016:200). This idea has inspired Indonesian writers and directors to adopt a similar approach, positioning female characters as central figures in their narratives. By reimagining the concept of ambivalence, these creators transform traditional notions into something contemporary and dynamic (Sanders, 2022:657). Whether consciously acknowledged or not, this new form of woman represents a new persona within societal institutions Eissa (2024:127), aligning with what Althusser (2015:21) refers to as the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA).

Many 21st-century novels and films highlight women as single parents navigating the tension between maintaining their households and coping with marginalization in a patriarchal system (Akass, A., 2022:185). Another cases portrays women character as a wife who is pressured by the ir community system that urge them to take an unusual action regarding to their role (Syarifudin, 2025:172). A fundamental question then arises: is this ambivalence a genuine internal conflict, or is it a strategic response to patriarchal pressure designed to ensure survival and agency?

Previous research has primarily focused on the ambivalence created by the double standards that the patriarchal system imposes on women (Moumni, O., 2024:1448). Motherhood and a wife are often portrayed as the core site of ambivalent behaviour, shaped by emotional complexity and gendered power dynamics (Wahlström, 2023:5). This highlights women's position within the patriarchal structure (Hasan, 2022:344), yet little research has examined how women in literary works actively utilize patriarchy to advance their social status.

Ambivalence arises from the internal conflict between emotions and roles that cannot easily coexist (Zoppolat, G. et al., 202:81). This conflict shapes the moral ambiguity of female characters' actions, particularly in how they interact with others (Brewington, 2022:1544). Patriarchy further intensifies this ambiguity by defining women's roles inside the domestic sphere. Female characters cultivate new forms of ambivalence through these interactions, revealed in the language of novels and the dialogues of films. These expressions show how women engage with their circumstances and assert masculine traits strategically to achieve their goals within a patriarchal framework Mandela (2024:148).

This study offers a fresh perspective on the ambivalence of female characters in Indonesian thriller novels and films produced in 2000 to 2020, as they confront patriarchy. The thriller novels and films in this period were used as research objects because the female characters in them show the attitude of female masculinity in the form of ambivalence very strongly. Their ambivalence does not reflect despair over societal stereotypes; rather, it showcases their intelligence and adaptability. By aspiring to become household heads, these women challenge traditional gender roles. Their awareness of being positioned as second-class citizens does not diminish their resolve—it sharpens their ability to identify and exploit weaknesses in the patriarchal system, thereby opening pathways toward equality in specific contexts.

2. Literature Review

Previous research states that ambivalence is a label society attaches to female characters due to their rebellion against patriarchy. Furthermore, it is argued that ambivalence stems from social class factors and the alienation they experience (Williamson, 2021:253). More specifically, this ambivalence arises from their role as housewives (Budhiana, 2024:648). The ambivalence associated with the role of housewives, on one hand, becomes a form of resistance to patriarchy in all its manifestations (Ripki, 2024:19). Their position as housewives, along with their physical characteristics, contributes to society's labeling of this ambivalence (Manggarsari, 2023:243). The domination of female characters is portrayed as an accusatory voice that marginalizes them by associating them with dominant or deviant attitudes (Sutandio, 2024:11). Over time, this labeling turns into a form of propaganda enforced by the regime (Agani, 2022:210). For example, propaganda often targets Muslim women who are forbidden from removing their hijab, framing this as an act of obedience (Kütük-Kuris, 2021:19). The involvement of legal and social institutions reinforces the stereotyping of women (Jamilah, 2023:239). These institutions are referred to as the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). These apparatuses offer women no space to defend themselves regarding the ambivalence they express. As a result, women face dilemmas in speaking out or asserting themselves (Hadi, 2016:26). This dilemma may manifest as aggression toward their surroundings, which society perceives as ambivalence without nuance.

Other studies also emphasize that the aggressiveness of female characters in pursuing their goals is interpreted as a form of ambivalence that harms society (Mandela, 2024:148). This negative ambivalence includes dominant behavior toward men (Sholihah, 2023:114). Such portrayals are often found in female characters in Indonesian novels and films. These studies ultimately interpret ambivalence solely as a negative expression of women's movement in response to an oppressive society. Furthermore, they fail to consider how women might strategically utilize the RSA and ISA to achieve their objectives. They also overlook the possibility that ambivalence can represent women's efforts to survive and assert control over their circumstances for the well-being of themselves and their families within the domestic sphere.

3. Methods

This research employs a qualitative approach, grounded in the assumption that understanding the world emerges through the construction of subjective meaning portrayed by the women characters in the Indonesia thriller novels and films produced in 2000-2020. These meanings give rise to complex and varied perspectives. Accordingly, the study explores the interactions among characters and delves into specific contexts to understand the historical and cultural backgrounds that shape their experiences. Character's history lived experience, and cultural context all contribute to interpretation (Creswell, 2009).

