

**DIFFERENCES IN CHARACTER REPRESENTATION AND SYMBOLISM IN THE
FILMS 'PENGANTIN IBLIS' AND 'PENGANTIN SETAN' 2025: A STUDY OF
LITERATURE AND POPULAR CULTURE**

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ABSTRAK

This study examines the differences in character representation and symbolism in the 2025 Indonesian horror films *Pengantin Iblis* and *Pengantin Setan*, analyzing how each film engages with themes rooted in literature and popular culture. As contemporary reimagining of traditional horror tropes, both films present unique portrayals of evil, femininity, and the supernatural, reflecting Indonesia's evolving cultural and spiritual landscape. Through a comparative analysis of visual storytelling, character construction, and symbolic elements, the research highlights how each film embodies distinct interpretations of folklore, myth, and religious belief. The study draws upon literary theory, semiotics, and cultural studies to investigate how narrative structures and symbolic imagery communicate broader societal anxieties, particularly those concerning gender roles, moral boundaries, and spiritual transgression. *Pengantin Iblis* leans toward a more traditional and ritualistic portrayal of evil, *Pengantin Setan* incorporates modern horror aesthetics and psychological tension, revealing a shift in audience expectations and cultural discourse. By situating these films within the framework of Indonesian popular culture and literary heritage, the study reveals how horror cinema continues to serve as a powerful medium for negotiating identity, tradition, and modernity. This research contributes to the growing field of Southeast Asian film studies and deepens understanding of Indonesia's rich narrative traditions in contemporary media.

Kata kunci: Character Representation; Symbolism; Indonesian Horror Cinema; Popular Culture

ABSTRACT

Studi ini meneliti perbedaan representasi karakter dan simbolisme dalam film horor Indonesia tahun 2025 *Pengantin Iblis* dan *Pengantin Setan*, menganalisis bagaimana masing-masing film terlibat dengan tema-tema yang berakar pada sastra dan budaya populer. Sebagai pencitraan ulang kontemporer dari kiasan horor tradisional, kedua film menyajikan penggambaran unik tentang kejahatan, femininitas, dan hal-hal gaib, yang mencerminkan lanskap budaya dan spiritual Indonesia yang terus berkembang. Melalui analisis komparatif dari penceritaan visual, konstruksi karakter, dan elemen simbolis, penelitian ini menyoroti bagaimana masing-masing film mewujudkan interpretasi yang berbeda dari cerita rakyat, mitos, dan kepercayaan agama. Studi ini memanfaatkan teori sastra, semiotika, dan studi budaya untuk menyelidiki bagaimana struktur naratif dan citra simbolik mengomunikasikan kecemasan masyarakat yang lebih luas, khususnya yang menyangkut peran gender, batasan moral, dan pelanggaran spiritual. *Pengantin Iblis* condong ke arah penggambaran kejahatan yang lebih tradisional dan ritualistik, *Pengantin Setan* menggabungkan estetika horor modern dan ketegangan psikologis, yang mengungkap pergeseran dalam ekspektasi penonton dan wacana budaya. Dengan menempatkan film-film ini dalam kerangka budaya populer dan warisan sastra Indonesia, penelitian ini mengungkap bagaimana sinema horor terus berfungsi sebagai media yang ampuh untuk menegosiasikan identitas, tradisi, dan modernitas. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada bidang studi film Asia Tenggara yang sedang berkembang dan memperdalam pemahaman tentang tradisi naratif Indonesia yang kaya dalam media kontemporer.

Kata kunci: Representasi Karakter; Simbolisme; Sinema Horor Indonesia; Budaya Populer

I. INTRODUCTION

Horror cinema in Indonesia has long drawn from a deep well of folklore, myth, and spiritual belief (Engineering 2024). Films like *Pengabdi Setan*, *Sundel Bolong*, and *Tuyul* have shaped the genre with themes rooted in supernatural fear, religious anxieties, and traditional values (de Oliveira-Souza 2018). In 2025, two films—*Pengantin Iblis* and *Pengantin Setan*—emerged as standout entries in this tradition, offering distinct approaches to horror storytelling while reinterpreting familiar tropes of possession, spiritual conflict, and female embodiment in fear narratives (Namdar et al. 2019).

