



CHARMING SHACKLES: PATRIARCHAL HEGEMONY AND THE ROMANTICIZATION OF WOMAN'S SUFFERING IN THE FILM THE SINKING OF THE VAN DER WIJCK

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Abstract: The Indonesian film industry is often caught in a dilemma between visual aesthetics and social criticism, especially when portraying women's stories from the grip of patriarchy with romantic imagery. This study aims to dissect the hegemony of patriarchy and the romanticisation of women's suffering in the phenomenal film *The Singking of The Van Der Wijck*, which visualises the powerlessness of the character Hayati under the authority of Minangkabau custom. Using a qualitative approach with Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis method, this study examines the denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings in each scene to reveal the reality behind the signs of patriarchal hegemony and the romanticisation of women's sadness. The results of the study found that patriarchal hegemony is also present through the power of the Ninik Mamak in 'blackening and whitening' the fate of female relatives through the sanctity of customs. The main finding reveals the phenomenon of 'Charming shackles', in which Hayati's suffering due to forced marriage and the stigma of being someone else's widow is packaged through visual beauty in order to romanticise this sadness as fate.

Keywords: Patriarchal hegemony, the romanticisation of sadness, Roland Barthes' semiotics, literary sociology



Introduction

Indonesia has made numerous achievements on the national and international stage in the world of cinema, from the Cannes Film Festival and the Asian Pacific Screen Awards to the Toronto After Dark Film Festival (CNN INDONESIA, 2021). Film has been recognised not only as entertainment, but also as a medium that shapes public opinion, reflects reality, and builds or dismantles various myths in life (Metz, 1974; Bordwell & Thompson, 2017). Film is a recording of moving images to provide information with the support of sound as a complement to the visuals (Prasetya, 2019). This provides space for the world of cinema as a medium of communication with a combination of audio-visual elements to send messages that can be well received by the audience (message recipients). Not merely entertainment, films also carry informative, educational, and persuasive functions in delivering messages broadly, both explicitly and through various visual symbols. The combination of the collaborative elements of film, such as narrative elements (characters, time, conflict) and cinematic elements (cinematography, editing, sound), successfully shapes meaning and makes films memorable to the audience.

Behind the achievements and role of films as messengers, film adaptations often face a dilemma between maintaining social criticism or satisfying market tastes through visual aesthetics, especially in the representation of women. In almost all aspects of life, women are constantly confronted with rigid moral standards, where they must submit and obey established religious and social norms within society. These established norms and rigid moralities often stem from the image of patriarchal hegemony. Hegemony, in Antonio Gramsci's view, is defined as power over leadership supremacy, whether physical, ideological, or cultural, so that they gain the approval of the hegemonic group (Utami et al, 2018). In this case, patriarchy constantly haunts women through the preservation of this hegemony. Patriarchy is an ideology of male symbolisation to demonstrate their power over women's sexuality and fertility and to prove that patriarchal men have a higher status than women (Utami et al, 2018). However, the visualisation of patriarchal hegemony is no longer limited to ancient concepts in indigenous life, but often appears in scenes from films about emancipation (liberation).

A phenomenal Indonesian film in 2013, Hamka's writing as a social critique of the system of forced marriage in Minangkabau



customs is the focus of this article. The film *The Singking of The Van Der Wijck* (Sinking of the Van Der Wijck), with three main characters, Herjunot Ali (Zainuddin), Pevita Pearce (Hayati), and Reza Rahadian (Aziz), attempts to convey a message about patriarchal hegemony through the gentle touch of director Sonil Suraya (Oktavia et al, 2024). One example of this patriarchal hegemony is the power of the Ninik Mamak in blackening and whitening the nephew, so that women bow their heads and give their consent even though their hearts are broken. However, a mystery remains: does the visualisation of women's sadness in literary films as an image of patriarchal hegemony also romanticise women's sadness? Starting from this concern, this study aims to peel away the 'charm of bondage' from patriarchal hegemony and the romanticisation of women's sadness. *Charming shackles* is described as a representation of women (Hayati) with beautiful faces, *Bunga Batipuh* in the words of the people, but shackled like a prison.