The primary data consists of utterances and dialogues of female characters that reflect ambivalence, as portrayed in selected Indonesian thriller novels and films produced in 2000 to 2020. Data collection is conducted through observation and note-taking techniques, allowing for a focused examination of key scenes and interactions.

The analysis adopts a qualitative method, utilizing Althusser's theory of ideology (2004), particularly the concepts of the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), to examine the position and representation of women in society. A descriptive approach is employed in presenting the findings, with the support of tables and visual elements to enhance the clarity and depth of the analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

This study found that the ambivalence of female characters in selected Indonesian thriller novels and films produced in 2000 to 2020 frequently manifests within the domestic sphere, particularly in their roles as wives and mothers. The following table presents examples of female characters and their ambivalent actions in both domestic domains of Indonesian thriller novels and movie produced in 2000 to 2020.

Table 1. Ambivalent Comen's Characters innINdonesian Thriller Novels and fims produced in 2000-2020

No	Character's Name	Character's Role	Ambivalence
1	Madrim	Wife	Opposes polygamy, yet engages in an affair with another man
2	Nana	Wife	Loves her missing husband, yet accepts another man's proposal
3	Sari	Wife	Loves her husband, yet decides to divorce him
4	Marlina	Wife	A devoted wife, yet has intercourse with a stranger in front of her late husband's body
5	Menik Sasongko	Mother	Loves her family, yet plans to destroy her son
6	Nyi Misni	Mother	Loves her son, yet becomes a control freak
7	Ibu	Mother	Love her family, yet joining the satanic cult

The table illustrates how ambivalence is displayed by female characters in Indonesian thriller novels and films between 2000-2020, particularly in the private (domestic) realm. Regardless of their roles—whether as wives or mothers—these characters remain deeply entangled in patriarchal structures that produce and perpetuate their ambivalence. The following discussion analyzes their ambivalent behaviors based on their respective roles and contexts.

In the novel Doa Ibu (2007), the character Madrim—a wife—demonstrates ambivalence rooted in the clash between moral responsibility and emotional desire. As the first wife, she maintains a firm stance against polygamy, yet engages in a romantic relationship with another man. Her ambivalence is shaped by external pressures that force her to leave the man she loves and marry someone else, while still caring deeply for her former lover. Rather than succumbing to despair, Madrim exhibits strategic resilience—a trait traditionally coded as masculine—by securing her future through marriage.

Madrim leverages her position as the first wife to assert her rights, particularly through her involvement with the Legal Aid Institution in claiming her husband's inheritance. This demonstrates her strategic use of the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA). However, her emotional attachment to another man undermines her ideological stance on loyalty, placing her in a morally ambivalent position. She simultaneously resists and conforms to patriarchal norms, reflecting the complex moral and emotional dilemmas women face in such systems.

Importantly, Madrim's ambivalence is not inherent to her character alone; it emerges from environmental pressures that forced her to abandon one relationship and adapt to another. Her decision to remarry is a rational response to abandonment and a strategic step toward securing her future—rather than a betrayal of emotional fidelity.

A similar dynamic is present in Nana (Before, Now & Then, 2022), where the character Nana, after years of uncertainty regarding her missing husband, accepts a marriage proposal from another man. This decision reflects an ambivalence in loyalty—an expectation deeply embedded

in patriarchal norms. Yet, Nana's choice is less about emotional betrayal and more about survival. Her prolonged loneliness, compounded by societal and economic pressures, compels her to make a pragmatic decision that ensures her well-being. The bold action to get new marriage offers not only companionship but also social and financial security.

Nana's attitude can be interpreted as ambivalent, seemingly driven by personal gain. However, this is not necessarily the case. The loneliness of a woman without a husband, regardless of her personal strength, is constantly threatened by social pressures. Stereotypes rooted in patriarchal society offer no protection; instead, they generate physical and psychological vulnerability. These dynamics reflect a power relationship enacted through RSA, which imposes pressure on her via negative stereotypes about unmarried women. Nana then interprets this pressure as an opportunity—leveraging her situation to survive. Her decision to accept another man's proposal is not an act of weakness, but one of resilience.

Another example is Sari, from the film Kala (2008), who loves her husband yet chooses to divorce him. Her husband's condition—narcolepsy—becomes a source of emotional conflict. Sari's decision to leave Janus is supported by the court, which acts as an RSA. Here, the legal system empowers her to end the marriage. Her ambivalence reflects inner strength and the willingness to prioritize a more rational and secure future over emotional attachment.