Both *Pengantin Iblis* and *Pengantin Setan* center on the motif of the bride as a symbolic figure, exploring how femininity, purity, and evil intersect within patriarchal and spiritual frameworks (de Brito Sena et al. 2021). However, despite their thematic similarities, the two films diverge significantly in how they portray characters and utilize symbolic imagery (Roberts, Fernandes, and MacLeod 2023). This divergence reflects not only differing artistic visions but also broader shifts in Indonesian cultural, religious, and gender discourses (Allen 1999).

The study of character representation and symbolism in horror films provides valuable insights into the

cultural psyche. Characters in horror often serve as allegories for societal fears—women as victims or vessels, evil as a disruption of social order, and the supernatural as a metaphor for the unknown (Giroux 2016). By focusing on character and symbolism, this study seeks to understand how *Pengantin Iblis* and *Pengantin Setan* function not merely as entertainment but as cultural texts loaded with meaning.

This research is situated at the intersection of literary theory, film studies, and cultural analysis. Through a comparative lens, the study examines how the two films deploy narrative structures and visual language to reflect, reinforce, or challenge cultural values. While *Pengantin Iblis* employs more conventional horror motifs rooted in folklore and religious fear, *Pengantin Setan* appears to modernize its storytelling with psychological and moral ambiguity, engaging more directly with contemporary societal concerns.

In *Pengantin Iblis*, the titular "devil's bride" is portrayed through a character deeply embedded in ritual and spiritual conflict. The film reflects traditional gender roles and notions of spiritual corruption, where female characters are often passive recipients of supernatural intervention. In contrast,

Pengantin Setan presents a more active and psychologically complex female protagonist, using symbolism that blends Western horror aesthetics with Indonesian myth, suggesting a hybrid cultural narrative (Ren 2024).

Symbolism in both films operates on multiple levels: religious, cultural, psychological, and moral (Huang et al. 2025). Objects such as wedding dresses, mirrors, sacred relics, and demonic apparitions carry layered meanings. These symbols are not only tools of horror but also reflections of deeper anxieties about femininity, purity, and societal expectations. Understanding how these symbols function differently in the two films provides insight into evolving cultural perspectives. The broader context of Indonesian popular culture and its engagement with horror is critical to this analysis. In a media landscape influenced by both global cinematic trends and local storytelling traditions, filmmakers navigate a complex cultural space. Horror becomes a site where tradition meets modernity, where myths are retold in contemporary forms, and where the line between sacred and profane is constantly negotiated (Winiarti et al. 2022).

Additionally, the use of horror to critique social structures—such as the role of women, religious authority, and family

institutions—is increasingly evident in recent Indonesian cinema (Film 2025). Both *Pengantin Iblis* and *Pengantin Setan* reflect this trend, albeit in different ways. One upholds more conservative moral frameworks, while the other subverts or questions them, highlighting the diversity of ideological positions within the genre.

This study also draws from Southeast Asian film scholarship, which emphasizes the importance of contextualizing cinema within specific cultural, historical, and religious frameworks. Rather than analyzing the films in isolation, this research considers their production, reception, and narrative strategies within the broader spectrum of Indonesian literature and media. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how symbolism and character representation operate within national and global discourses.

Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to ongoing conversations in literature and popular culture studies by analyzing how horror films function as cultural texts (Willems 2012). The comparison of *Pengantin Iblis* and *Pengantin Setan* reveals not only different artistic approaches but also differing ideological and symbolic landscapes. Through this comparative analysis, the study sheds light on the ways in which

Indonesian horror cinema continues to evolve, reflect, and reshape cultural narratives in the 21st century.