This research is also based on two relevant previous studies as a framework for identifying gaps and novelties in the research. First, there is the study by Yuliandra et al (2024) entitled *Feminist Standpoint Theory Analysis: Women as Objects in the Film The Singking of The Van Der Wijck*. This study uses Standpoint Theory analysis and shows that matrilineal customs are a tool used by the patriarchy to control women. However, this study does not examine how the suffering of women (Hayati) is made beautiful for the consumption of the audience. Second, it comes from the research by Rahmah et al (2025) entitled *Roland Barthes' Semiotic Analysis: Representation of Cognitive Dissonance of the Character Kiran in the Film Tuhan, Izinkan Aku Berdosa (God, Allow Me to Sin)*. This study uses a qualitative approach with Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis and shows the clash between religious purity and the hypocritical reality of religious scholars. However, the study is too focused on psychological aspects (dissonance and cognition) and does not touch on how the film's cinematography dramatises this dissonance for the audience's enjoyment.

Reflecting on the relevance of these two studies, this research was conducted to examine how the film *The Singking of The Van Der Wijck* portrays the image of patriarchal hegemony and romanticises female sadness. A qualitative approach using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis forms the basis of this study's systematic writing, with an orientation that goes beyond simply providing a conventional narrative to examining each scene



together with the audience, observing the audience's expressions, and providing plot twist questions as surprises at the end of the agenda. Seeing the loneliness of research with semiotic analysis and too much focus on novels (textual), the author dared to open up and fill that loneliness by attempting to uncover new mysteries from the film *The Singking of The Van Der Wijck*. In conclusion, this research is expected to bring a new perspective to future research as an inspiration and contribute to relevant studies, such as sociology and literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Comparison with Previous Research

Table 1. Comparison of Previous Similar Studies with the Present Study

No.	Researcher and Year	Research Title	Method	Results and Findings	Relevance
1	Yuliandra et al (2024)	Feminist Analysis Standpoint Theory: Women as Objects in Film <i>The Sinking of the Van Der Wijck</i>	Qualitative (Analysis Perspective Theory)	Matrilineal customs became a tool for the patriarchy to control women	How the patriarchal Minangkabau of old controlled women through custom and religion
2	Rahma et al (2025)	Roland Barthes' Semiotics: Representation of Cognitive Dissonance The Character Kiran in the Film <i>God, Let Me Sin</i>	Qualitative (Analysis Roland Barthes')	The clash between religious purity and the reality of the hypocrisy of the pious.	How religion became the foundation of customs, but in practice customs dominate religion



The Theory of Patriarchal Hegemony

Hegemony is one of the major ideologies in society, based on power for supremacy and perpetuating the leadership of certain groups over others. Hegemony is not limited to the state, but is also present in the lives of the powerful towards the marginalised (subordinate), such as the hegemony of men over women. Reflecting on this narrative, Utami et al (2018) explain that the repeated practice of hegemony will create a new legacy called patriarchal ideology. Patriarchal hegemony also shapes understanding in literary works. Literature is closely related to society; it does not appear in a vacuum, but rather from the socio-cultural context that underpins literary works. Literary films often represent patriarchal hegemony. One phenomenal literary film is *The Singking of The Van Der Wijck* (The Sinking of the Van Der Wijck). This film is based on a novel by Buya Hamka as a critique of the tradition of forced marriage in Minangkabau customs in ancient times.

Representation Theory

Representation can be understood as the use of conceptual frameworks in interpreting the meaning and understanding of the world. In detail, representation is defined as the use of signs (images, sounds, emotions) to illustrate the results of sensory perception, such as what is seen, imagined, or felt (Danesi, 2010). Representation is a concept in the social process of meaning-making through various signs, such as photography, dialogue texts, and films (Aprinta, 2011). The main function of representation is to reveal whether the visualisation of characters in the media is truly displayed in accordance with reality or not (Eriyanto, 2001). Stuart Hall, in his book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, also explains representation as symbolising, defending, becoming a specimen, or replacing (Hall, 1977).