In a similarly complex situation, Marlina—the protagonist of Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts (2017)—experiences ambivalence as a wife. Her love for her late husband remains strong, as shown through her efforts to protect his reputation and resolve his debts. Marlina's strength and intelligence enable her to endure and survive a traumatic assault by a debt collector, whom she ultimately kills in self-defense. Through this act, she not only reclaims her agency but also symbolically protects her husband's legacy.

Marlina's position as a victim of RSA is strategically turned to her advantage. The arrival of the debt collector represents the coercive power of the state, echoing Althusser's theory of servitude imposed on the weaker party (2015:32). However, Marlina consciously reverses this dynamic. Her apparent surrender is part of a calculated strategy that ultimately shifts the balance of power in her favor.

In the domestic sphere, maternal ambivalence is also evident in characters such as Menik Sasongko from the novel Forbidden Door (2004) and Nyi Misni from the film Impetigore (2019). Both women, despite being loving mothers, become overprotective to the point of being controlling. Their affection, driven by a desire to secure their children's futures, manifests as interference in both personal and public domains.

Menik Sasongko believes that happiness is achieved through hard work, a value shaped by her experience as a diligent wife. Frustrated by her husband's failure to be a responsible head of the household, she assumes control, working tirelessly and passing this ethos onto her children. Her efforts to ensure their success result in her becoming a micro-manager, exhibiting ambivalence: on one hand, she is a loving mother; on the other, she limits her children's autonomy.

Similarly, Nyi Misni's overprotectiveness stems from her role as a single mother. Her desire to shield her only child intensifies once he becomes the village head. Her influence extends beyond the domestic sphere into public life, effectively making her the decision-maker in both realms. Her son's voice and actions become indistinguishable from her own. This reflects the benevolent and hostile attitude of her. The ambivalence stems from a sincere desire to protect him from perceived dangers but ultimately results in an unhealthy consolidation of control.

A different situation occurs with the character named Ibu in the film Satan's Slaves (2017). Ibu, who loves her family deeply, simultaneously experiences pressure from society and those around her (Saputra, 2019:51). Her inability to bear children prompts her to join a devil-worshipping sect in hopes of conceiving as soon as possible, despite her husband's unconditional acceptance. This decision reveals her ambivalence—while she seeks to fulfill societal expectations of motherhood, she ultimately sacrifices her own family in the process. Her

ambivalence stems from a desire to create a happy family, but one defined by societal norms rather than personal values.

As mothers, both Menik and Nyi Misni embody the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) within the family, using their maternal roles to shape their children's futures according to personal ideals. In Menik's case, the ISA operates through the imposition of values such as hard work and discipline; in Nyi Misni's, it merges with the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) as she uses her son's public position to maintain her dominance. Their ambivalence reflects not failure, but a determined effort to secure their children's futures amid uncertainty and patriarchal pressures. Conversely, the awareness shown by Ibu, as a representation of ISA within the family, enables her to pursue the ideal of a complete family, even if it means succumbing to the pressures of patriarchal expectations and female stereotypes.

5. Conclusion

The ambivalence shown by female characters in responding to problems should not be mistaken for moral ambiguity. Rather, what is often interpreted as moral ambiguity is a reflection of their sensitivity and ability to assess situations that require a balanced approach from multiple perspectives (Faizah, 2021:94). This complexity fosters the development of their capacity to harmonize both feminine and masculine traits when acting and making decisions. This ambivalence also shapes the thinking of these female characters to have a greater goal for the well-being of themselves and their surroundings, without having to challenge the patriarchal system openly. This situation then allows them to get out of their linear way of thinking and consider what is possible or impossible to do (Emajulu, A., 2022:3)

In a domestic context, a woman's ambivalent stance—supporting her husband while also stepping into his role when necessary—demonstrates the dynamic nature of her role. It reflects her ability to take control of the situation when her partner is unable to fulfill his responsibilities (Ge, 2024:1031). Thus, the examples illustrate that ambivalence in women is not a weakness, but a strategic capability to manage circumstances in ways that protect both themselves and those around them.

Implication of the Study

This study aims to provide insight into the ambivalence portrayed by female characters in Indonesian thriller novels and films published between 2000 and 2020. The ambivalence depicted is not solely driven by the characters' personal desires, but rather reflects a broader context in which such behaviour serves as a strategic and immersive response to protect themselves and those closest to them from the pressures of a patriarchal system. Further, this research offers a new paradigm for readers and viewers, suggesting that ambivalence can be a meaningful and empowering stance—one that contributes to both individual resilience and collective well-being.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The focus of this study on the thriller genre of Indonesian novels and films also presents a limitation, as it provides only a narrow perspective on the ambivalence of female characters. Future research is encouraged to explore a broader range of genres, including works from different countries, and consider a wider range of publication years to enrich the understanding of female ambivalence in various cultural and narrative contexts.

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