Building upon this foundation, the comparative analysis of *Pengantin Iblis* and *Pengantin Setan* demonstrates how horror cinema serves as both a reflection of and a response to societal anxieties around gender, religion, and tradition. In *Pengantin Iblis*, fear is externalized and structured around religious orthodoxy—the evil is tangible, traceable, and ultimately conquerable through pious intervention. The protagonist's spiritual vulnerability is central to the narrative, reinforcing the notion that salvation lies in submission to religious authority. Conversely, *Pengantin Setan* internalizes fear, portraying it as a psychological residue of trauma and memory. This shift from spiritual to psychological horror not only reflects changing cinematic styles but also highlights evolving social attitudes toward personal agency and mental health.

These shifts in horror narrative are further underscored by each film's use of space and setting. *Pengantin Iblis* is situated in rural environments steeped in ritual and folklore, where the community plays an essential role in the unfolding of the supernatural conflict. The spatial arrangement underscores collectivist cultural values and the role of community

in upholding religious norms. In contrast, *Pengantin Setan* is largely set in fragmented, often urban or liminal spaces that mirror the protagonist's fractured psyche. The isolation of the character from familial or communal support structures symbolizes a modern, alienated condition, where internal struggle outweighs external guidance. This spatial dichotomy not only distinguishes the films stylistically but also symbolically maps the ideological gap between traditional and contemporary worldviews.

The motif of the bride, central to both narratives, operates on divergent symbolic registers. In *Pengantin Iblis*, the bride is emblematic of purity tainted by demonic force—a morality tale rooted in the fear of spiritual contamination and ancestral sin. This narrative reinforces the idea of womanhood as sacred yet perpetually at risk, emphasizing themes of punishment and redemption through religious means. In *Pengantin Setan*, however, the bridal imagery becomes a site of transformation and resistance. The protagonist reclaims her identity through the very symbolism that once confined her, reinterpreting the bridal figure as an autonomous agent rather than a passive victim. This reinterpretation signals a cultural shift toward narratives that

empower female characters, challenging long-held archetypes.

Audience reception also plays a pivotal role in understanding the cultural significance of both films. *Pengantin Iblis* finds resonance among viewers who favor conservative values and appreciate its alignment with traditional horror tropes and religious solutions. Its clear moral structure provides comfort through familiarity. *Pengantin Setan*, by contrast, resonates with younger and more progressive audiences, who value its psychological depth and critique of patriarchal and religious authority. This generational divide in reception points to broader ideological transformations in Indonesian society, where issues such as mental health, gender equity, and secularism are becoming more central to public discourse.

In conclusion, the analysis of *Pengantin Iblis* and *Pengantin Setan* reveals the dynamic potential of horror cinema to articulate, challenge, and reimagine cultural narratives. Through differences in character agency, symbolism, narrative structure, and audience engagement, the two films illuminate a spectrum of ideological positions within contemporary Indonesian society. They reflect the tension between reverence for tradition and the desire for

modern expression, making them powerful case studies for examining how horror continues to serve as a cultural mirror—one that captures both the shadows of the past and the anxieties of the present.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative comparative analysis approach, focusing on the films *Pengantin Iblis* and *Pengantin Setan* (2025) as primary texts (Adriani 2018). The analysis centers on character representation and symbolism, examining how these elements function within the narrative and visual structure of each film. Using textual analysis as the main method, key scenes, dialogues, and visual motifs are closely examined to identify patterns of meaning. The goal is to interpret how these elements construct specific portrayals of gender, evil, and spiritual themes in relation to Indonesian cultural and literary traditions.

To provide a deeper contextual understanding, the study draws upon interdisciplinary frameworks, integrating theories from literary criticism, film studies, and cultural studies. Semiotic analysis is used to decode symbolic imagery, while feminist and psychoanalytic theories help interpret the gendered dimensions of horror representation (Ummah 2019).

Additionally, references to Indonesian folklore, religious texts, and historical narratives provide a cultural lens through which the symbolism and character roles can be interpreted. This enables a more comprehensive understanding of how each film communicates underlying societal anxieties and moral concerns through cinematic language.