Roland Barthes' Theory of Semiotics

Semiotics is the study of signs, representing signs, and revealing the meaning behind them to understand how messages are constructed (Subaryana, 2022). For Barthes, the term semiotics is semiology, which involves understanding how humanity



interprets various things (Sobur, 2017). Through these two narratives, the process of meaning seeks to see how signs are brought about and end up becoming ideology, that is, signs become reality. Roland Barthes' semiotic theory focuses on two stages of meaning (Two Orders of Signification), in which meaning is conveyed straightforwardly, although it still requires deep understanding. The first stage is the correlation between the signifier and the signified in relation to external reality. Barthes calls this denotation or meaning captured by the five senses. The second stage is called connotation, where the sign (a combination of signifier and signified) in denotation becomes a signifier in connotation. Connotation is the emergence of meaning due to cultural influences and works through myths. According to Barthes, myths are the normalisation or naturalisation of meaning at the level of connotation. The naturalisation of myths is itself a product of social class formed through cultural domination.

Method

This study utilises a qualitative approach with Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis method. The choice of a qualitative approach in this study is based on its essentiality, whereby the qualitative approach prioritises exploration and aims to understand complexity, which is sometimes difficult to explain with numbers or statistics alone (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Qualitative research is also capable of stimulating participants' awareness, forming critical reasoning, and encouraging a spirit of togetherness based on democracy and egalitarianism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Data collection in qualitative research is conducted in a neutral setting (natural conditions) with data collection techniques predominantly in participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation (Sugiyono, 2017). Primary data is primary information without intermediaries. The primary data in this study is observation and documentation. Observations were conducted by watching, observing, and exploring signs of patriarchal hegemony and the romanticisation of women's sadness with the audience, while documentation was carried out by taking screen captures of relevant scenes according to the above signs in the film *The Singking of The Van Der Wijck*. Secondary data in this study was obtained through a literature review to provide additional and supporting information in the writing of the research.



Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis method was chosen based on its suitability for this study, in which the representation of each sign in the film will be examined. This study was conducted in several stages. The first stage was data collection from observations of the film *The Sinking of the Van Der Wijck* to identify signs (dialogue and visual elements) of the significance of patriarchal hegemony and the romanticisation of female sadness. The second stage is data analysis using Roland Barthes' semiotic model, beginning with denotative analysis (interpretation of literal meaning) of each sign, connotative analysis (interpretation of figurative meaning) based on contextual relevance in the film (social, cultural, emotional), and ending with myth analysis (metalanguage) to identify whether dominant ideologies or values are naturalised and normalised through these signs. The final stage is the interpretation and conclusion of all findings. At this stage, the researcher will show how social myths are represented through the signs of analysis at the denotative, connotative, and mythical levels.

Results and Discussion

This section presents various findings from an analysis of the film *The Singking of The Van Der Wijck*, examining how patriarchal hegemony and the romanticisation of female sadness are portrayed. This analysis is presented through the application of Roland Barthes' semiotic method to signs and is reinforced by audience arguments and theoretical conclusions from figures relevant to this study.

Representations of Patriarchal Hegemony and the Romanticisation of Women's Sorrow

The Sinking of the Van Der Wijck is a phenomenal literary film from 2013, adapted from Buya Hamka's novel as a critique of the tradition of forced marriage in Minangkabau customs. The film has a duration of 2 hours, 35 minutes and 29 seconds, with each scene containing denotative and connotative signs. Hayati herself is the main female character in the film, who displays a life full of obstacles in every scene. Hayati's life takes place in the midst of a patriarchal family that imposes various restrictions on women, especially regarding marriage. Ninik Mamak appears as one of the patriarchal figures in this film. Ninik Mamak is a family relative as well as a Minangkabau



traditional figure who has the power to determine the fate of the family (Arrazak, 2022). Ninik Mamak plays a role in representing the hegemony of patriarchy in Minangkabau customs. Before analysing the scenes in depth, we can also see the hegemony of patriarchy in the poster for the film *The Singking of The Van Der Wijck*.

Denotatively, the poster for the film *The Sinking of the Van Der Wijck* has a background of cloudy skies and blue seas. In the leftmost image, there are three main characters, namely Hayati, Zainuddin, and Aziz, with an image of the Van Der Wijck ship almost sinking below their photos. In the rightmost image, Hayati is seen drowning in the ocean wearing a white dress while holding a photo of Zainuddin. A group of people who drowned along with the wreckage of the Van Der Wijck ship is also shown.

However, behind the literal meaning, there is a connotation (metaphor) that illustrates patriarchal hegemony. Hayati is between two men (Zainuddin and Aziz), which shows the narrative of women as objects to be fought over. There is also an image of a horse race on the far left, which tells the story of the Minangkabau people's tradition of horse race gambling in the past. In addition, Hayati is shown drowning while holding a photo of Zainuddin. This shows her inner turmoil as a woman, where she must obey Zainuddin's request to return to her hometown but must relinquish her lover himself. Now, we will examine scenes from the film *The Singking of The Van Der Wijck* to identify signs that reveal patriarchal hegemony and the romanticisation of female sadness.

In the seventh minute, Jamila's husband (Zainuddin's uncle) is shown introducing Zainuddin to the land of Batipuh. However, at the beginning of the film, the hegemony of patriarchy is increasingly evident, where it is said that Ninik Mamak can blacken or whiten his nephew. The connotation of this expression is the power of Minangkabau traditional leaders in determining the fate of their own families. Their decisions are considered absolute and indisputable, even if they have fatal psychological consequences, especially for women. Then, at the 20th minute, Hayati is shown wearing ordinary clothes while sitting down and sobbing. The visual connotation of this is Hayati's plea for Ninik Mamak not to expel Zainuddin from Batipuh. On the other hand, she is under pressure to obey their customs. Angku Datuk, as Ninik Mamak, reinforces this narrative by saying, "*Mount Marapi still stands tall, customs still loom large*".



In the ninth minute, Zainuddin is shown wearing religious clothing and carrying an umbrella. He takes shelter with Hayati at Lapau (a place to eat). Zainuddin says, *"I'm a man, I am brave. Staying at Lapau is fine."* Although not rude, the connotation of this statement makes it clear that women are not as free as men to roam in life. Minangkabau women were once constantly overshadowed by restrictive customary rules.

In the 39th minute, Hayati's appearance changes, from wearing Muslim clothing to dressing fashionably like a Dutch woman, due to Khadijah's persuasion, who says, *"It's a woman's instinct, right? Zainuddin will definitely be captivated by your beauty, Hayati."* Hayati gives in and wears the fashionable clothes. However, when she meets Zainuddin and has not spoken to him for long, Hayati is pulled away by Khadijah and Aziz. This visual connotation shows that women are made objects of competition by the patriarchy and their beauty is exploited. Hayati's beauty was the only reason Aziz approached her and married her. Unfortunately, Aziz himself belittled Hayati by calling her a *"country girl"*. At the 45th minute, Khadijah intends to change Hayati by pampering her with wealth and luxury. She wants Hayati to wear gold and dress like a big city girl in Padang so that Aziz will not be ashamed to take her to the big clubs there.

In the 49th minute, Ninik Mamak is shown with an angry expression, refuting the interruption of another traditional figure who does not accept Aziz's proposal to Hayati. Aziz's proposal is rejected because he does not respect Zainuddin according to Makassar customs. However, this elicits an emotional response from Ninik Mamak, who immediately refutes the argument with the statement, *"Waliyah knows better than you all."* Then, in the 50th minute, Hayati was forced to accept Aziz's proposal due to Ninik Mamak's three shouts. The visual connotation of Hayati shows that it is very difficult for women to resist patriarchal hegemony during matchmaking, especially when it comes to marriage proposals. Hayati's face also shows anxiety, sadness, and unwillingness to accept the proposal because it violates her vow to Zainuddin.