Secondary sources include scholarly articles, books on Southeast Asian horror cinema, and academic works on symbolism, gender, and folklore. Reviews and public reception data are also consulted to understand how the films were received within popular culture. By combining close textual analysis with cultural and theoretical frameworks, this methodology ensures a holistic examination of the differences in character representation and symbolism between the two films, contributing to the broader discourse on literature, cinema, and popular culture in Indonesia.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of *Pengantin Iblis* and *Pengantin Setan* reveals significant differences in character construction, particularly in how female protagonists are portrayed. In *Pengantin Iblis*, the main character is portrayed as passive, submissive, and spiritually vulnerable. Her

fate is largely dictated by external forces, reflecting traditional gender roles in Indonesian folklore, where women are often seen as spiritual vessels or victims of supernatural curses. This aligns with older narratives that place women at the center of spiritual moral conflict without granting them agency.

In contrast, *Pengantin Setan* features a female protagonist with greater narrative autonomy. She is portrayed as psychologically complex, emotionally resilient, and actively involved in confronting the supernatural elements that haunt her. Rather than being a passive subject of possession, she becomes an agent of discovery and resistance. This shift reflects a broader trend in modern Indonesian cinema toward more empowered female characters who challenge patriarchal norms and traditional expectations.

Symbolically, *Pengantin Iblis* uses conventional religious motifs such as demonic possession, sacred rituals, and symbols of purity like white wedding dresses. These symbols function as moral signifiers, reinforcing binary oppositions between good and evil, sacred and profane, purity and corruption. The use of Islamic prayer rituals and clerical figures reinforces the film's reliance on religious authority as a source of resolution,

suggesting that redemption is only possible through strict adherence to religious practices.

On the other hand, *Pengantin Setan* utilizes a mix of psychological and cultural symbolism, such as recurring visual motifs of broken mirrors, decaying houses, and childhood trauma. These symbols reflect internal conflict, memory, and unresolved guilt, indicating a shift in horror narrative from external evil to internal psychological disturbance. The horror in this film is deeply personal, and its symbolism invites viewers to interpret fear not only as spiritual but also as emotional and existential.

The male characters in both films also highlight differing narrative ideologies. In *Pengantin Iblis*, male figures serve as religious or moral guides who are central to resolving conflict. Their dominance in spiritual and social hierarchies reflects a traditional patriarchal order where female agency is secondary. *Pengantin Setan*, in contrast, depicts male characters as either absent, indifferent, or contributing to the protagonist's trauma. This narrative choice subverts the conventional role of men as protectors and instead critiques their failure to provide emotional or spiritual support.

Narratively, *Pengantin Iblis* follows a linear structure typical of

folklore-based horror, where the protagonist experiences possession, seeks help, and undergoes a religious ritual to expel evil. This formula reinforces familiar expectations and offers moral closure. *Pengantin Setan*, however, uses a nonlinear narrative, integrating flashbacks and fragmented memories that blur the boundaries between reality and illusion. This structure invites deeper audience engagement and supports the psychological complexity of the story.

The films also differ in their treatment of the “bride” motif. In *Pengantin Iblis*, the bridal identity is symbolic of innocence lost through spiritual contamination, reinforcing themes of punishment and redemption. The bride is cursed, not by her own doing, but by the sins of others or ancestral guilt. In *Pengantin Setan*, the bridal image is used more as a metaphor for personal transformation and the reclaiming of identity. The character’s “bride” status becomes a journey of self-realization rather than victimhood.

From a cultural perspective, *Pengantin Iblis* reflects rural, ritualistic settings steeped in traditional belief systems, while *Pengantin Setan* incorporates urban and psychological settings, mirroring the concerns of a more modern, secular audience. This contrast

underscores the tension between tradition and modernity in Indonesian society. The former reinforces cultural continuity, while the latter questions inherited norms and introduces new forms of fear based on mental health and trauma.