Then, the acceptance of the proposal was greeted with gratitude by NinikMamak with a smile, even though Hayati was forced to accept it. This visual connotation makes it clear that women's sadness is romanticised or considered normal by the patriarchy. This connotation also becomes the key that patriarchal hegemony truly romanticises women's sadness. It



changes from a mere connotation to a myth that is realised in real life. Women's sadness is considered to be only temporary and will be replaced by wealth and luxury after marriage. In fact, in the film *The Singking of The Van Der Wijck*, Hayati's sadness is shown even before she dies. The three scenes above are the most powerful examples of patriarchal hegemony and the romanticisation of women's sadness in the film. Ninik Mamak's objection, Hayati's acceptance of Aziz's proposal, and Hayati's tears form a truly controversial plot in this film, which runs for over two hours.

At the 52nd minute, Hayati is shown dressed up for her wedding to Aziz. However, she looks gloomy and does not smile. Then, Hayati is shown staring out of the window until she cries. This illustrates Hayati's sadness about her marriage. However, she still accepts and fights her conscience as a woman. This shows us how patriarchy can manipulate women's lives and have a major impact on their mental health.

However, Hayati also suffered misfortune. She is shown to have been confined and unable to go anywhere freely, even having to ask Aziz for permission to watch the opera. When drunk, Aziz is shown to be jealous of Hayati, who still remembers Zainuddin, to the point that he almost slaps her. The connotation of this visual scene shows Hayati's mental pressure increasing in her domestic life. When collecting the debt, the loan shark clearly says, "*Koon is the victim, it's your husband's lust.*" The connotation increases, showing that Hayati has been lied to and her loyalty exploited by Aziz.

Towards the end of the film, Aziz commits suicide by drinking poison pills because he is frustrated and feels guilty towards Hayati and Zainuddin. Afterwards, Hayati apologises to Zainuddin for her mistake, but Zainuddin refuses her apology, saying, "*No, a banana tree cannot bear fruit twice. It is forbidden for a man to eat leftovers.*" The connotation of this visual explains that the husband's suicide will create a new mental burden for his wife. Zainuddin's labelling of Hayati as a widow also makes him reluctant to forgive her and labels her as a used woman. However, in Hayati's final moments, Zainuddin realised and regretted his actions. He should not have labelled her and should have accepted her apology as a second chance for Hayati. Although, on the other hand, Zainuddin still remembered Hayati's mistakes towards him.



Emotional Audience and Myth Identification

After showing certain scenes to the audience, spontaneous changes in facial expressions such as frowns, lowered eyebrows, and expressions of disapproval were clearly visible while watching the film *The Singking of The Van Der Wijck*. The audience was shown scenes where Hayati was treated unfairly by Ninik Mamak, the wedding process, Zainuddin's freedom, violence against Hayati, and her death. In this section, the focus of the discussion will shift to an in-depth exploration of the myth of romanticising female sadness, supported by the audience's arguments and emotions. There are three main scenes that spark the myth: Hayati's wedding process, the meeting at Zainuddin's mansion, and the rejection of Hayati's apology.

During the scenes depicting Hayati's proposal and wedding, there was a significant change in the audience's facial expressions. Seeing Ninik Mamak scold Hayati as a way of pressuring her to accept the proposal increased the audience's focus. The audience requested that the scene be repeated several times and then retold. The majority of the audience agreed that this was an example of patriarchal hegemony over women, in which the audience saw Hayati's life as being completely controlled by Ninik Mamak. When Ninik Mamak said, *'Waliyah knows better than you all,'* and uttered the words of gratitude, *'Alhamdulillah,'* the audience shook their heads and expressed anger. The entire audience argued that women's sadness is romanticised in the film *The Singking of The Van Der Wijck*. This argument supports the justification of the myth of romanticising women's sadness, which is taken from the visual connotation of Ninik Mamak giving thanks. One audience member, FN, said.

"From this part, I do feel that Hayati's parents are happy that the proposal was accepted, even though Hayati is mentally exhausted".

Continuing with the meeting at Zainuddin's mansion, the audience feels that Hayati has been trapped all this time. Recreating scenes from the beginning to the end of the film, Hayati is always shown under the supervision of the patriarchal family, not fighting back, and being treated harshly by Aziz. The audience begins to realise that Zainuddin, as a man, has the freedom to travel to Java. Meanwhile, Hayati has to beg Aziz to



take her to the Teroesir opera. The audience's affirmation reinforces the connotation of Hayati's visual decline as a woman. Finally, in the scene where Hayati's apology is rejected, the audience feels that this is unfair. The audience members describe the same thing, that Hayati deserves forgiveness. One audience member with the initials JR further emphasises this.

"Although in the film The Sinking of the Van Der Wijck, Zainuddin is perceived as being most cornered, we also forget that Hayati also suffered. Before she died, Hayati even expressed her apology in a letter. This is sometimes the reality: death comes first, and regret comes last".

The stigma attached to being someone else's widow was one of the reasons why Zainuddin rejected Hayati's apology. He could not accept a woman who was someone else's ex-wife. This was emphasised by Zainuddin's words, *"No, a banana tree cannot bear fruit twice. A man cannot eat leftovers."*

Emotional Audience and Myth Identification

The lens of literary sociology provides a deeper understanding of the myths of patriarchy and female sadness. As Alan Swingewood suggests, films should be positioned as literary adaptations rather than mere imaginings in a vacuum. It is a social mirror that represents the era, social structure, and how class tensions were preserved at that time. The film *The Singking of The Van Der Wijck* serves as a stark contrast between the rigidity of Minangkabau customs, especially the matrilineal system, which is controlled by the decisions of the Ninik Mamak. Swingewood explains that literary sociology is able to explore how social structures shape individual characters, such as Hayati's powerlessness due to patriarchal pressure (Swingewood, 1972). The juxtaposition of the visualisation of the grandeur of Minangkabau customs with Hayati's tears creates an irony, where the beauty of customs is directly proportional to the level of repression against women. This is proof that the film is a social critique in cinematic aesthetics. It does not merely tell the story of the past, but represents patriarchy and is still 'accepted' by modern society as a cultural norm.



Furthermore, if we examine it using Lucien Goldmann's Genetic Structuralism, we will find a homology (structural parallelism) between the world view, the author (Buya Hamka), and the director (Sunil Soraya). Goldmann emphasises that literary works represent the world view of a particular social class (Goldmann, 1975). One relevant visual is Hayati's death under the sea. In fact, this scene is a manifestation of the inability of the social structure at that time to accept back 'tainted' women or other people's widows. Instead of emancipation, this romanticisation actually reinforces the position of women as objects that are 'more valuable when suffering or dead' than living with the social burden of being a widow. The film scene also has the potential to dampen women's resistance by transforming suffering into a beautiful melancholic destiny.

In addition, the film *The Singking of The Van Der Wijck* also uses euphemisms for violence. Bourdieu explains that euphemisms of violence soften patriarchal oppression through poetic dialogue, orchestral music, and cinematic lighting, so that the audience focuses on enjoying the love story, and overlooks the suffering of women (Bourdieu, 2001). Hayati, as the object of 'Charming shackles', experiences multiple layers of objectification: she is made into a trophy of beauty by Aziz, a tool of traditional transactions by Ninik Mamak, and her sadness is further exposed by the film's visuals. Literary sociology examines this mechanism by showing that the audience's 'enjoyment' in watching Hayati cry is evidence of the success of patriarchal hegemony in manipulating public emotions to normalise women's suffering.

Conclusion

The visualisation of patriarchal hegemony in the film *The Singking of The Van Der Wijck* proves to be a social critique of the rigidity of Minangkabau customs and the authority of the Ninik Mamak. Using the sanctity of custom, the Ninik Mamak not only control women's bodies, but also manipulate Hayati's consent to submit to their absolute decisions. This phenomenon confirms that the social structure of the Minangkabau in the past effectively transformed women from sovereign subjects into objects of cultural transactions in order to maintain the marwah of the clan and the ego of patriarchy. Through the concept of "*Charming Shackles*", this study concludes that



the hegemony of patriarchy in the film truly romanticises women's sadness. Supported by visual aesthetics, this romanticisation is neatly wrapped up in poetic dialogue until the end of the scene, where Hayati is stigmatised as someone else's widow. Thus, this film plays a dual role, namely as a record of patriarchal hegemony in Minangkabau society and as a representation of the myth of the romanticisation of women's sadness, both from a historical perspective and from the world of cinema.

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