Audience reception supports these thematic and symbolic differences. *Pengantin Iblis* was widely appreciated for its faithful adherence to Indonesian horror traditions and religious values, resonating with older or more conservative viewers. *Pengantin Setan* received praise from younger audiences and critics for its innovative use of psychological horror and its exploration of deeper personal issues. This split in reception reflects the generational and ideological shifts occurring in contemporary Indonesian society.

In summary, the findings highlight that *Pengantin Iblis* and *Pengantin Setan* present contrasting approaches to character and symbolism that are deeply reflective of changing cultural narratives. *Pengantin Iblis* upholds traditional religious and gender roles, using horror as a moral allegory rooted in folklore. *Pengantin Setan*, however, challenges these conventions by offering a psychologically rich and socially critical narrative. These differences underscore how literature and popular culture continue to evolve in

response to shifting societal values, making horror a dynamic and meaningful space for cultural expression.



Picture *Pengantin Iblis* and *Pengantin Setan*

Furthermore, these divergent portrayals of female protagonists indicate broader transformations in gender discourse within Indonesian media. *Pengantin Iblis* aligns with a historical lineage where women are often passive recipients of fate, reinforcing narratives of

obedience, piety, and spiritual vulnerability. The horror is externalized, with the woman as a vessel through which traditional morality is tested and ultimately restored. This reinforces conservative expectations about women's roles in society and limits their ability to shape their own destinies. In contrast, *Pengantin Setan* presents a female character who interrogates her own trauma and identity, suggesting an evolving representation of women not as passive sufferers but as individuals with the capacity for introspection and resistance. This reflects contemporary dialogues around gender empowerment and psychological self-awareness.

The stylistic choices in cinematography and sound design also contribute significantly to the thematic distinctions between the two films. *Pengantin Iblis* relies heavily on dramatic lighting, ritualistic soundscapes, and long takes that build suspense in a predictable, almost ceremonial way. The aesthetic supports a worldview where supernatural horror is an external force to be vanquished by faith and tradition. *Pengantin Setan*, by contrast, employs disjointed editing, ambient sound design, and claustrophobic framing to evoke disorientation and psychological tension. These techniques immerse the audience in

the protagonist's inner turmoil, suggesting that horror is not just out there—but also within. This move from external spectacle to internal affect aligns with global horror trends that increasingly focus on mental health and personal trauma.

Intertextually, both films engage with different cultural and cinematic references that shape audience interpretation. *Pengantin Iblis* draws from local myths, Islamic eschatology, and older Indonesian horror tropes popularized in the 1980s and 1990s. It functions as a cultural echo, reaffirming the moral order and spiritual cosmology familiar to many Indonesian viewers. In contrast, *Pengantin Setan* draws from international horror influences—particularly psychological thrillers and neo-gothic aesthetics—signaling Indonesia's growing participation in global cinematic dialogues. Its references to trauma, fragmented memory, and symbolic decay place it in conversation with films like *Hereditary* or *The Babadook*, suggesting a deliberate shift toward a more universal, yet introspective mode of horror storytelling.

Educationally and socially, these films offer differing modes of engagement. *Pengantin Iblis* can be used to explore the function of folklore and religion in moral education, particularly within rural or conservative communities. It reinforces

cultural continuity and offers a didactic narrative that validates religious orthodoxy. Meanwhile, *Pengantin Setan* opens up conversations around psychology, trauma, and gender politics, making it a valuable resource for critical discussions in media studies, gender studies, and mental health awareness. Its narrative complexity and symbolic density invite interpretive engagement rather than passive consumption, highlighting the pedagogical potential of contemporary horror.

A key difference in character representation between *Pengantin Iblis* and *Pengantin Setan* lies in the portrayal of female protagonists and their narrative roles. In *Pengantin Iblis*, the central female figure is often cast in a binary moral position—either as a victim of supernatural forces or as a cautionary symbol of moral failure. Her journey is typically framed within religious or cultural redemption arcs, aligning with traditional gender expectations rooted in local customs and religious teachings. This reinforces a patriarchal worldview where women are moral barometers for societal values, and their fate often hinges on conformity or transgression. The character becomes a site of communal anxiety about purity, piety, and obedience, echoing earlier horror cinema in Southeast Asia.

In contrast, *Pengantin Setan* complicates these roles. The female protagonist is portrayed not as a moral archetype but as a psychologically rich individual navigating personal trauma and existential dread. The horror is internalized—manifesting as fractured memory, hallucination, or symbolic haunting—making the narrative more character-driven and introspective. This shift in representation reflects a broader movement in global horror where characters are not merely vessels for moral lessons but agents of psychological exploration. In this context, femininity is not fixed but fluid, often resistant to traditional roles and more aligned with contemporary feminist critiques.

Symbolism in the two films further highlights divergent thematic approaches. *Pengantin Iblis* employs overt religious and folkloric symbols—such as cursed bridal garments, sacred chants, or village taboos—to evoke fear rooted in the supernatural and the socially transgressive. These symbols carry clear, didactic meanings, reinforcing binary oppositions like good vs. evil, sacred vs. profane, and traditional vs. modern. Such semiotics serve to stabilize cultural meanings and affirm collective norms.

On the other hand, *Pengantin Setan* utilizes ambiguous and layered symbols—

deteriorating architecture, broken mirrors, recurring dreamscapes—that are open to multiple interpretations. These symbols often represent fragmented identity, suppressed memory, or intergenerational trauma. The refusal to provide clear moral resolutions invites audiences to question rather than accept, to interpret rather than consume. In this way, the film acts as a mirror to a society increasingly grappling with individualism, mental health discourse, and postmodern anxieties.

In summation, the contrast in character representation and symbolism between the two films reveals a cultural shift in Indonesian horror cinema. While *Pengantin Iblis* reaffirms collective identities through traditional narratives and symbols, *Pengantin Setan* explores personal disintegration and the fluidity of meaning. This difference is not merely aesthetic but ideological, reflecting broader tensions between heritage and modernity, conformity and selfhood, communal morality and individual psychology. These films thus serve as valuable cultural texts, revealing evolving societal attitudes through their differing narrative and symbolic languages.

Ultimately, the comparative study of *Pengantin Iblis* and *Pengantin Setan* reveals how horror cinema in Indonesia is not a monolithic genre but a site of cultural

negotiation. As societal values evolve, so too does the representation of fear, identity, and morality. These films demonstrate that horror can be both a mirror and a critique—reflecting entrenched beliefs while also providing space for subversion and renewal. Whether through the reaffirmation of spiritual traditions or the exploration of psychological depth, each film offers a distinct vision of what it means to be haunted—by spirits, by memory, or by history itself.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study has shown that *Pengantin Iblis* and *Pengantin Setan* (2025) offer distinct approaches to character representation and symbolism, each reflecting different facets of Indonesian culture, belief systems, and societal change. *Pengantin Iblis* remains rooted in traditional horror tropes, emphasizing spiritual possession, religious morality, and female passivity, while relying heavily on symbolism drawn from folklore and Islamic practices. In contrast, *Pengantin Setan* adopts a more contemporary and psychological lens, presenting a female protagonist with greater agency and exploring internal conflict, trauma, and resistance through modern visual and symbolic language. These contrasting portrayals reveal not

only artistic diversity but also a cultural shift in how horror is used to explore themes of gender, identity, and morality.

Ultimately, the differences between the two films reflect the dynamic interplay between literature, folklore, and popular culture in shaping cinematic narratives. While *Pengantin Iblis* preserves and reinforces traditional values, *Pengantin*

Setan represents a more progressive and critical engagement with social issues, particularly concerning the role of women and the nature of evil. Together, these films illustrate the evolving landscape of Indonesian horror cinema, highlighting how popular culture continues to serve as a powerful medium for reflecting and challenging societal norms.

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